

*Reason Papers*, John Stuart Mill, and Me

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It is now forty-one years since the 1983 publication of my essay “The Libertarian Philosophy of John Stuart Mill” in *Reason Papers*.<sup>1</sup> It was my first publication on Mill and led eventually to my 2004 intellectual biography *John Stuart Mill*.<sup>2</sup> It also helped me to lobby and convince Liberty Fund to sponsor several colloquia focused on Mill and to republish part of his Collected Works. I even had my fifteen minutes of TV fame on C-SPAN’s *Booknotes* in connection with my book.<sup>3</sup> Honestly, I do not believe that I would have been willing to devote the necessary time or spent the requisite political capital to promote Mill’s work without the initial publication in *Reason Papers*. Despite wide-ranging intellectual interests, staying focused on one thing and revisiting it periodically allows you to gain a deeper appreciation of what you are focused on by re-reading the material in the light of your own expanded frame of reference. What I learned as a scholar was that the moral insight of libertarianism had a history and unexpected origins and that many other intellectual movements shared in varying degrees that same insight.

I also learned a great deal about publishing professionally and the challenges of good scholarship. I especially learned the extent to which mainstream journals fall into two categories. Either they are captives of an editor, editorial board, or specific agenda or they are copycat journals trying to compete for the latest fashionable views. In retrospect, *Reason Papers* has been one of those rare periodicals that not only challenges the dominant fashionable views, but also keeps

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Capaldi, “The Libertarian Philosophy of John Stuart Mill,” *Reason Papers* 9 (1983): pp. 3–19.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: A Biography* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Brian Lamb interviewing Nicholas Capaldi, “Booknotes: *John Stuart Mill: A Biography*,” C-SPAN, March 1, 2004, accessed online at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?181230-1/john-stuart-mill-biography>.

alive the devotion to “telling it like it is.” There is something about the spirit of individualism that is receptive to taking novel views or unorthodox approaches to traditional topics. I cannot stress enough the importance of publishing views that are outside of the mainstream—you have nothing to lose but your reputation. Reputations are not worth much, if all they involve is viewing yourself through the eyes of others. It is far more important to remain steadfast to your own standards.

I observed how really bad writing passes for serious scholarship. In the case of Mill, I observed that he was accused variously of promoting an “anything goes” society (by ultra-conservative or constrictive natural law theorists, such as James Fitzpatrick Stephen),<sup>4</sup> of supporting diabolical forms of a repressive society (for example, by Joseph Hamburger),<sup>5</sup> and of contradicting himself.<sup>6</sup> If Mill were contradicting himself, then why bother to interest yourself in such a writer?

Great thinkers also evolve in their thinking, just like the rest of us, so quoting two passages written in different contexts thirty years apart and assuming that they are a timeless whole is a seriously misleading fabrication. Let me cite one example. Mill claimed in 1848 that he was a “socialist.” Unpacking what that meant in the specific context leads to the view that a social order based on individual autonomy<sup>7</sup> requires an answer to the question of how such individuals understand their social persona. So, a present-day Silicon Valley startup where the employees are all limited partners is “socialism” in Mill’s 1848 sense (that is, a workers’ cooperative). Really? I thought that was the essence of contemporary entrepreneurial capitalism. By the end of his life, Mill understood that “socialism” meant something else to others, people he considered to be morally retarded and allergic to competition. Mill was cognizant of the historical challenges and problems of a market-based social order, but he viewed this primarily

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<sup>4</sup> James Fitzpatrick Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (New York: Holt & Williams, 1873).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Hamburger, *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> For example, James O. Urmson points out in his “The Interpretation of the Moral Philosophy of J. S. Mill,” in *Mill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. B. Schneewind (London: MacMillan, 1968), p. 180, that “[i]nstead of Mill’s own doctrines a travesty is discussed, so that the most common criticisms of him are simply irrelevant.”

<sup>7</sup> What Michael Oakeshott calls “civil association”; see Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

as a challenge for those workers unready or unwilling to embrace individual autonomy. He reworked this topic again and again, so it behooves a reader to note the context of a publication, its relation to other publications, and avoid the perfunctory reading.

Mill was my great inspiration. Reading *On Liberty*<sup>8</sup> changed my life. The message was loud and clear: individual freedom (autonomy) is the highest value; it means not only the absence of external control and avoiding imposing control on others, but also the achievement of self-control. I have always taken this to be the moral message of libertarianism, not a specific political or economic doctrine, not a particular policy, and not some bizarre or sexy theory. Incorporating that insight into one's personal and professional life requires judgment and openness to debate. There are two great dangers. First, there is the smug posturing of not getting involved in anything short of utopia, and thereby becoming an accomplice before the fact to external control. Second, there is losing sight of the challenges to exercising self-control by promoting versions of romantic self-indulgence as a form of virtue-signaling. For Mill, an autonomous individual does not have the luxury of opting out of conflict, because the failure to act has dire consequences, and making the right decision often involves self-denial of our own impulses.

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<sup>8</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1859).