

## Review Article

### *The Moral Economist*

*The Improvement of Mankind. The Social and Political Thought of John Stuart Mill.* By J. M. ROBSON. Toronto: University of Toronto Press [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul], 1968. Pp. XII, 292. \$6.50.

*Principles of Political Economy.* By JOHN STUART MILL. Two volumes. Introduction by V. W. BLADEN. Textual editor, J. M. ROBSON. Toronto: University of Toronto Press [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul], 1965. Pp. lxxxvii, 1166. \$25.00 the set.

*Essays on Economics and Society.* By JOHN STUART MILL. Two volumes. Introduction by LORD ROBBINS. Textual editor, J. M. ROBSON. Toronto: University of Toronto Press [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul], 1967. Pp. iv, 847. \$25.00 the set.

John Stuart Mill is probably best known as the victim (and beneficiary) of the extraordinarily rigorous education given him by his father, an education which began with the study of Greek at the age of three, Latin at nine, and, after progressing through the major classics literary and philosophical, culminated at the age of thirteen in a course on the whole field of political economy. His interest in the subject led him to study the works of Ricardo, which were just then appearing. From this auspicious beginning the youthful Mill matured into a political economist of great stature. His *Principles of Political Economy*, first published in 1848, became the standard text book on the subject for the last half of the Victorian Age. Although economics remained a dominant area of interest to Mill throughout his career, his competence extended far beyond it to make him famous as a logician, moralist, and philosopher of society and politics. Underlying this multiplicity of interests, and the end to which his astonishing intellectual powers were devoted was, as J. M. Robson shows us in his book to be discussed below, a profound life-long concern for the continued improvement of mankind. His religion was humanity and its supreme goal was mortal happiness, expressed for him in the utilitarian creed inherited from his father and Bentham, according to which the aim of human endeavour should be "the greatest happiness of the greatest number".

Mill's object was, then, the construction of a better society, and he under-

took his task from both its theoretical and its practical aspects. Nowhere is this dual approach more evident than in his economic writings, now offered in volumes II, III, IV, and V of the Toronto edition of his collected works, all of them scrupulously edited by Professor Robson. Dean V. W. Bladen, in his introduction to the *Principles*, and Lord Robbins, in his introduction to *Essays on Economics and Society*, point out a two-fold value in these works for the present-day economist. Mill's *Principles* are of course of indisputable significance in the history of economic thought. For example, it is there that he distinguished between the laws of production, which are unalterable laws of nature, and the laws of distribution, which may be adjusted to fit social needs. While this division may be less clear and the modes of distributing wealth may be less flexible than Mill believed them to be, he nonetheless provided the foundation for the system of transfer payments that made possible the concept of the welfare state. But for Dean Bladen the *Principles* have another great value.

"From my own experience", he writes, "and from the observation of the development of my students, I would argue that the study of the classical economists, and in particular of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, is important in the development of the modern economist, in the development of insight if not in the development of analytical skill." In other words, he goes on, the student of Mill "may come to recognize much more fully how much more he needs than technical equipment." And, one may add, in that *more* lies much of our hope for a better world. Lord Robbins, introducing the *Essays*, makes a similar point. The economic essays provide the reader of the *Principles* with the context within which it was written, and make it possible to trace the development of Mill's thought on various issues such as socialism, wages, land reform, banking, and public finance. But the great value of Mill's work lies, Lord Robbins avers, not in its range or in its conclusions, but rather in its spirit. "It is for this reason that for a generation disillusioned with systems, he once more appears as a highly admirable figure: a man with a firm hold on the ultimate values of truth and justice and liberty, with strong principles and a strong belief in their applicability; yet once the high spirits and arrogance of youth had been transcended, fair in argument, willing to learn from experience, empirical in practical judgment, experimental in action." The real worth of these works resides, then, not only in their revealing of Mill as economist but also Mill as liberal and humanist bringing to bear, on economic problems, attitudes and values that had long strengthened English social philosophy.

Mill's *Chapters on Socialism*, included in the economic essays, are of special interest, particularly when read in conjunction with the relevant por-

tions of the *Principles* and the review of Francis Newman's lectures on Political Economy. The *Chapters* were written in 1869 and were intended to serve as the rough draft of an outline for an exhaustive study of socialism. The book was not written, and the *Chapters* were published posthumously by Mill's step-daughter. In the first two works Mill champions socialist ideals. The preface to the third edition of the *Principles* (1852) states:

... the only objection to which any great importance will be found to be attached to socialism in the present edition, is the unprepared state of mankind in general, and of the labouring classes in particular; their extreme unfitness at present for any order of things, which would make any considerable demand on either their intellect or their virtue. It appears to me that the great end of social improvement should be to fit mankind by cultivation, for a state of society combining the greatest personal freedom with that just distribution of the fruits of labour, which the present laws of property do not profess to aim at. Whether, when this state of mental and moral cultivation shall be attained, individual property in some form (though a form very remote from the present) or community of ownership in the instruments of production and a regulated division of the produce, will afford the circumstances most favourable to happiness, and best calculated to bring human nature to its greatest perfection, is a question which must be left, as it safely may, to the people of that time to decide. Those of the present are not competent to decide it.

By 1869 the achievement of greater political equality for the masses as a result of the Second Reform Act would, Mill was convinced, inescapably issue in demands for greater economic equality. Yet, he felt that the state of mental and moral cultivation had not then sufficiently progressed to meet the requirements of a socialist regime. In the *Chapters*, therefore, Mill shifts his rhetorical stance from defender of socialism to defender of competition, and concentrates on the possible modes of improving the competitive system. At the heart of his argument is the recognition that the poor are apt to prefer economic equality to freedom, and therefore use their newly attained political power to renounce the very system of liberal democracy that had given it to them. Thus in 1869 he concludes that

an entire renovation of the social fabric, such as is contemplated by Socialism, establishing the economic constitution of society upon an entirely new basis, other than that of private property and competition, however valuable as an ideal, and even as a prophecy of ultimate possibilities, is not available as a present resource,

since it requires from those who are to carry on the new order of things qualities both moral and intellectual, which require to be tested in all, and to be created in most; and this cannot be done by Act of Parliament, but must be, on the most favourable supposition, a work of considerable time. For a long period to come the principle of individual property will be in possession of the field. . . .

There is no real inconsistency here, since his earlier defence of socialism rested always on the conditional assumption of moral and mental improvement among mankind. This passage, moreover, shows two characteristics of Mill's approach to social and economic issues. First, inherent in his liberal outlook is the conviction that the shape of the ideal polity is to be discovered in the future rather than in the past. Though he cannot be sure of its form, he never doubts that it can be attained only by moving forward. Second, here as everywhere, he keeps a sharp eye on circumstances, on the actual conditions which prevail at the time, and with which changes, if they are to be effective, must accord. In Mill there is manifest that characteristic Victorian gradualism born of a genuine interest in constructive change for improvement.

It is Mill's passion for individual and social improvement which provides Professor Robson with his starting point in his study of Mill's social and political thought. He undertakes to demonstrate the unity of Mill's social and political thought, arguing that the utilitarian ethical criterion of the greatest happiness of the greatest number constitutes the focal point of both the theoretical and practical aspects of Mill's endeavours to foster human progress. This devotion to the utilitarian end provides the unifying element of Mill's thought on the vast range of subjects upon which he wrote.

The care and thoroughness with which Professor Robson examines Mill's works has produced a convincing study. He shows that notwithstanding the enormous influence of Bentham and James Mill on their intellectual heir, the younger Mill went on to construct a coherent and unified social philosophy indisputably his own. Although Mill remained thoroughly empirical in his approach to social and political issues, he extended his investigations over a much greater area of human experience, and corrected and adjusted the predominantly deductive method of his predecessors, by a salutary application of inductive reasoning. The result was a utilitarian social philosophy at once humane and sensible: humane in its singular devotion to the moral and intellectual improvement of mankind, and sensible for its practical bias that distinguished Mill from most of the great Victorian social critics. Mill had his dreams of a perfect society no less than did Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, and others.

But his schemes for attaining it were always subjected to the sensible question of whether or not they would work under prevailing circumstances. There are, says Professor Robson, "two controlling features of his [Mill's] thought, his desire for social advancement and his sense of the practical, the first the impelling force behind his work, the second the limiting condition on it." This treatment of Mill as a theoretical and practical thinker derives from Mill's own recognition of the duality in his work. In the last chapter of the *System of Logic* he distinguishes between the work of the "Artist" and the "Scientist" in the sphere of social reform. There are, Mill holds, three areas of activity in effecting reform: first, the ends must be determined; second, the means of attaining these ends must be found; and, third, the means must be put into practice to bring about the desired end. The first and third procedures are the province of the "Artist", while the second constitutes the proper work of the "Scientist". Although Mill modestly claims for himself only the second or "Scientific" area of endeavour, it becomes apparent that his works often embrace all three, and for Robson this three-fold programme "is in fact the unifying element in Mill's thought." But he goes on to acknowledge that "while it cannot be pretended that it can be seen in every detail of each of his works, those details can be best brought together for a comprehensive view by its application throughout." This is what Professor Robson does, examining Mill's career as a social reformer bent on devising means suitable to the circumstances of his day that will implement the utilitarian ethic for the benefit of mankind.

In the first half of the book the major influences on Mill's intellectual development are examined. Beginning with the Benthamite education and the mental crisis it fostered in the young Mill, Robson goes on to discuss the influence of Harriet Taylor and thence to briefer consideration of contributions from Coleridge, the Saint Simonians, Carlyle, Comte, and de Tocqueville, all aimed at showing how these various and often disparate sources of influence contributed to either or both the theoretical and practical aspects of Mill as a social reformer. The rest of the book is devoted to a massive but concise study of the mature Mill's social and political thought, the keystone of which is his formulation of the utilitarian ethic. He seeks to obtain a society based on the utilitarian ethic which relies, not on man's selfish feelings as Bentham and James Mill proposed, but on man's powers of sympathy for his fellows, which, if initially weak, are nonetheless susceptible to cultivation, and which offer for Mill the chief source of hope and justification for attempts at improving the lot of mankind. It becomes clear that Mill is primarily a moralist and that he subordinates all practice and theory to his ethical philosophy. Consequently

he is prepared always to adjust and even compromise the means, though he will not alter his ends. Thus he is a qualified democrat and a qualified socialist simply because he was, as Professor Robson makes clear, an unqualified utilitarian. *The Improvement of Mankind* is not an easy book to read. Despite the lucidity of the author's style, the complexity of Mill's thought demands close attention. Mill was above all an earnest Victorian, and Professor Robson has made an earnest and successful attempt at enlarging our understanding of this great Victorian intellectual.

*Dalhousie University*

C. J. MYERS