

MILL AS A MORAL PHILOSOPHER

(SOME COMMENTS ON FREDERICK ROSEN'S MILL)¹

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ABSTRACT

First, I want to thank Professor Rosen's deep and illuminating study of the Philosophy of Stuart Mill. In my view, one of the most important contributions of the author is his claim that Mill was not only a social moralist but was primarily a philosopher and a logician. In many ways, Rosen is right. Mill was not a moral philosopher, or at least was not only a moral philosopher. However, he was concerned with the part of philosophy that deals with morality and enthusiastically defended both the welfare and the individual and social development. First, I want to thank Professor Rosen's deep and illuminating study of the Philosophy of Stuart Mill. In my view, one of the most important contributions of the author is his claim that Mill was not only a social moralist but was primarily a philosopher and a logician. In many ways, Rosen is right. Mill was not a moral philosopher, or at least was not only a moral philosopher. However, he was concerned with the part of philosophy that deals with morality and enthusiastically defended both the welfare and the individual and social development.

As we say, Mill was not only a moral philosopher, because in many cases he anticipated to contemporary metaphysics, showing that the principles of normative ethical could be defended so that the human intellect helps to understand them. Even so, it should be added that Mill was, however, a reformer and a defender of moral character education. I think no exaggeration to say that Mill used logic and reasoning as ways to promote intellectual and moral development of all human beings, which is necessary for the individual improvement of welfare and social harmony. Reading Mill carefully is discovered that all his reasoning and use of the senses is aimed at deepening

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the welfare of all members of humanity, recommending the highest pleasures (more developed). Being a moral philosopher is not so, and as Fred Rosen suggests in his brilliant work, an obstacle to Mill being a defender of ethical revolution of society, i.e., the transformation of human life.

Thus, while I deeply admire the contribution of Professor Rosen to the study of Mill, I will show my disagreement with it at some length, and finally I will also summarize the main points of convergence between the study of Rosen and my own view of John Stuart Mill's thought.

Keywords: moral philosophy; empathy; social utility; relativism; social transformation; socialism.

RESUMEN

En primer lugar, quiero agradecer al Profesor Rosen su profundo y esclarecedor estudio sobre la Filosofía de Stuart Mill. A mi modo de ver, una de las contribuciones más importantes del autor es su afirmación de que Mill no era solamente un moralista social sino que era ante todo un filósofo y un lógico. En muchos sentidos, Rosen esta en lo cierto. Mill no era un filósofo moral, o al menos no era sólo un filósofo moral. Sin embargo, le preocupaba la parte de la filosofía que se ocupa de la moralidad y defendía de forma entusiasta el bienestar tanto como el desarrollo individual y social.

Como decimos, Mill no era únicamente un filósofo moral, porque en muchos casos se anticipó a la metafísica contemporánea, mostrando que los principios de ética normativa podían ser defendidos de manera que el intelecto humano ayudase a comprenderlos. Sin embargo, debería añadirse que Mill fue, no obstante, un moralista reformador y un defensor de la educación moral. Creo que no exagerado afirmar que Mill usó la lógica y el razonamiento como formas de promover el desarrollo intelectual y moral de todos los seres humanos, lo cual es necesario para el perfeccionamiento individual del bienestar y la armonía social. Leyendo a Mill cuidadosamente se descubre que todo su razonamiento y uso de los sentidos está dirigido a profundizar sobre el bienestar de todos los miembros de la humanidad, recomendando los placeres más altos (más desarrollados). Ser un filósofo moral no es, así, y como parece sugerir Fred Rosen en su brillante trabajo, un obstáculo para que Mill sea un defensor de la revolución moral de la sociedad, es decir, de la transformación de la vida humana.

Así pues, aunque admiro profundamente la contribución del Profesor Rosen al estudio de Mill, mostraré mis desacuerdos con ella con una cierta extensión, y resumiré finalmente los principales puntos de convergencia entre el estudio de Rosen y mi propio punto de vista sobre el pensamiento de John Stuart Mill.

Palabras clave: filosofía moral; empatía; utilidad social; relativismo; transformación social; socialismo.

First of all, I want to congratulate Prof. Rosen for his deep and clarifying study of Mill's work. One of his most important contributions is, to my mind, his assertion that Mill was not mainly a public moralist but a philosopher. As he writes, "Mill was not a public moralist but primary a philosopher and a logician" (*Mill*, Oxford University Press 2013, p. 211.)

In my opinion, however, something must be added about Mill's philosophy. I shall refer here to the interesting contribution by Philip Kitcher entitled "Mill, Education and the Good Life" (included in *John Stuart Mill And The Art Of Life*, ed. by Ben Eggleston, Dale E. Miller and David Weinstein, Oxford University Press, 2012).

According to Kitcher, it is a great mistake to delimitate philosophy to Metaphysics, Epistemology and Analysis. Instead, he looks at another concept of Philosophy that tries to answer to the most fundamental questions relating to how to live, such as How should I live? How should we live together? "Within this tradition the theory of education is indeed central, for education is to foster individual development and to prepare for participation in society" (*Ibid.*, p. 191) "I hope to show how Mill is as central to the main philosophical tradition as Plato, Rousseau and Dewey and how his importance consists not in offering a radical alternative (as Plato, Rousseau and Dewey all did) but rather in his immense range of learning and his sympathetic tendency to try to reconcile many different perspectives" (*Ibid.*, 193-194).

In many senses, Rosen is right. Mill was not a moralist, at least not merely a moralist. But he was concerned with that part of Philosophy that deals with Morality, and he enthusiastically defended the good life as well as individual and social development...

Mill was not merely a moralist because in many ways he anticipated contemporary Meta ethics, showing that the principle of normative Ethics could be vindicated, in a way that helped human's intellect to accept it. But I would add that Mill was nonetheless, a progressive moralist, a reformer and defender of moral education.

As a matter of fact, I would like to add that it is not a demerit making a plea for a progressive Morality. All philosophers are secretly defenders of certain rules or principles and nearly never succeed in hiding them, trying to show that they are the result of good reasoning and not of personal prejudices, or personal convictions. In my opinion, the task of Philosophy, as in Mill case, is not to know Truth as an end, but as a mean to transform people's minds and hearts.

Prof. Rosen cannot help admitting that “Logic was not mainly intended to promote the methodological common ground where the positions of Harley and Reid, of Locke and Kant may meet and join hands. . . Mill’s strategy in writing and publishing the work related more to a battlefield for defeating German or ontological philosophy whose roots in England in philosophy and theology had an important effect not only on philosophy but also on the creation of obstacles to social and political reform (Ibid., p. 12).

I think it is not exaggerated to assert that Mill used Logic and reasoning as means to promote the intellectual and moral development of all human beings which is necessary to improve individual well-being and social harmony. Reading Mill carefully one discovers that all his reasoning and his use of feelings is directed to the deep well-being of all the members of humankind, recommending high pleasures.

Mill’s concern with Sociology, his interest in advancing Ethology, his regard of Education, had the purpose of improving the intellectual faculties of the illiterate. In this sense, it is important not to forget his enlightening and stimulating chapter “On the probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes (*Principles Of Political Economy*, chapter VII, CWIII.) As Mill asserts there: “The future well-being of the labouring classes is principally dependent on their mental cultivation.”(Op.cit., p. 763)

As for the lot of the labouring classes, Mill refers to two conflicting theories: “the one may be called the theory of dependence and protection, the other that of self-dependence,” adding Mill according to the former that the lot of the poor should be regulated for them not by them” (Ibid., 759), insisting on the fact that “of spontaneous actions on their part should be no need” (Ibid. P. 759).

For Mill personal development is (as he insisted in *On Liberty* and other places) the result of the working of an active character, which he considers the welcoming sample of a good character. On the other hand, Mill is cutting on considering that “All privileged and powerful classes as such, have used their power in the interest of their selfishness” (Ibid., p. 760).

Moreover although the privileged class could protect the labouring class the protection will make it impossible the development of active character. “Modern nations will have to learn the lesson that the well-being of a people must exist by means of the justice and self-government...of the individual citizen...The prospect of the futu-

re depends on the degree in which they can be made rational beings” (Ibid. P. 163).

Being a Moral Philosopher is not an obstacle for Mill being a defender of the moral revolution of society (Ibid. P- 1929), that is, the transformation of human life, from a conflict of classes struggling for opposite interests to a friendly rivalry in the pursuit of a good common to all; the elevation of the dignity of labour...and the conversion of each human being’s daily occupation into a school of the social sympathies and the practical intelligence” (Ibid. P. 192).

Although Mill thinks that a friendly competition is a necessary weapon to combat laziness and passiveness in many ways he can be considered a socialist, as I shall mention in another place.

I agree with Prof. Rosen when he asserts that Mill was not an absolutist (Rosen, Ibidem., p. 257). In a sense it is true that Mill seemed to reject a science of society based on universal principles (Rose, Ibid., p. 59) but that does not mean that human beings could not, given a particular education, develop an active character and enlarge their natural sympathy.

I do not think that to call Mill a relativist is a proper way of understanding his goal. In *Considerations On Representative Government*, he regards democracy idealistic the best form of government. For that reason, it must be clarified what Prof. Rosen means when proclaiming that for Mill no form of government is universally applicable.

Although I deeply admire Rosen’s contribution to Mill’s study, I will show my disagreements at a certain length, and summarize the main points of convergence between Rosen’s Mill and mine.

1. COMPLEMENTING ROSEN

1. UTILITARIANISM

I think inappropriate the assertion of Rosen relative to important works by Mill such as *Utilitarianism*, *On Liberty*, and *Considerations* that Rosen considers cannot themselves provide satisfactory accounts of the topics under consideration (Rosen, Ibid.p.2).

I think, in opposition to Rosen, that Ethology is not the concern at the heart of Mill’s approach, but simply a tool for the development

of active character that is the key to the fullest enrichment of human capacities for pleasure and flourishing.

I disagree with Rosen's contention that "For Mill there is no single concrete standard no universal carácter to which we all tend (Rosen, *Ibid.*, p. 5). As Alan Ryan writes for Mill "The good society is one made of happy people and Mill's picture of what makes a man happy is not nuclear. It is the possession of a character which is self-reliant, rational in its assessment of the World, tolerant, wide engaging in its interest and spontaneous in its sympathies" (*The Philosophy Of John Stuart Mill*, Macmillan Press, 1987, pp. 24-25). Adding Ryan that "Mill's concern with self-development and moral progress is a strand in his philosophy to which everything else is subordinate (*Ibid.*, p. 265).

From the point of view of Mill's ethics Utilitarianism explains in a clear way, the proper meaning of utility contrary to mere expediency or the superiority of higher pleasures with regard to lower ones, as well as the very difference between happiness and content. If on *On Liberty* Mill entitles one chapter as "Individuality as an element of well-being," in *Utilitarianism* he insists on the relationship between Justice and well-being.

2. REASON AND PASSION

I think the most impressive contribution of Mill to Moral Philosophy is the balanced role of reason and feeling (reason and passion) on the grounding of metaethics and normative ethics. I shall quote Colin Heydt for some similar appreciation, in his work *Rethinking Mill's Ethics* (Continuum, London 2006). As this writer asserts there: "Mill differentiates his ethical position, from those of Bentham and his father by emphasizing the need to attend to our affective and imaginative development" (op.cit. p. 7).

On another place Heydt asserts: "Mill outlines a place for character in utilitarian theory and provides new goals for the development of various dispositions, especially those of feeling" (*Ibid.*, p. 48).

Among moral feelings, there is a prominent place for sympathy. According to Heydt: "Mill places greater emphasis on non-self-direct components of the human psyche (e.g. sympathy) than his early companions" (*Ibid.*, p. 58). Mill appreciates especially "regard of others" (*Ibid.*, p.82). Or mentions "the social feeling of mankind"

(Ibid. 83). And is almost original when writing of “the pleasures of fellow-feeling”(Ibid., p. 84).

From my point of view, contrary to Rosen’s appreciation, Mill is not primary a logician, but an intense romantic reformer who offers a work written with rigor and a deep enthusiasm. This enthusiasm of Mill puts him high above the common academic Moral Philosophy so distant from human development as an active creature. Mill like Plato in classic Greece dreamt of a world where Happiness and Goodness stepped side by side and this shared view made them the important leaders of political and moral reform.

3. RELATIVIST?

According to Rosen, Mill was a relativist, and this consideration runs through the most part of his interesting work on Mill. In this sense, Rosen asserts that for Mill: “The thesis that mankind shared universal psychological principles, on which a science of government might be established was false” (Rosen, Ibid., p. 85).

To my mind, Mill was not a relativist but a not dogmatic thinker. The same rules were right in one place and wrong in another according to the degree of civilization, but this did not imply that barbarous countries were as good as civilized ones.

Rosen himself quotes from Riley that “utilitarian rules of justice distribute equal rights to absolute self-regarding liberty for all mature individuals in any civilized society”(Rosen.Ibid., p. 208)

Mill was not an absolutist, that meaning he did not believe morality was a sort of a priori principle. He was a humanist in the sense that all morality depended on human development and cultivated desire.

Utilitarianism, with his emphasis on the required quality of pleasures, is one of the best exponents of his faith on the vindication of utilitarianism as the doctrine that most systems of Ethics aspire to be although their defenders seem to ignore their ultimate end and their hidden principle.

I want to quote a paragraph from Mill’s “Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy” where he asserts the possibility of everyone developing his human nature on the right way:

“There are, there has been many human beings in whom the motives of patriotism or of benevolence have been permanently steady principles of action, superior to any ordinary and in not a few instants,

to any possible temptations of personal interest. There is nothing in the constitution of human nature to forbid its being so in all mankind. Until it is so, the race will never enjoy one tenth part of the happiness which our nature is susceptible of” (CWWX, p.15).

Instead of taking Mill as a relativist I would call him a realist and a “gradualist.” Morality depends on the social and political conditions, but education and changes in institutions could impose the moral standard. Mill’s goal was deep happiness that depended on the full development of individuals (he shows his preference for active characters and rejects passive ones) and desired a society where cooperation would take the place of competition.

In many senses, Mill was a Manichean Moral Leader aiming at the triumph of good over evil. He was a Cosmopolitan, too, who hoped things could be reformed along the time. As he asserts: “we cannot judge it impossible that the love of that larger community, the World, may be nursed into similar strength both as a source of elevated emotion and a principle of duty (*The Utility Of Religion*, CW X, p.471).

Works such as *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism*, *Principles Of Political Econocmy*, *The Subjection Of Women*, and others make it clear that there are ways of behavior that are bad in themselves, and other ones that are good ones. As Colin Heydt asserts: “The value of friendship of equals between husband, and wife is Mill’s most basic normative commitment in *The Subjection Of Women* (op. cit., p. 116).

As Rosen himself comments: “Mill could not accept the domestic role assigned to women.” (op.cit., p. 103,

I think it is important to insist that Mill was a Reformer who took into account the present state of citizens and nations in order to *educate* human beings to live according to the most beneficial form of government. As Mill writes in *Consideration On Representative Government*:

“The ideally best form of government, it is scarcely necessary to say, does not mean one that is practicable or eligible in all states of civilization, but one which in the circumstances that is practicable and eligible is attended with the greatest amount of beneficial consequences, immediate and prospective. A complete popular government is the only polity which can make any claim to this character” (Op.cit., O.U.P. p 244)

4. EQUALITY AND LIBERTY

I want to congratulate Prof. Rosen for his splendid treatment of Liberty in Mill's work, but I cannot but disagree with Rosen's account of equality in Mill's writings.

It is true that Mill rejected strict equality as Rosen reports (Ibid., p.67), but he was only meaning that strict equality of salaries would lead to a society where the lazy ones would earn as much as the diligent ones, which seems clearly wrong and unjust. But we cannot forget that Mill rejected the difference of status between the privileged ones and the subordinated ones and was not only against despotism, but in favor of a society grounded on "a principle of perfect equality regarding the relationship between men and women," as Rosen recalls (Ibid., p. 245).

I am not sure that Rosen is right when claiming that Liberty was a major theme in *The Subjection* (Ibid., 246). I think both equality and liberty were, for Mill, equally necessary for an ideal society and an ideal family.

In Book III, chapter VI of the *Principles* (CWIII) entitled "On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes" (pp. 758-796) we can find an important analysis of the desirable cooperation in the working-shop aiming at the self-dependence and mutual friendship among everybody involved.

The role of equality is very important to ensure well-being. I consider appropriate to quote a paragraph from *The Subjection*:

"What marriage may be in the case of persons of cultivated faculties, identical opinions and purposes between them whom there exists the best kind of equality, similarly of powers and capacities with reciprocal supremacy in them-so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other and can have alternately the pleasure of leading and being led in the path of development, I will not attempt to describe. To those who cannot conceive of it, it would appear the dream of an enthusiast. But I maintain with the profoundest conviction that this, and only this, is the ideal of marriage (*The Subjection Of Women*, in *On Liberty And Other Essays*, O.U.P., 1991, p.575).

With regards to the relationship between higher classes and labouring ones the need of equality is firmly called for. It is not enough that the rich should be in loco parents to the poor guiding and restraining them like children (see on "The probable..." , Ibid., p. 759).

To begin with, Mill cannot trust the privileged classes. As he asserts: “All privileged and powerful classes have used their power in the interest of their own selfishness”(Ibid., p. 760) . This is the reason why Mill contends that the so-called protectors are now the only persons against whom, in any ordinary circumstance protection is needed (Ibid.p. 761). The theory of dependence is not enough and “Modern nations will have to learn the lesson that the well-being of a people must exist by means of the justice and self-government. . .of the individual citizens” (Ibi., 763). Adding that “the prospect of future depends on the degree in which they (the labouring classes) are made rational beings” (Ibid. 763).

I am almost certain that for Mill Liberty cannot do without Equality, and that Equality leads to the deepest happiness and the enjoyment of any other´s fraternal company. As Mill writes : “The aim of improvement should be not solely to place human beings in a condition in which they will be able to do without one another but to enable them to work with or for one another in relations not involving dependence”(Ibid.p. 768).

5. MILL AS A QUALIFIED SOCIALIST

As one reads Rosen about whether or not Mill was a socialist one gets the impression that as Mill was a philosopher, he could not be a socialist. In Rosen´s words: “The denial that Mill had a simple answer, to whether or not he was a socialist is related to the fact that he was not primary a public moralist and his avoidance of final and categorical moral positions would not permit him to become one” (Ibid., p.211).

In the first place, being a philosopher is not an obstacle to defend progressive ideals. I would suggest that usually Philosophy helps us to commit ourselves to a sort of values defended by democratic socialism. As a matter of fact Mill defines himself as defending a qualified socialism . In his *Autobiography* he states: “My new tendencies had to be confirmed in some respects, moderated in others: but the only substantial changes of opinion that were yet to come related to politics and committed....as far as regards to the ultimate prospects of humanity to a qualified Socialism “(*Autobiography* , Penguin Books, London, 1981, first published 1873, p.149).

As Mill writes in the same work: “our ideal (Harriet Taylor´s and his) of the ultimate improvement went far beyond Democracy and

would class us decidedly under the general designation of Socialists” (Ibid., p.149). More cuttingly he shows his socialist trend when asserts that Harriet Taylor and him: “Looked forward to a time when society will no longer be divided into the idle and the industriors... The social problem of the future we considered to be how to unite the greatest individual liberty of action with a common ownership in the raw materials of the globe and an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labour” (Ibi., p. 175).

Indeed, Mill was neither a utopian nor a radical socialist. He disagreed , for example, with the usual socialist declamation against competition. According to Mill: “It is the common error of Socialism to overlook the natural indolence of mankind; their tendence to be passive, to be slaves of habit, to persist indefinitely into a course once chosen...Competition may not be the best conceivable stimulus but is at present a necessary one, and no one can foresee the time when it will not be indispensable to progress” (“On the Probable Futurity...”p. 595).

II. THE MOST POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION OF ROSEN TO MILL´S STUDIES

1. MILL´S LEGACY

I do not want to obscure the extraordinary value of Rosen´ s work on Mill, with my objections and disagreements. It would take me a longer space to point out all that is worthy in his titanic effort for pointing out Mill´ s merits as an intellectual researcher. I shall limit myself to comment on his most positive contribution.

I quite agree with Rosen assertion: “Mill´ s legacy in philosophy and social thought is particularly rich” (op.ct., p.24).

I find suggestive Rosen´ s contention that “in rejecting the importance of constitutional forms like monarchy, aristocracy and democracy and relying on the estate of ‘active character’ to asses a country´ s progress as a modern state would never lead him to support the imposition of ‘regime change’ in a country like Irak in the hope of creating a modern democracy”(Ibid., p. 25)

It is also important Rosen´ s assertion that ”it is clear that Mill´ s idea of the circle of liberty could not be linked simply with capitalism and the minimal state, or with revolution and state socialism.

He recommended a different way forward, which may be called large-state liberalism based on cooperative foundations and *laissez-faire*” (Ibid., p. 25).

As far as religion was concerned: “One crucial test for Mill, as it remains today, is the status of women in religion and society and their aspirations to achieve equality with men in a framework of liberty. No cultural or religious practice that opposes this aspiration should be encouraged in a modern society” (Ibid., p. 25).

Rosen adds another example of the relevance of Mill’s legacy: Mill’s belief that continually increasing economic growth may not be the key to happiness. Mill argues with great skill and cogency that the emphasis on constant economical growth leads to destructive competition (Ibid., p.25).

I quite agree with Rosen when he adds: “the depth and breath of his philosophy was unnequally in his lifetime. . . He possessed a dialectical skill in argument that rivalled that of Plato’s dialogues. His method of reform led to a unique moderation in his political thought, combining an emphasis on stability with a context of progressive change” (Ibid., p. 26).

2. GENERAL REMARKS

In spite of my diverse disagreements, I think Fred Rosen’s *MILL* is a splendid contribution to the understanding of Mill’s way of philosophing, although Rose was more devoted to Mill’s way of reasoning than to Mill’s emphasis on the place of Ascetics and the Art of Life.

Rosen insisted on the greater importance of Science over Art in Mill’s thought, asserting that: “In this book considerable emphasis will be placed on Mill’s reversal of the art-and-science paradigm developed by Bentham. What counted for Mill were the sciences” (Ibi., p. 77), because, according to Rosen: “Mill recognized that the sciences were probably more important than the logical argument to undermining the strength of religious views. As Science expanded and accepted the supremacy of Logic the grip of Religion in numerous fields was forced to retreat. Mill reflected and encouraged these developments” (Ibid., p. 77).

This is an interesting position because it helps to understand Mill’s approval of empiricism although I am more of the opinion of Wendy Donner that contends than the archeology of Mill’s theory is organised in the basis of the Art of Life (Ibid., p, 78).

In any case, Rosen's work is a very estimable contribution as it helps to avoid the absurd belief that places Mill as a minor philosopher. Rosen's Mill shows the undeniable effort of Mill to make political and moral philosophy a human enterprise, grounded on the rational and sensitive human capacities.

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