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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN STUART MILL

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Nicholas Capelin, *John Stuart Mill, A Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 456 pp. £27.50, $40.00 (hb.). ISBN 10: 0521620244

Victor Sanchez-Valencia (ed.), *The General Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002. 542 pp. £112.50, $225.00 (hb.) ISBN 07546 20689

Henry West, *An Introduction to Mill's Utilitarian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 228 pp. £14.90, $21.99 (hb.) £40.00, $65.00 (pb.) ISBN 0521828325 (hb.) ISBN 0521535417 (pb.)

I

Though John Stuart Mill's ethics and politics are as important as ever, his overall philosophical reputation remains somewhat uncertain and obscure. Nick Capaldi says, in his new intellectual biography, that 'Mill was an enigma to his contemporaries, and this enigma has remained down to the present'. Yet his is one of the most important nineteenth-century contributions to philosophy. Why then the uncertainty? 'The main reason', Capaldi suggests, 'is that Mill expressed a total vision of liberal culture that was shared by almost no one and had in Britain no natural constituency' (357).

That is an interesting explanation to which I shall return. However, a more obvious reason is simply the breadth and scale of his thought. Few if any of us have the time or interest to find the vantage point, outside the concerns of current specialist philosophy, that is required to assess it. Mill's idea of the role of philosophy in intellectual culture, and of its place in his own thinking and practice, is hard to capture from within the current divisions of academic research. What he was trying to do as a philosopher, and how far he succeeded, remains surprisingly unfamiliar.

This 'Mill problem' is part of a larger 'nineteenth-century philosophy' problem. It is not just our understanding of Mill, it is our understanding of philosophical debate in the nineteenth century, in all its remarkable ambitiousness and diversity, that remains uncertain. Not only that; when it comes to some of its most prominent features, above all its historicism and

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its developmental ideals of self, uncertainty becomes hostility. This aspect of nineteenth-century thought – its preoccupation with becoming and progressiveness, in world history, in the individual, and perhaps in nature – is the one we like least, or even find dangerous. Whether we should come to like it more if we understood it better is moot.

Yet this emphasis on historicity, with its accompanying gain of psychological insight, is what Mill praised, in his essay on Coleridge, as the contribution of the counter-enlightenment – a contribution of which he often says that it transformed his own thinking. In a letter to Comte he says that it 'corrected the excessively analytic disposition of my thought, nourished by Bentham and the French philosophers of the eighteenth century' (XIII 576, quoted in Capaldi, 92), and he repeats the same point forcefully elsewhere.[1] So these ideas cannot be ignored in interpreting him. However, it is tricky, especially in the light of current hostility, to get them right. In Hegel one can hardly fail to notice the focus on becoming, but one can fail to notice it in Mill, because there is much in Mill that can be discussed without noticing it. Mill is enough of an 'analytic philosopher', and these ideas are sufficiently misunderstood or suspected, for this whole aspect of his thinking to fall easily out of view. Of course, Mill developed his own, characteristically cool, individualist critique of the truth in historicism (in the *System of Logic*, Book VI). It is true, nonetheless, that Hegel and Mill share a historical conception of progress towards freedom – an idea of pervasive progress that takes place both within the lives of individuals and at the level of social norms. It is impossible to grasp Mill's substantive ethical and political outlook without understanding this; but it is also a challenge to many modernist and post-modernist assumptions.

Nor is there a consensus about 'the' nineteenth-century philosophical argument – whether there was one, and if so who was important in it. Contrast the familiar story about the earlier modern period, which tells it as a contest between empiricism and rationalism resolved by Kant. Historians of philosophy may highlight its deficiencies, nonetheless it provided a narrative within which the aims and importance of a large number of contrasted figures acquired a shape that can be discussed in history of philosophy courses. In the case of the nineteenth century no-one has come up with any similarly user-friendly way of telling its story. Maybe there isn't one. At any rate it is difficult to grasp what was going on. It does not help that until recently, at least in 'analytic philosophy' departments, the history of philosophy seemed to stop at Kant and then restart, somewhat mysteriously, with Frege in logic, Moore (or more recently Sidgwick) in ethics, Viennese positivism (or perhaps Duhem, Mach, Poincaré, etc.) in philosophy of science. Histories of analytic philosophy tended to emphasize the Kantian continuities to be found in Wittgenstein and the Vienna

[1] I cite the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Routledge, 1963–91, by volume and page number.

Circle (even though the connections with nineteenth-century empiricism, positivism and pragmatism could just as easily be stressed), the supposed *ur*-sources in Frege, and the growth of 'professional', i.e. largely analytic, ethical theory from Sidgwick, Brentano and Moore.

Given this situation, a first way of approaching Mill is simply to fill the gap by showing how important he was in the development of all these subjects. This 'continuity' approach is well advanced as regards his ethics. It is being applied, though less prominently, to his radical empiricism and his ideas about meaning, logic and mathematics. All these are areas in which Mill's concerns are not too difficult to relate to those of the present day.

Another type of 'continuity' approach could start from the view propounded by nineteenth-century idealists. As they saw it, Kant resolved the early-modern issues, rendering a continued interest in them obsolescent, but in doing so generated his own dualisms of self and world which – according to those idealists who followed Hegel – it was now the task of philosophy to overcome. This is a potent story, but it is not easy to fit Mill into it; though as we shall see, Capaldi's book makes a strong effort to do so. However, we need not take for granted the story: it is itself the product of a particular post-Kantian philosophical perspective. We could instead place Mill's radicalism about logic and mathematics into a different narrative, which downgrades the problems of transcendental idealism and emphasizes the continuities in the development of empiricism, situating Mill in relation to the logical empiricism of Vienna and the pragmatic empiricism of Quine.[2]

A third view sees these approaches, despite their merits, as too purist or internalist to capture what is really distinctive in the thinking of the major nineteenth-century philosophers. They miss the strong integration between nineteenth-century philosophy and nineteenth-century thought and culture. The important philosophers of the time did not just do things other than philosophy, though many of them did – the point is that they had a much more expansive view of what it *is* to do philosophy. To understand them a more lateral and intellectually integrated approach is needed than a purist history of philosophy provides. You have to relate Mill's thinking as a whole to such figures as Comte and Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche, and to their speculative and historicizing philosophies of human nature, society and knowledge. Mill is more 'analytic' than they are, but he is also, like them, a bold synthesizer with a strong hinterland outside philosophy. His concern is the cultural and spiritual battle of humanity. This concern, the most significant feature of philosophical thought in the nineteenth century, is best understood comparatively. Understanding the significance of any one of these nineteenth-century thinkers thus goes with understanding the significance of the rest.

[2]On Mill, Vienna and Quine, see my 'Later Empiricism and Logical Positivism', in *The Oxford Handbook to the Philosophy of Mathematics*, edited by Stewart Shapiro (Oxford University Press, 2005).

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II

Two of these three books, those of Sanchez Valdez and West, contribute to the first of these three approaches. Capaldi contributes to the second and third.

Sanchez-Valencia's volume collects papers that either discuss Mill's general philosophy or take an aspect of it as a starting point for philosophizing. They are of mixed quality, and most are quite old, which is a little disappointing. Still, the best ones make valuable contributions, particularly to recapturing the details of Mill's philosophy of induction, language, logic and maths. Scarre's 1983 paper, 'Was Mill Really Concerned with Hume's Problem of Induction?' was important in pointing out that Mill was not attempting to answer the 'sceptical' problem of induction, but rather (among other things) to explain why formally similar inductions can greatly differ in the support they confer on their conclusion. Kessler, 'Frege, Mill and the Foundations of Arithmetic' and Kitcher, 'Arithmetic for the Millian' (both 1980), made important contributions to the understanding and defence of Mill's philosophy of arithmetic. Bryan Frances (1998), 'Defending Millian Theories', is not concerned with Mill interpretation, but he shows very clearly the resources of the 'Millian' as against the 'Fregean' view of names. Ken Akiba (1996) 'Logic as Instrument: The Millian View on the Role of Logic', is an interesting formal study of Mill's claim that all inference is 'from particulars to particulars'. Mill held that a general statement is just a useful way of remembering and passing on a rule for making such inferences. As Akiba notes, this view can be applied to all complex statements. Logic could be formulated as a set of rules for inferring atomic statements from atomic statements. The only advantage of a more standard formulation in terms of natural deduction rules is its succinctness for memory and communication. Akiba has an interesting discussion of what, from this perspective, the deduction rules for negation should be.

As these papers and others indicate, there has been a worthwhile advance in accurate appreciation of Mill's general philosophy. Interest in the details of his semantics and philosophy of logic will develop as the history of these subjects becomes more objective and comprehensive. Taken as a whole, however, Sanchez-Valencia's volume suggests that any grander revival of interest in Mill's general philosophy is at best stuttering. This fact can itself be seen historically. It is not surprising that there was a flurry of interest in the System of Logic in the 1980s: by that time the modernist dogma that saw logic and maths as analytic had receded into historical perspective, Quine's empiricist naturalism had acquired great influence, while the enormous revival of interest in Frege had also been assimilated and it was beginning to be interesting to see him in perspective. At this point Mill's radical empiricism about logic and mathematics, and his naturalistic epistemology (the *System of Logic* might have been more accurately called 'A System of Naturalised Epistemology') could be sympathetically grasped for what it

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was, without, for example, being confused with 'psychologism'; while his strongly developed semantic theory, based on the distinction between denotation and connotation, could also be appreciated afresh, and not just through Fregean eyes.

This also opened a better view of the relation between Mill and later nineteenth-century developments. Mill's account of the 'inductive process' emphasizes the growth of scientific theory into a powerful deductive structure, and the progressive historical self-vindication that it thereby achieves; his attitude towards science is fallibilist but non-sceptical. His phenomenalism is a stage on the road to that baffling standpoint, 'neutral monism', so important to pragmatism and to Machian empiricism (and, come to that, to Nietzsche), and which in a way continues right into Carnap's *Aufbau*. As for Quine, while he is emphatically a scientific realist, his holistic verificationism raises baffling questions about the relation between language and world which are rather similar to those raised by earlier monisms about thought and reality.

However, since the 1980s, philosophy has not taken Millian and Quinean paths but turned in rationalist, realist and metaphysical directions which are at odds not just with their kind of empiricism but also with the idealist and pragmatist trends in nineteenth-century philosophy. It may be that these new directions will have to run their course before standpoints favourable to Mill's epistemology re-emerge.

III

To turn from studies of Mill's general philosophy to studies of his ethics is to turn from continuing uncertainty to increasing scholarly convergence. Here, it is no longer acceptable to take a cavalier attitude to what Mill actually says. His exact words are respectfully scrutinized; people realize that while the manner of *Utilitarianism* and *Liberty* is simple, their content is complex and subtle. Henry West has been a main contributor to this raising of interpretative standards. His authoritative new study of Mill's utilitarianism makes deft use of less-known writings such as Mill's notes on his father's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*. It provides exactly what its title promises: an introduction to Mill's utilitarian ethics that will be invaluable to students studying Mill's *Utilitarianism* and to anyone else who is interested in Mill's ethical thought.

West's general interpretation is set out at the beginning: 'Mill revised and perhaps broadened and softened Benthamism, but he never deserted it . . . his debt to Bentham cannot be overemphasized. His modifications are refinements of a basically utilitarian view from which he never wavered' (5, 12). This interpretation, as we shall see, is strongly in conflict with that of Capaldi.

The foundation of Mill's ethics is indeed, as West says, a theory of the good that is welfarist, hedonist, impartial and aggregative. West clearly

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sympathizes with it. He defends all three steps in the 'proof' of the principle of utility. Of the step which argues from happiness being desired to its being desirable he gives what should by now be a familiar explanation. Mill's methodological point is that 'evidence' for conclusions about the good for human beings *can* be found, and that only appeal to such 'evidence' has rational, though not deductive, force. The evidence is what we ultimately desire, after experience and reflection. Applying this naturalistic method, Mill claims that what it indicates is that happiness (pleasure and the absence of suffering) is desirable.

So far, so good. West's defence of the other two steps is less compelling. He makes the most of Mill's subtle defence of hedonism – but while I appreciate that this is a surprisingly elusive issue, with much to be said on Mill's side, I am not convinced. When we desire, for their own sake, the well-being of children and friends – as West agrees we do – the prospect that they will be happy pleases us, and the prospect that they may be unhappy causes us sorrow. However, if to satisfy the desire for their well-being we are ready to take a net reduction of our own happiness, that seems to show, by Mill's own test, that their happiness is desirable to us *independently* of our own. The same goes if it turns out that we are willing to sacrifice happiness for achievement, or for knowledge. It is not enough to answer that we view the prospect of achievement or knowledge with pleasure. That does not show hedonism to be true.

A more clear-cut weakness comes with West's defence of Mill's step to aggregative utilitarianism. Here he is unconvincing for two reasons. In the first place he does not deal adequately with the Sidgwickian challenge, as it might be called – namely, that while Mill's method may show that each person's happiness is good or desirable to that person, it does not show that there is any agent-neutral standpoint from which the happiness of all is good. West comments that the fact

> that one desires only one's own happiness does not restrict the desirability of happiness to one's own happiness. If the desirability of happiness *as such* is *identified* (and not created) by one's own desire for it in one's own experience, its desirability – wherever it is located – can be admitted by the intellect. (143)

The 'as such' (italicized by West) in effect inserts an agent-neutral reading of the desirable. However, the appropriateness of that reading is precisely what is at issue. On the face of it, the fact that my happiness is desirable to me – that there is reason for me to want it – does not entail that my happiness is desirable to anyone else – that there is reason for anyone else to want it. 'Desirable' does not work like 'admirable'. To admire something, say the architecture of a building, is to think it has qualities that give everyone reason to admire it; but to desire something is not to think that there is reason for everyone to desire it, still less that there is reason for everyone to desire that

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one should have it. My desire for my success is evidence that it is desirable for me – but it is not evidence that my success is desirable for you. To say that the desirable-for-me is desirable *as such* is to insert an extra premise: the premise that if a thing is good-for-someone, then it is agent-neutrally good.

The second point concerns Mill's aggregative theory of the good. Here too his conclusion is stronger than his premises justify. Even if we concede that happiness is agent-neutrally good wherever it occurs, must we concede that it is *equally* good wherever it occurs? This is an extremely strong move. West seems to think that it results simply from conceding that 'the value of different instances of happiness is arithmetical' (143), i.e. that it can be measured on an additive scale. However, it goes well beyond that: even granting that the value of happiness can be agent-neutrally and additively measured, the question is, what determines its value? West's view, evidently, is that its value is determined by its quality and quantity but not by its relative location in people or time. Where or when happiness is instantiated does not affect its value. West thinks Mill thinks this too. He has good textual evidence, notably Mill's well-known remark, in a footnote in *Utilitarianism*, that 'equal amounts of happiness are equally desirable, whether felt by the same or by different persons' (quoted at 141). However, it is not clear to me that Mill considered this specific question (the other, confused, remarks in the footnote suggest otherwise); and one can add that no deeper element in Mill's ethical view, such as hedonism or impartiality, entails the aggregative criterion, while some of his deepest convictions might even be thought to point away from it.

This is one of the points at which it seems to me that West underestimates the anti-Benthamic thrust in Mill's thinking; or perhaps one should rather say that Mill himself did not think it sufficiently through. There can be an experience-oriented and a person-oriented version of hedonism. On the former view, it is the experience of happiness that is good, wherever it occurs; on the latter view what is good is that people are happy. On the former view people matter, so to speak, only as containers of happiness – it is the total quantity of happiness that really matters. On the latter view the starting point is impartial concern for the happiness of actual people. Real and important ethical differences can flow from this very deep contrast. The evidence that Mill's ethical stance is person-oriented rather than experience-oriented is far from clear-cut, whereas the remark quoted above clearly indicates that he is an aggregate, or at any rate a 'simply maximizing' utilitarian. On the other side one can cite passages such as his remark in a letter to Carlyle that he holds 'the good of the species (or rather of its separate units) to be the ultimate end (which is the alpha and omega of my utilitarianism)' (XII 207). However, these cannot be decisive, since he never explicitly examines the contrast in question, or recognizes that aggregate utilitarianism goes well beyond this alpha and omega. All one can say is that the romantic-liberal side of Mill points towards the person-oriented stance, while the Benthamic side points towards the experience-oriented stance.

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The remark in the letter to Carlyle, taken literally, would also suggest that Mill's utilitarianism consists solely in a welfarist theory of the good. Mill also takes it for granted that his impartial and hedonistic theory of the good must be the 'standard' or 'test' of morality; however, these are rather indefinite, stage-setting phrases. I think West is right to argue that Mill is neither an act nor a rule utilitarian about moral obligation. More generally, as he says, Mill is interested not in reconstructing common-sense morality but in social reform: 'Mill is a social reformer, but he is a conservative regarding ordinary day-by-day morality' (27).

I do think this comment is fair if the comparison is with twentieth-century utilitarians, who have been very interested in defining moral obligation and constructing substantive theories of morality, often of a sharply revisionist kind, in welfarist terms. In contrast, although Mill does interestingly define moral wrongness in terms of the appropriateness of blame, it is striking that he makes no attempt to construct a new theory of moral obligations on that basis.

However if the comparison is with Bentham, then I think the comment is misleading; this is another point at which West underplays the anti-Benthamic side of Mill. He gives a good defence of Mill's quantity/quality distinction (pointing out, by the way, that it is made in very similar terms by Hutcheson). He does not, however, put it in its larger context. One of Mill's main criticisms of Bentham was that he was insufficiently interested in personal morality. He did not mean that Bentham was insufficiently interested in constructing a utilitarian theory of duty. The point, rather, is that what ideals one should live by, what gives life dignity and substance, is for Mill a fundamental question, but one to which he thinks Bentham – the 'boy to the last' – had nothing to contribute. In contrast, Mill obviously thinks that self-governing moral agency, together with other ideals and other forms of personal commitment, is an important contributor to the dignity and substance of one's life. These are the issues of 'integrity' that Bernard Williams and others have taken to pose a challenge to utilitarianism. Although Mill is not an act utilitarian about morality, he is committed to an actual-consequence act utilitarian view of what the best thing to do is. That still raises questions about integrity, morality and self-alienation, and these questions preoccupied Mill. They arose from the nineteenth-century side of his thought, particularly from its concern with character and self-development, and they remain a fundamental issue for anyone who accepts a welfarist theory of the good.

IV

It is on the fine grain of a philosopher's work, in particular in theses or passages of argument relating to current philosophical preoccupations, that much of his reputation among the 'professionals' lies. Close study of these

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can bring a past philosopher to life as someone coming at our preoccupations from a fresh and illuminating direction. This can plainly be seen from Mill's current importance in the debate about utilitarianism; Henry West's study of Mill's ethics is valuable in just this way, in that it helps us to take fresh stock of the resources of the utilitarian tradition, and of ways to develop them that can come from careful rereading of Mill.

It goes without saying, however, that to address the 'Mill problem' with which I started, that of finding a standpoint from which to see his thought as a whole, something rather different is needed: a study that presents an overall picture of his philosophy, is laterally knowledgeable about the culture and thought of his time, and relates his philosophy to his life. This is where Nick Capaldi's new intellectual biography of Mill comes in. His 'aim is to try to provide the big picture – a coherent vision of Mill'. And he has a bold thesis: 'where I think I am breaking new ground is in presenting an in-depth discussion of how Mill was in fact a Romantic' (xvi). The final sentence of the book concludes, indeed, that 'Mill was the greatest of the English romantics' (365).

It is telling that the last large-scale biography of Mill, that of Michael St. John Packe, goes back as far as 1954. Packe is readable, full of information about Mill's life, lively and amusing (this must, by the way, be the only philosophical biography written by the captain of a county cricket club). However, he is by no means an accurate, or even stimulating, guide to Mill's thought; and in any case, much has changed since 1954. So a full-scale study of Mill's life and work is sorely needed.

Capaldi's *John Stuart Mill* does much to fill the gap. Yet his interpretation of Mill's philosophy is quirky in the extreme, as I shall try to show. First, I should say that this book is nevertheless a fine achievement, an intellectual and historical resource which will benefit, stimulate (and exasperate) people interested in Mill for years to come, like an eccentric but brilliant performance of a piece of music we thought we knew well. It comes from a great deal of really good, hard work by a philosopher with strong and interesting views, and so it quite rightly puts Mill's overall philosophy at the centre of attention. Capaldi also has a good eye for the significant statement in an out-of-the way place. The biographical details are done somewhat dryly, without much feeling for narrative flow, but with a compensating perceptiveness and good sense. The Harriet Taylor relationship, which is one of Capaldi's main themes, is well-handled. He treats both sides fairly, while not ignoring its unattractive aspects, such as Mill's inexcusable treatment of his mother and sisters, or Harriet's and Mill's isolation and arrogance:

> the private correspondence between Mill and Harriet reflects an almost embarrassing sense of elitism, mission, and superiority in both of them. Even the visitor Gomperz [One of Mill's great admirers] noted what he thought was a kind of self-righteousness in them.
>
> (190)

Above all, however, this book is a serious attempt to apply the third interpretative approach I mentioned at the beginning – to reach Mill's deepest concerns, in all their nineteenth-century boldness, to relate him to other equally bold figures of his time, and to ground a new interpretation and valuation on that:

> Mill possessed a kind of genius that had no analogue prior to the development of historical imagination in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that therefore was only dimly recognized by himself and his contemporaries. What Mill, like Hegel and even to some extent Marx, could do was to synthesize all of the major intellectual and cultural factors of his time into a coherent narrative.
>
> (25)

True. Philosophy in this grand nineteenth-century manner – the attempt to see things as a whole – is at the heart of what Mill did.

Futhermore, according to Capaldi, 'The concept of 'autonomy' is the key to understanding Mill' (199) – autonomy conceived in the way that Kant and German romantic thinkers who followed Kant conceived it. Like Hegel, Mill thinks that human history is the history of progress towards freedom; but as his thinking developed, he progressed from the 'Enlightenment project' – the limited perspectives of Bentham and of his father – and came to see, with Kant, that to account for human autonomy naturalism must be abandoned; further, it seems that one must postulate some sort of God or divine principle (though it's not always clear whether this is just what Capaldi thinks, or what he thinks Mill also thinks).[3] Where Henry West gives us the friendly corrector of Bentham, Nick Capaldi gives us the all-out romantic, anti-naturalistic theorist of human autonomy.

Alas, this reading of Mill's grand project has very serious flaws. They all stem from a single distortion: whereas Mill's own view of his project was that he was trying to reconcile enlightenment fundamentals with the ethical and historical counter-enlightenment insights of the nineteenth century, Capaldi presents a Mill who swings wholly from the one to the other; more, a follower of German philosophy and a predecessor of the British idealists.

Let me approach this interpretation through three main questions: What kind of commitment to autonomy did Mill have? What is it to be a romantic philosopher, and was Mill that? What kind of idealist was he?

[3]What Capaldi actually says is that Mill believed, or at least thought it probable, that there exists a personal, benevolent but not omnipotent God. Apart from being an over-strong reading of what Mill says in 'Theism' (where he only places the hypothesis among the lower levels of probability), this sits badly with the idealist reading of Mill that Capaldi favours. On that interpretation what Mill should have favoured is a Hegelian *Geist*, or Greenian eternal consciousness.

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Mill hardly uses the word 'autonomy'. In a letter to a French correspondent (CW XVII 1831–32) he describes 'l'autonomie de l'individu', or 'l'autonomie de la personne humaine', as the doctrine defended in *On Liberty*. Here (and in a later letter at XXXII 221) 'autonomie' clearly refers to the 'principe' or 'rêgle', of liberty that is put forward in that book. It does not refer to the Kantian notion of autonomy as a capacity of the will, or a personal power. There are a few other uses of the term, mainly in his writings on the Classics, but not in the Kantian sense.[4] Capaldi does not cite them, and the word is absent from the Indexes to the *Collected Works*.

Clearly this does not show that Mill did not have the concept. However it does place an onus on Capaldi to explain what concept he has in mind. The core of it, if I have not misunderstood, is the notion of freedom as an ability (as against a liberty) to govern oneself. I certainly agree that Mill has this positive notion of freedom, that it is for him an important value, and important to his liberal ethics. He calls it 'moral freedom':

> A person feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist . . . we must feel that our wish, if not strong enough to alter our character, is strong enough to conquer our character when the two are brought into conflict in any particular case of conduct. And hence it is said with truth, that none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free.
>
> (VIII: 841)

However, Capaldi wants to do much more with the notion of autonomy than that. In the first place he argues that it, not happiness, is Mill's ultimate value:

> the ultimate value is freedom understood as personal autonomy, as the imposing of rules upon oneself in the interest of a higher ideal.
>
> (140)

> Instead of Bentham's ideal of universal happiness, Mill advocated universal autonomy.
>
> (260)

> There is only one intrinsic goal for Mill, and that is autonomy understood in the classical Greek-Christian-Protestant-Kantian-Humboldtian tradition.
>
> (280)

These claims are too strong. The one ultimate end, for Mill, is happiness. That is the obvious reading of Mill's ethics, and one could not read Henry West's book without being convinced that it is indeed correct. True, Mill

[4] I owe this information to Christopher Macleod.

thinks that to achieve that end one should pursue one's own development as a human being, and the development of one's moral freedom is certainly for him a part of that. Thus, Capaldi could argue that while happiness is, strictly speaking, the intrinsic and final goal, autonomy is nevertheless for Mill an *ultimate* goal, in the sense of being an ultimate part or essential of happiness, certainly of the higher forms of happiness. Mill makes room for just this kind of distinction, by distinguishing 'means to' and 'parts of' happiness, as in his discussion of virtue as an end.

At this point, however, another difficulty arises, which is that Capaldi places far too much emphasis on autonomy, or moral freedom, at the expense of other equally important elements in Mill's liberal ideal of character. Connectedly, he does not distinguish enough between various strands of post-Kantian thought in Germany. There is an important difference between moral freedom and the qualities Mill has in mind when he talks of individual spontaneity, of the cultivation of the feelings, of the Greek ideal of self-development 'which the Platonic and Christian ideal of self-government blends with, but does not supersede'. Mill's overall view, that the Platonic and Christian ideal one-sidedly over-emphasizes self-government at the expense of the culture of the feelings, is very similar to Schiller's view that Kant over-emphasizes 'dignity' at the expense of 'grace', or in other words autonomy (in the Kantian sense) as against the aesthetic education of feeling. Moral freedom and expressive spontaneity are balanced in Mill, as are dignity and grace in Schiller.

Capaldi gives a prominent role to the German conception of *Bildung*; 'What Mill wants, ideally, [he says] is a series of institutions that promote *Bildung* as the human ideal' (255). If we think of *Bildung* in a Schillerian way, as a balanced development of both moral freedom and expressive spontaneity, then Capaldi's remark about what Mill ideally wants seems to me to be true. It is precisely in his Schillerism that Mill comes through most clearly as a romantic. Given Capaldi's emphasis on Mill's romanticism, then, it is curious that he does not give more attention to this issue. On the same page he refers both to 'individuality (*Bildung* and autonomy)' and to '*Bildung* as autonomy'. The important question, for understanding Mill's liberal ideal, or the romantic conception of *Bildung*, is how 'autonomy' relates to spontaneity of feeling. It is its conception of that relation that distinguishes *this* liberal ideal – whether we find it in Schiller, Mill or Matthew Arnold – from, say, the Fichtean ethic of self-realizing struggle, the Hegelian ethic of my station and its duties, the Comtean ethic of service to humanity, or the later Nietzchean ethic of self-making. To talk of the 'classical Greek-Christian-Protestant-Kantian-Humboldtian' tradition of autonomy, and still more, to treat it simultaneously as though it could be identified with a modernist notion of expressive authenticity, is to miss these differences, which were rightly vital to Mill.

We now come to a much more radical interpretative claim. Capaldi thinks autonomy is incompatible with determinism or indeed naturalism; he thinks

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Mill thinks so too and that he therefore gives up on determinism and naturalism, accepting some form of transcendental idealism instead. Weirdly, Mill turns out to be T. H. Green before the arrival of T. H. Green, in every philosophical particular – starting with the transcendental self, going on through positive freedom as the ultimate end, arguing that autonomy can be achieved only if everyone achieves it, and then only by means of pursuit of the common good. This, to put it mildly, would have surprised Green, the author of 'Can there be a natural science of man?' and influential critic of Mill's naturalism, empiricism and hedonism. Green's answer to his question was 'no'; whereas Mill, in Book VI of the *System of Logic*, returns an emphatic 'yes'.

Whether autonomy, understood as the capacity to recognize and respond to reasons, is compatible with naturalism or not – and if it is, with what kind of naturalism – is, I believe, an unresolved question. The question, however, is what Mill thought. On the usual view, he held that autonomy, i.e. moral freedom, *is* compatible with naturalism, and specifically with psychological determinism (indeed with associationism). That is what he explicitly argues in his chapter on the subject in the *System of Logic*, from which I quoted the passage about what it is to feel morally free. Capaldi rightly emphasizes the importance of this chapter to Mill; but it was important because he thought that in it he had worked out a compatibilist analysis of the issue that had been troubling him so much, that of reconciling moral freedom with determinism.

Capaldi gives no direct evidence for thinking otherwise. His approach is to paint a picture of literary and philosophical romanticism and then to put Mill forward implicitly as adhering to all its aspects on the basis of his adherence to some. Literary romanticism, as he presents it (see, for example, 89–93), saw the imagination as a constructive force and a source of emotional insight or knowledge, gave up on eighteenth-century associationism, emphasized the organic in nature and humanity, advanced a positive, self-developmental notion of freedom, and dreamt of the beauty and wholeness of classical Greece. Romanticism was also, however, 'a philosophical movement . . . as represented in the works of Humboldt, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel'. Philosophically, it

> still proclaimed reason as the source or medium of universal truths. But reason could no longer be understood as a mirror held up to a contextless independent structure. Epistemologically, Romanticism exemplified modernity and Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy. Rather than being the result of grasping an external structure, our understanding of the world reflected the imposition upon it of an internally generated frame of reference. The internal framework was not just intellectual but imaginative and affective as well . . . in discovering the meaning of something, we discover our own meaning, for we are the givers of meaning.
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Where the romantics went beyond Kant was in putting reason itself into the world of becoming: 'Reason has to be understood as having a temporal or historical dimension' (91).

This is a recognizable portrait; but it needs to be distinguished from the philosophers' overall assessment of the enlightenment. Romanticism was an aesthetic and ethical movement that the philosophers responded to but also reacted against – that is what philosophers do. Many of them were also reacting against the enlightenment; but to take any reaction against the enlightenment as 'romantic' is too broad. The point applies to both Mill and Hegel, indeed particularly to Hegel. The idea that the subject, rather than 'grasping an external structure' imposes upon the noumena 'an internally generated frame of reference' certainly influenced the romantic picture of the heroic self – but it was rejected by Hegel. There is in Hegel no dualism of outer world and framework-imposing ego; the 'Concept' differentiates itself both as thought and reality. At the ethical level, *Sittlichkeit* is primary, *Moralität* a subordinate moment. At neither level, metaphysical or ethical, does the individual dominate – neither as knowing nor as moral subject. True, Hegel had a much more sympathetic understanding of the preoccupations of romantic individualism than Comte. He sees the importance of 'subjective freedom' for modern people. Nonetheless his ethics is among other things a critique of romantic individualism, not least that of Schiller.

In comparison with Comte and Hegel, Mill stands out as a romantic individualist; but he too, in his way, is a historicist and a sociologist. Reconciling these two stances was very much an issue for him, indeed fundamental to his analysis of the moral sciences and to his kind of liberalism, so while Capaldi is quite right to draw attention to similarities in the social philosophy of Hegel and Mill, these are similarities that actually distance Mill from romanticism rather than drawing him towards it.

Capaldi, however, would argue that 'the very idea of reconciling the eighteenth-century Enlightenment Project and the Romantic reaction of the nineteenth century is itself both a reflection of Romanticism and an indication that the nature of that reconciliation must itself be Romantic' (89). He believes this, I think, because he takes it for granted that the reconciliation must be on transcendental idealist terms. If I am right that he holds this view, both Hegel and Mill would disagree: Capaldi, as it seems to me, simply reads his own view into Mill. On his interpretation the earlier Mill, of the *System of Logic*, 'failed to see and state the ultimate conflict between Bentham and Coleridge – and why there could be no reconciliation of them without a capitulation to Romanticism' (186); but in the *Examination* he came to see it, and the *Examination* should be read in transcendental idealist terms.

Certainly Mill was an idealist in one sense of that confusing word. But in what sense?

We should recollect some distinctive features of nineteenth-century philosophy. Phenomenalism or sensationalism is in this period widely taken

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to be quite compatible with physics and with a physiological approach to the mental. Scientific naturalism, taken as the view that nothing real escapes or transcends the net of scientific inquiry, can be signed up to by a wide range of people. For example an absolute idealist could agree, since absolute idealism postulates no transcendental self (or any other noumenon) outside the phenomena – it just does not make that distinction. Metaphysical positions in this period shade into their opposites with disconcerting ease, because they share a basic anti-Kantian rejection of the dualism of self and world.

Consider then the sequence Berkeley – Mill – neutral monism. Berkeley thinks reality consists of ideas in the mind of God, Mill thinks it consists of actual and possible sensations and confesses to uncertainty as to what kind of self, if any, that requires, Mach and other neutral monists dispose cleanly of the self as a merely 'thought-economical entity' and see reality as a set of elements which can be given either a sensationalist or a physical interpretation. Berkeley is not a naturalist, Mach is. How should we understand Mill's view within this sequence?

Does he take a transcendental view of the self? Capaldi thinks so, and Mill's analysis of the self in the *Examination* gives him some support. For there Mill is unwilling to accept 'the common theory of Mind, as a so-called substance' (IX 206) – but is nevertheless driven, by the apparently irreducible self-consciousness involved in memory and expectation, to 'ascribe a reality to the Ego – to my own Mind – different from that real existence as a Permanent Possibility, which is the only reality I acknowledge in Matter' (IX 208). That combination of views certainly sounds rather like Kant.

The issue calls for more exploration than I can give it here.[5] It is notable that Mill reaches his famous conclusion in a tentative spirit, and does no further philosophical work with it. In particular he does not link the status he tentatively ascribes to the self with the possibility of either freedom or knowledge, as Kant does. Capaldi, agreeing with Kant, thinks that freedom must be transcendental. He may be right; but he gives no evidence at all that Mill agrees. Throughout the *System* and the *Examination* the tenor of Mill's discussion is scientific-naturalist and associationist. Perhaps Mill's difficulties with the self should have given him pause, but they did not.

Capaldi's attempt to recruit Mill to German idealism thus strikes me as misguided – but it is exciting and I hope it will help to open up discussion of Mill's metaphysics and its relation to its time. In terms of presenting a picture of Mill in the round, its biggest disadvantage is that it leads him into a quite peculiar failure to deal with the *System of Logic*. This is one of the two books, along with *Liberty*, that Mill thought would survive him. He was right: a portrait of Mill's philosophy without the *System of Logic* is just as defective as a portrait without *Liberty* would be; but Capaldi's discussion of this book gives it a reading that is quite frankly perverse: 'two issues stand

[5]See Andy Hamilton, 'Mill, Phenomenalism, and the Self', in *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, edited by John Skorupski (Cambridge, 1998).

out in the *Logic*: the defence of individual freedom against determinism, and the Romantic conception of the role of imagination in discerning the inherent norms of evolving social institutions' (180). Not merely do they not stand out, they are in my view entirely absent. Mill clearly thinks freedom is compatible with determinism. And while elsewhere he certainly shows his openness to the Romantic conception of the role of imagination, there is not much trace of it in the rigorously naturalistic discussion of the logic of the moral sciences that constitutes Book VI of the *System of Logic* (though Capaldi sees the final chapter, 'Of the Logic of Practice, or Art, including Morality and Policy' as a defence of the insight of artists (182)).

We find out nothing about the issues that are discussed by contributors to Sanchez-Valencia and are such fresh and original features of the book. Capaldi dismisses them without discussion as 'technical contributions... noteworthy but not groundbreaking' (24). I appreciate that in an intellectual biography as ambitious as this there is justification for not discussing them, though not for slighting them. But given Capaldi's overall interpretation it is serious indeed that we find out nothing about Mill's radical empiricism about logic and mathematics, or of his naturalistic epistemology; for the *System of Logic* is a sustained exercise in seeing our scientific theories and the underlying epistemic norms from a naturalistic point of view: 'Principles of Evidence and Theories of Method are not to be constructed a priori. The laws of our rational faculty, like those of every other natural agency, are only learnt by seeing the agent at work' (VIII 833).

This is hardly Kant. On the contrary, the System uncompromisingly pursues the thesis that there are no synthetic a priori propositions. Therefore, if Mill is after all a transcendental idealist, it is not on Kantian grounds. Capaldi could perhaps have argued far more explicitly that there is a massive shift in Mill's metaphysics between the *System of Logic* and the *Examination*; but he does not do so, and it would be, to put it mildly, a major task.

A big picture of Mill should convey something of the imaginative overall vision, combined with toughness and detail carried through for its own sake, that is so characteristic of him. Many philosophical questions are pursued; and not just philosophical questions of course – questions in economics, aesthetics and criticism, history and sociology. Faced with this, an intellectual biographer may well feel daunted, and try to find a simplifying way through. I think Capaldi is right to focus on the Enlightenment/Romanticism issue as a key to Mill's philosophical vocation; but it is an all-too-familiar distortion to say that 'Mill's views on metaphysics, epistemology and religion were always another expression of his moral and political agenda' (160), a distortion that plays to the stereotype Capaldi wishes to avoid, and that has caused so much prejudice against Mill, especially among philosophers who are uncomfortable with his passionate moral advocacy and strident activism. The attempt to portray Mill as the first transcendental idealist in Britain seriously unbalances the book. Far too much time is spent

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discussing what Mill should have thought, while the solidity and weight of Mill's actual achievement is not conveyed.

Nevertheless, if this books helps to open up Mill's philosophy as a whole to wider discussion it will have done sterling service. It is not 'the authoritative intellectual biography'. Perhaps we are not yet at a stage in Mill studies where that is possible or desirable; but it does open up a view of Mill as a major philosopher concerned to resolve the moral and intellectual dilemmas of his time at a fundamental level; and these are dilemmas which, whatever we'd like to think, have not gone away.

Did Mill express 'a total vision of liberal culture that was shared by almost no one and had in Britain no natural constituency'? Historically speaking, this is surely an exaggeration. Many people, both in Britain and Germany, well into the twentieth-century, understood his liberal ideal well. Rather fewer may have grasped so well how Mill wanted to ground it, place it within other and more fundamental ethical concerns, and liberate it from anti-naturalistic fantasies. In that specific respect Capaldi is right; moreover, our own understanding of Mill's 'total vision' is, if anything, worse than that of some of his contemporaries. Capaldi himself seems to me to misrepresent and diminish it. I do not agree that reconciling enlightenment and romantic themes must lead to romanticism. Nor did Mill think that. What he was trying to do was something more philosophical and detached – and a good deal harder to do. It is difficult to say how successful he was, because the ethical and metaphysical questions on which his project turns remain as unresolved as ever.

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