

Notes on Mill's *The Subjection of Women*¹

The overall goal of Mill's essay is to argue for the conclusion that

"..the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes --the legal subordination of one sex to the other-- is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement." (97)

Mill argues that the subordination of women is both:

- (a) wrong in itself—because unjust, and
- (b) wrong due to its consequences—because it promotes misery and prevents good.

CHAPTER I: In Ch. 1, Mill, first, clears the ground for the discussion by anticipating and addressing objections, and second, presents the basic case against women's subordination.

Ground clearing:

It is generally thought in discussing political matters that the burden of proof lies with those who seek to restrict liberty and the presumption is in favor of freedom and equal treatment. But in considering the situation of women, the burden of proof is reversed. Why? Because it is commonly maintained that:

- i) What is customary is presumed correct, and it is customary that women should be subordinate.
- ii) What is natural is presumed correct, and it is natural that women should be subordinate.

So Mill will critique each of these claims.

Re (i): Mill points out that we should presume what is customary to be correct only if we can be confident that the custom owes its existence to its soundness. (98) So we should ask, does our society subordinate women because it is a sound policy to do so? He points out:

- There has never been a trial of any other policy, so we cannot pretend that our experience has proven that it is the best policy. (99)
- The policy was not adopted as the result of deliberation, because "Laws and systems of polity always begin by recognising the relations they find already existing between individuals. They convert what was a mere physical fact into a legal right, give it the sanction of society..."(99)
- The subordination of women is nothing more than a surviving relic of the "law of the strongest".(99) But the law of the strongest is generally acknowledged to be the wrong basis for good policy.
- There are many explanations of why the law of the strongest has survived so long in governing the relations between the sexes, other than that it is a sound policy. E.g., the intimate relations between men and women put men in a better position to prevent collective uprisings by women.(102)
- From these considerations Mill concludes that even though it is our custom to subordinate women, the custom should not be presumed sound.

Re (ii): Are women subordinate by nature? Is the position in which we find women in society natural for them? Mill notes:

- All domination appears natural, especially to those in power. So it is not surprising to find the conviction that women should be subordinate. However, we should be wary of this conviction. What is usual or common typically seems natural, even when it is only a matter of custom.(103)

¹ Page numbers in parentheses refer to the version in *TF. The Subjection of Women* was originally published in 1869.

- Some might think that women's position is natural because voluntary. Women accept their position largely without complaint. (104) But, Mill claims:
 - Many women do not accept their position. (104)
 - It is easy to explain why most do, given the socialization of women, and the penalties for resisting. (104-5)
 - Typically, resistance begins with individual dissatisfactions and only later builds to collective rebellion; almost all women are individually dissatisfied. (104-5)
- No one knows or can know the nature of the two sexes, because they have only been seen in their present relation to each other. (108)

If men had ever been found in society without women, or women without men, or if there had been a society of men and women in which the women were not under the control of the men, something might have been positively known about the mental and moral differences which may be inherent in the nature of each. What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing--the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others. (108)

- Even if it were natural for women to function in their current social role, this would not justify their legal and political subordination, since nature doesn't need any help to enforce what's natural.

The anxiety of mankind to interfere on behalf of nature, for fear lest nature should not succeed in effecting its purpose, is an altogether unnecessary solicitude. (111)

- From this Mill concludes that the presumed "naturalness" of women's subordination cannot be sustained as a basis for their ongoing subordination.

Sketch of Mill's argument that subordination is unjust:

1. Basic principle of the "new society":

Human beings should not be born to their place in life; they should be "free to employ their faculties, and such favorable chances as offer, to achieve the lot which may appear to them desirable." (105)

Why?

- a. The ordinary motives of human conduct and competition work best to see that the competent succeed and the incompetent do not. (106)
 - b. Individuals, together with help from those who know them, are the best judges of what's good for them. (105-6)
 - c. So, freedom of individual choice leads to much better consequences than attempts of authorities to regulate our lives. (106)
 - d. It is an injustice to individuals to place barriers in the way of their using their faculties for their own benefit and for that of others. (106) (Note example of slavery.)
2. The subordination of women stands out as a breach of modern principles of justice and liberty. (107)
3. So, the continued subordination of women is both an injustice and unnecessarily blocks the good consequences which would come from treating women as equals.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

WGS.301J / 17.007J / 24.237J / 17.006 Feminist Thought
Fall 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.