

The Philosophies of John Stuart Mill as a Guide for the World

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As the world moves into the twenty-first century, it faces many problems. War, disease, over-population, and starvation are examples of problems that have yet to be solved. However, progress has been made in many areas that aid in the reduction of human misery. Diseases, through research and scientific study, are better understood-many that formerly were considered deadly are now treatable. Advances in agricultural technology have enabled crops to be grown in great abundance, and thus feed many more people than was possible previously. Unfortunately, there are several problems that seem to defy any of the world's best efforts to remedy them. The subjection of women in much of the world leads to much human misery, as well as being a waste of half of the population where it takes place. The attitude that a woman should be under the rule of a man is one that has only recently changed in the West (and not universally there); in many parts of the world women are no better off than they were hundreds of years ago in this respect. Even in the United States there are many who advocate women's restriction to a submissive role in the home; many of these people are part of the religious right, a politically vigorous group. It is difficult to hope that less advanced nations will take the initiative in freeing women from political and social restraints when our own backyard is populated with people whose views are similar.

However, there is hope. If people around the world would adopt the philosophy of John Stuart Mill, the world might become a more intelligent, and therefore tolerant, place in which to live. John Stuart Mill espoused beliefs on the subjection of women and theism, which, if

embraced by the majority of people in the world, would put a stop to much of the oppression the world, now endures. Mill was a philosopher who took the unusual stance that women should be considered equal to men in all respects and given the same opportunities as men. He had very strong feelings on the subject, and in his essay entitled "The Subjection of Women" he states,

... the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes--the legal subordination of one sex to the other--is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.¹

In this essay Mill admits the difficulty of achieving this, but defends his ideas by showing that the position of authority held by men is not a result of the comparison of several kinds of systems being tried and its having been found to be the best system, but that it is the only system that has ever been tried. As a result, one cannot not use past experience to say that women are incapable of being in positions of authority. In this essay Mill states,

In the first place, the opinion in favour of the present system, which entirely subordinates the weaker sex to the stronger, rests upon theory only; for there never has been trial made of any other: so that experience, in the sense in which it is vulgarly opposed to theory, cannot be pretended to have pronounced any verdict.²

Mill goes on to explain that it is the law of force which has ruled mankind until very recent times, and that this is still true for women. He explains that it is difficult for women to protest this rule because, unlike other subject peoples such as slaves, women are prevented from

¹ John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, edited by Alice S. Rossi, *Essays on Sex Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 125.

² *Ibid.*, 129.

birth from opposing it because of the way they are raised. Mills says that women are brought up to believe that their minds are very different from those of men and that they are unfit for any role except a submissive one. This serves the purposes of men who not only want a slave, but desire a willing one.³

Such attitudes still exist even in modern America, as evidenced by the numbers of women who are battered in the United States. In *The Victimization and Exploitation of Women and Children: A Study of Physical, Mental and Sexual Maltreatment in the United States*, by R. Barri Flowers, Flowers states that "2.9 million women were the victims of violence by intimates, for an average of 572,032 victimizations per year."⁴ One reason given for the prevalence of this abuse is that it has historically been acceptable for a man to beat his wife. The author says, "Another theory advanced that the historical condoning of violence against women is rooted in the 'subjugation and oppression of women through the male partner exercising his authority as head of the family.'"⁵

John Stuart Mill said that many women are raised to have attitudes that accept such behavior.⁶ This is true even today. Female victims of abuse often feel that they are inferior to men and that anger is not a reaction that is acceptable for them. Therefore, they often use denial as a way of dealing with anger, which can lead to depression, guilt and psychosomatic illnesses.⁷ In *The Victimization and Exploitation of Women and Children* the author cites another author's view, stating that,

³ Ibid., 141.

⁴ R. Barri Flowers, *The Victimization and Exploitation of Women and Children: A Study of Physical, Mental and Sexual Maltreatment in the United States* (Jefferson, North Carolina; McFarland & Company, Inc., 1994), 158.

⁵ Ronald B. Flowers, *Women and Criminality: The Woman as Victim, Offender, and Practitioner* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987), 15; quoted in R. Barri Flowers, *The Victimization and Exploitation of Women and Children*, 156.

⁶ Mill and Mill, *Essays on Sex Equality*, 141.

⁷ R. Barri Flowers, *The Victimization and Exploitation of Women and Children*, 159.

Victims of spousal abuse 'may exemplify society's old image of ideal womanhood--submissive, religious, non assertive, accepting of whatever the husband's life brings...The husband comes first for these women, who perceive themselves as having little control over many areas of their own lives.'⁸

This is exactly the kind of attitude John Mill argues against in his essay on the subjection of women. In this essay he states the following:

When we consider how vast is the number of men, in any great country, who are little higher than brutes, and that this never prevents them from being able, through law of marriage, to obtain a victim, the breadth and depth of human misery caused in this shape alone by the abuse of the institution swells to something appalling. Yet these are only the extreme cases. They are the lowest abyss, but there is a sad succession of depth after depth before reaching them.⁹

Surely if the people of the world adopted Mill's view on the equality of women such things would be less commonplace. Of course, in the United States men do not have lawful authority over their wives, so one might say that this is irrelevant in this country. However, many harmful attitudes remain despite the absence of law to enforce them; as long as this is the case, women will continue to be abused.

While the United States has largely abandoned laws that oppress women, many other nations are inhabited by women who are still under laws similar to the ones disparaged by John Mill in his essay, and they are still struggling to obtain rights that are taken for granted in most North American and European nations. A good example, though certainly not the only one, is that of the women who live in the Middle East and North Africa, areas which are known for,

⁸ Terry Davidson, *Conjugal Crime: Understanding and Changing the Wife-Beating Pattern* (New York: Hawthorne, 1979); quoted in R. Barri Flowers, *The Victimization and Exploitation of Women and Children*, 159.

⁹ Mill and Mill, *Essays on Sex Equality*, 164.

among other things, the subjection of their women. In these areas, the severity of the subjection of women varies from nation to nation and from community to community. Of the many ways in which this subjection manifests itself, female genital mutilation is perhaps the worst. This practice comes in several forms, ranging in severity from the least traumatic, clitoridectomy, to the most extensively mutilating, infibulation, which involves the removal of all external genitalia and the sewing up of the vagina, leaving an opening large enough only for urine and menstrual flow. In many areas these procedures are performed in unhygienic surroundings by practitioners who lack medical training--as a result there are often longterm ill effects on the woman's health.¹⁰

Female genital mutilation is an old practice that is justified through several means, including religion, tradition, and control of the woman's sexuality. However, since all Muslims do not practice it and the Koran never mentions it, the religious justification is tenuous at best. The traditional reasons are strong enough to justify it in the eyes of many without need of religious justification; because many men in areas where this is practiced will only marry a woman who has undergone the procedure, many families insist that their daughters undergo it so they will not become unmarriageable.¹¹ Many women themselves advocate the continuance of the practice for this reason. This is a sad indication of the status of women in such communities; they are so dependent on a husband for acceptance in the community that they advocate their own mutilation in order to be able to participate in the only meaningful occupation available--marriage. If women could gain access to life choices other than marriage, their social and economic survival would not depend on enduring such a traumatic and often debilitating

¹⁰ Herbert L. Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi, eds., *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41-42, 47-48.

procedure. But as long as women are kept in subjection to men such cultural practices will continue.¹²

John Mill was very much in favor of the education of women and their being allowed occupations other than those of wife and mother. In his essay "The Subjection of Women" he praises women's mental abilities. He writes, "When, consequently, they chance to be as well provided as men are with the results of other people's experience, by reading and education. They are better furnished than men in general with the essential requisites of skillful and successful practice."¹³ This attitude, if adopted by all men, would eradicate women's total dependence on men for their survival and would therefore eradicate the kind of abuses mentioned previously. Mills speaks of the barring of women from many occupations simply because of their sex:

The utmost that can be said is, that there are many things which none of them have succeeded in doing as well as they have been done by some men-many in which they have not reached the very highest rank. But there are extremely few, dependent only on mental faculties, in which they have not attained the rank next to the highest. Is not this enough, and much more than enough, to make it a tyranny to them, and a detriment to society, that they should not be allowed to compete with men for the exercise of these functions?¹⁴

John Mill obviously believed that women should not have to be dependent on men for their livelihoods; the adoption of this belief by men who live in nations which practice female genital mutilation would effectively stop the practice from continuing.

¹² Ibid., 42-47.

¹³ Mill and Mill, *Essays on Sex Equality*, 190-191.

¹⁴ Ibid., 183.

Other ways in which women are unequal to men in the Middle East concern marriage and divorce laws. In Islamic nations divorce, as it was in the England of John Stuart Mill's time, is a very bad thing for a woman because it can leave her destitute and often without her children. In Iran some reforms have been initiated which include a woman's right to a marriage contract in which she is allowed to make prenuptial agreements forbidding her husband to take multiple wives and stipulating what her financial support would be in the event of a divorce. However, these reforms are only available to women who are educated enough to know their rights--few men see fit to inform a potential bride of an opportunity to curtail his freedom.¹⁵

To Mill, a woman's financial freedom was very important, for without it a wife could be tied to a marriage that was a failure. He states in an essay on marriage and divorce,

...women will never be what they should be, nor their social position what it should be, until women, as universally as men, have the power of gaining their own livelihood: until, therefore, every girl's parents have either provided her with independent means of subsistence, or given her an education qualifying her to provide those means for herself¹⁶

Women in nations that use religious law to justify the subjection of women would also benefit from the adoption of another of John Stuart Mill's views--that of being skeptical of theism. In Part Five (entitled General Result) of his essay on theism Mill states, "...the rational attitude of a thinking mind towards the supernatural, whether in natural or in revealed religion, is that of skepticism as distinguished from belief on the one hand, and from atheism on the other."¹⁷ Mill does not deny the possibility that there is a creator, but instead appeals to the reason of the reader to come to a conclusion based on evidence. If people in the world today and in the next

¹⁵ Bodman and Tohid, *Women in Muslim Societies*, 93.

¹⁶ Mill and Mill, *Essays on Sex Equality*, 77.

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998), 242.

century would adopt this practice, many ills would be remedied. Many laws in Islamic nations are based totally on the Koran, which is thought to be the word of God. Obviously, if skepticism toward religion was employed by Islamic people, some of the inequity in laws concerning women would be eliminated.

The use of religion in the making of laws that are oppressive to women is evidenced in the results of a driving demonstration, which occurred in Saudi Arabia in 1990. The women argued that learning to drive would ease their economic burden by eliminating the necessity of chauffeurs, but it was found by the Supreme Council of Scholars that driving could be harmful to the dignity of women and was thus un-Islamic.¹⁸ This, while illustrating the extent of the restrictions placed on Saudi Arabian women in the name of Islam, may seem to be a trivial issue in comparison to the suffering caused elsewhere in the name of religion. In 1990, female Afghani refugees in Pakistan were subjected to the strict Islamic laws of that nation, which included purdah, or veiling. Women who were under these restrictions were not allowed to collect food rations in public, and if they had no male relative to do it for them, they simply went hungry. In addition, these women were not allowed to leave the refugee camp to obtain medical attention even if they were pregnant. Conditions did not improve much for these women when they returned home to Afghanistan; laws enacted forcing women to stay veiled and in the home removed many women's ability to earn a living. Also, if a woman had been raped during the war she was in danger of "honor killing" as the rape of the woman was considered dishonorable to her family.¹⁹ This kind of inhuman attitude toward women clearly shows the need for the adoption of philosophies toward women and religion like those of John Stuart Mill.

¹⁸ Mahnaz Afkhami, ed., *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 177-179.

The use of religious laws is not only detrimental to women. In *Faith and Freedom: Women 's Human Rights in the Muslim World*, edited by Mahnaz Afkhami, it is stated:

As for human rights, article 26 of the Basic Law says that 'the state shall protect human rights according to the shari'a, but without codifying the protections offered in the shari'a, the new law is at best equivocal. It does not, for example, ban torture or inhumane punishment, which is allowed under the Saudi penal system.²⁰

Perhaps if human rights were not wholly based on the shari'a, which is composed of Islamic law based on the Koran, ancient custom, and legal rulings made after Mohammed's death, they would be more assured.²¹ But under the shari'a discrimination based on religion and nationality is condoned, while the right to assemble is not protected, nor is the right to belong to political organizations or labor unions. The suppression of free speech means that publishers are in danger if they publish anything unfavorable to the government.²²

Besides human rights and the rights of women being unfavorably affected by the strict adherence to religious tenets, science also comes under attack by the rigidly religious. John Stuart Mill explains scientific argument in his essay on theism:

...The scientific argument is that which reasons from the facts and analogies of human experience as a geologist does when he infers the past states of our terrestrial globe, or an astronomical observer when he draws conclusions respecting the physical composition of the heavenly bodies.²³

²⁰ Ibid., 144.

²¹ New Era Encyclopedia, 1992 ed., s.v. "Sharia," by Larry B. Miller.

²² Ibid.

²³ Mills, *Three Essays on Religion*, 139.

It is unfortunate for science that there are many people in the world who discard the scientific method whenever its results conflict with their beliefs. Galileo was a victim of this in the seventeenth century; the church condemned his view that Earth is not the center of the universe. This was of course later rescinded, but even today there are groups that will de-logic and turn a blind eye to the discoveries of science if those discoveries do not fit into their particular religious beliefs. Delos B. McKown, author of *The Mythmaker's Magic*, describes it well in his book:

It is now possible to enunciate three general principles: First, no known religion (of historical significance) is quick to incorporate new scientific discoveries into its body of beliefs-unless these reinforce its soteriology; second, if new scientific discoveries call into question its soteriological claims, any religion can be expected to resist these strenuously; and third, no ecclesiastical structure is eager to accept new scientific discoveries if these weaken its authority by calling into question what it has been teaching.²⁴

This is obviously a threat to the study and teaching of science. It is easy to see how the adaption of John Mill's feelings about religion would alleviate the problem. He does not reject religion or say that it is not a useful and comforting thing, but only says that one should suspend judgment on whether or not religion is truth because there is not enough evidence to support it or negate it. In his essay on theism, Mill says that there is not enough evidence on either side to prove or disprove that there is a creator, but that what evidence there is points to a creator who, if he exists, is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, and whose primary concern is probably not the

²⁴ Delos B. McKown, *The Mythmaker's Magic: Behind the Illusion of "Creation Science"* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1993), 29.

creatures on Earth called humans.²⁵ The reasoning that Mill employed to reach these conclusions is, unfortunately, not thought by some to be the best way of obtaining knowledge. People who dismiss reason in favor of faith would put limits on science that should not be there; these same people wish to impose these limits on others by determining what is taught in public schools. Unfortunately, the public in many cases is too ignorant of science to put a stop to it. This has not enhanced the status of the United States as a scientific leader. Science education has been weakened in public schools, and this could put our nation at a disadvantage competitively against other nations who do not have to deal with this kind of ideology.²⁶

It is always unfortunate when one group tries to force its beliefs on others, but in this case it is damaging to schools, businesses, the advancement of technology and to new scientific discoveries. If every scientific discovery must be submitted to a certain set of beliefs to see if it conforms to them, then science is severely handicapped. Indeed, science ceases to be science, because the scientific method cannot be utilized effectively if it must conform to conditions that demand the rejection of certain outcomes before an experiment has even begun. Science, in order to be effective, must seek to be as unbiased as possible.

The root of this problem is the belief that the Bible is divinely inspired throughout and must be interpreted literally; many feel that one's status as a "true Christian" is in doubt if one does not believe this. Mill; however, wanted theism, or the belief in a god or creator, to be considered critically to see if it could bear the scrutiny. What he found was that the existence of a god or creator is not provable. Delos McKown says in *The Mythmaker's Magic*, "Scientific Creationists' are to be blamed for taking the limited science and the pseudoscience of the Bible's

²⁵ Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 242-43.

²⁶ McKown, *The Mythmaker's Magic*, 55.

day and making it into *the* science for all time."²⁷ Certainly a rational person should not expect others to accept what they consider to be true when there is no verifiable evidence to prove it. Unfortunately, that is exactly what religious zealots do expect and try to enforce.

When one reads the writings of John Stuart Mill, one is reading a study in tolerance. His works on the subjection of women, liberty, and theism all show what a truly tolerant man he was. The present population of the world is filled with people who do not think this way--instead it is filled mostly with people who find their own opinions to be correct, whether or not they have subjected them to the test of logic--and who would cheerfully impose these opinions on others. In his essay on the subjection of women, Mill gives many examples of why women should not be considered inferior to men, but this did not put a stop to the oppression of women in many otherwise enlightened countries. His essay on theism doubtless outraged many people, but that does not refute the logic that aided him in coming to his conclusions in this work.

In all of John Mill's writings his reliance on logic is obvious; if logic were used by the people of the world in the new millennium, instead of religious faith and custom, the world would be a less frightening and oppressive place for many people. Women would be freed from the perpetual servitude that binds them in many parts of the world and even in the United States. Religious wars would become a thing of the past, freeing people to concentrate instead on ways to make life better for everyone. Science, not subject to the constraints placed upon it by religious groups, would flourish everywhere and be available for the betterment of all. In addition to living much more intelligently, people would live more humanely, oppression would lose many of the supports which allow it to remain a force in the world, and reason could be employed to find ways of making the world a hospitable place for all of its inhabitants. All of the world's wrongs would not be righted, but the world would be much closer to perfection than it is

²⁷ Ibid., 64.

now, and we would have the tools necessary to be successful in the struggle toward equality for all people.

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Mary Windecker is a History major. Dr. Barbara Forrest was her History professor.

Dr. Forrest's Comments: *Mary Windecker's term paper is a model of how to apply the philosophical concepts of a previous century to our present society. She showed how the ideas of John Stuart Mill can be used by intelligent people to construct a society with more opportunities for women and to insure respect for intellectual freedom.*