The Subjection of Women
A feminist appraisal of John Stuart Mill’s last work.

JOHN STUART MILL WAS A VICTORIAN POLITICAL AND SOCIAL PHILOSOPHER. HE received a unique and rigorous education starting at the age of three when he learned Greek and went on to be lauded as the first great interdisciplinary mind of the modern world. His most famous works are his Autobiography, Utilitarianism, and On Liberty. Utilitarianism is Mill’s statement of Utilitarian ethics, the principle of which is that the right action is that action which will tend to increase happiness and decrease unhappiness. By happiness Mill means pleasure, both physical and mental, and by unhappiness, pain. Mill’s goal was a collectivist one, the improvement of society.

The means Mill thought best to achieve his goal included a large measure of individual liberty, the sociopolitical philosophy expressed in On Liberty. He brings together these two strains of his thought, individualist means to a collectivist end, in The Subjection of Women. This last work serves as a sort of case study of Mill’s thought. His goal here, as elsewhere, is the improvement of society by using individualist means, in this case the loosening of women’s social and legal fetters.

In reviewing Mill’s book The Subjection of Women, I wish to make three points and use them to build a partial case in support of feminism, using Mill’s social theory.

First, a word or two about terms. I believe the terms describing the two most frequently voiced opinions in the evangelical church are misleading. Complementarians believe in equality to the degree that we are all equal before God. Egalitarians believe that men and women complement each other, but not to the same extent as complementarians. Therefore, I have chosen to use here what I believe are more accurately descriptive terms.

The term patriarchalist will be used when referring to those who believe that Scripture limits positions of authority in the home and church to men only. Other terms used for this position include traditionalist and hierarchicalist; I believe patriarchalist to be more accurate, however, as it denotes a specific form of hierarchy.

The term feminist shall refer to those who believe that there is no biblical rule barring women from any position to which women may be gifted and called; this position is sometimes called evangelical egalitarianism. The adjectives Christian and evangelical are assumed of those holding either position. Also, since my purpose is to build part of a cumulative case for the feminist position using Mill’s social ethics, the biblical case will be bracketed and set aside for now.

The Subjection of Women was written nearly a decade before its publication in 1869 at the encouragement of Mill’s stepdaughter, Helen Taylor. It was the last work published during his lifetime, and it rapidly became popular among suffragettes on both sides of the Atlantic—and just as rapidly became the subject of scorn among those to whom suffrage had already been extended, notably politicians and philosophers.

The work is divided into four chapters discussing, in turn, the causes of women’s present and artificial nature, the injustice of what Mill terms marital slavery, the violation of utility by excluding women from public life and occupation, and answers to the question of whether or not society would be better if women were freed of their present legal fetters.

Women’s present, artificial nature

The thesis statement of the work is that the principle that regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in and of itself and ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other (p. 7). The legal and social disabilities women suffered at this time were substantial. Victorian legal and middle-class social pressures created an atmosphere in which a woman’s only respectable option was marriage. Socially, an idle wife was a mark of respectability; legally, the husband and wife were defined under law as one being, and that one was the husband. A husband might take his wife’s dowry, her wages, and their children all away from her, and she had no legal recourse.

Mill engages in a series of arguments against those who commit the naturalistic fallacy in defense of such arrangements. He argues eloquently that we cannot presume any favor toward those present arrangements by their mere customary existence, nor can we presume such is the only suitable state of sex relations, because no other arrangement has been given full and free trial (11). A telling point against the customary arrangements is the observation that authority always appears natural to those who possess it (19). This was a particularly poignant point to make in Mill’s day given the recent accomplishment of Abolition in many countries and the arguments slave owners made against Abolition: that members of the black race were incapable of governing themselves in freedom and that...
their subjection to the white race was only natural. Now that we are more than a century removed from such practices, the arguments have lost their sting. Today, when the parallels are drawn between the arguments for the subjection of the black race and the arguments for the subjection of women, hackles are often raised.

**Marital slavery**

The second chapter deals with the conditions of marriage, both legal and social, which Mill likens to slavery except that a slave is allowed his wages. A wife was a legal bond-servant to her husband in fact, if not in sentiment; he could dispose of their property and children as he wished with little fear of legal interference. He could ship their children to America where their mother would never see them again, and she had no legal recourse. He could confiscate her dowry, and she had no legal way of retrieving it, even if it included an ancestral home and lands.

Mill goes on to counter the claim that, in any association between two people, one must be the perpetual master with the law arbitrarily determining which one it should be. No one would enter into a business partnership under such conditions, so why, Mill wonders, would anyone enter into such an intimate relationship as marriage under these conditions (50)? Although actions and decisions in marriage never come down to an issue of downright authority unless the marriage is already a bad one, Mill finds that the more natural arrangement is a division of powers based on gifts and talents (51).

The conditions of marriage as described above serve, when there is also a lack of sympathy between the parties, to create a sort of countertyranny of the oppressed in the form of scolding and manipulating (49). Such constraining conditions also tend to increase the number of women who will be satisfied with nothing less than the opposite of husbandly tyranny: a wifely tyranny of having her own will, and only her own will, given consideration (54). The result is that the law, in not determining her rights but theoretically allowing her none at all, practically declares that the measure of what she has a right to is what she can contrive to get (54).

**Exclusion of women from public life and occupation**

In order, then, to maintain women’s suppression and exclusion from public life and outside occupation, it is not enough to prove a case from averages; one must prove that no woman is fit for the occupation (63). Given that women have proven themselves capable of many varied tasks as opportunity has arisen, however, this will be very difficult. In addition, not only those so denied suffer the injustice; all who might have benefited suffer (64). While it might be said that there are many areas in which women have never proven themselves qualified to compete and have never achieved accomplishments of a high rank, a negative case remains an open case (67). How many eminent men arise in a given field in a given generation and a given culture? In some fields, such as the art of painting, entire generations may pass without a single achievement of excellence. Could it then be said that men are no longer suited to that particular endeavor? I hardly think so.

Two women in particular held the throne of England for lengthy and illustrious reigns: Mill’s own sovereign, Queen Victoria, and Queen Elizabeth I. We will look briefly at the latter’s reign.

Though Elizabeth I is sometimes treated as a puzzle, it seems clear that she was one of those rare persons born to exactly the right position. She was certainly her father’s daughter, but she surpassed him in the excellence of her rule. She brought England out of the turmoil inaugurated by Henry VIII’s marital troubles and steered the country clear of its religious trials. She is the monarch who succeeded in defeating the “invincible” Spanish Armada. The social and literary climate of her reign gave birth to no less than Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets. It is the rare king who can lay claim to such accomplishments as those of this mere woman.

The examples of Elizabeth I and Victoria aside, women’s temperament is said to disqualify them from responsible positions because it indicates they are too changeable (75). Much of this supposed nature is the result of cultivation and artificial restraint. There was a time when women were treated as delicate hothouse plants, subject to frequent fits and fainting spells (75). In Mill’s day such histrionics had gone out of fashion, and with the fashion went the tendency of women to make such displays. That Mill is skirting around the nature versus nurture debate becomes evident when he mentions the constitutions of poor women who were accustomed to manual labor. Their constitutions were trained differently, and they certainly never had the luxury of indulging in fainting spells!

**Mill’s question**

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We now come to the question Mill seeks to answer: Would society be better off if women were free to pursue interests outside of the home? (98)? He proposes five advantages to allowing women legal and social liberty.

First is that a marriage regulated by justice will reduce selfishness (99). Sympathy is increased in a marriage when the partners duly consider each other rather than one ruling the other. In addition, children learn respect for both parents. A boy especially will learn to obey rather than dominate his mother, learning from his father’s example (99).

The second advantage Mill sees is a doubling of mental resources available to serve humanity (100). Although women’s resources are not totally lost to society, society would benefit by their direct exercise rather than their indirect use through women influencing their husbands. The additional competition would also serve to stimulate improvement.

The third advantage is that women’s opinions would be better informed and more beneficial (104). Specifically, a mother’s
influence on the early formation of character in her children would be improved. A wife who stayed at home but had a wider education would also be better suited to help her husband rise in influence.

A fourth benefit Mill sees is that *shared knowledge and interests would lead to greater intimacy and sympathy between husband and wife* (113). He sees the condition of differences in education as tending to increase natural differences and decrease sympathy.

Finally, *evil tendencies are exaggerated when those differences come from inferiority* (116). Adding enforced differences to a relationship of inferiority and superiority has the effect of dragging down the superior partner while increasing the negative traits of the inferior partner (116).

**Social ethics for the body of Christ**

Mill’s optimism about the future improvement of human society rests on his faith in the power of nurture, of education. Mill was right to see the problems inherent in granting one human being authority over another simply by accident of birth, but he erred in explaining why it was wrong. Mill finds the error in the way the institution, such as that of marriage, is constituted. What Mill denies is the depravity of unredeemed human nature. No social or legal institution, however constituted, will escape the problems Mill writes of unless our depraved natures are recognized.

Within the body of Christ we also recognize that not all redeemed human male natures are suited to positions of authority. In no other instance is such authority granted to an entire class of human beings merely by virtue of their membership in that class (also see “Hermeneutics in Pink and Blue,” p. 3 of this issue). The authority of men over women and husbands over wives lasts throughout all ages and areas of life. Children are under their parents’ care for a time, but there may also come a time when the parent comes under the care of the child. And even if that does not occur, a child leaves its parents’ immediate control upon marriage. Teachers sometimes become students of their former students. Doctors are sometimes in need of nursing. But women, however eminently suited and gifted and trained, are always under the authority of a man, no matter how ill-suited and lacking in gifts that man may be. It is this sort of arrangement that Mill argues against in *The Subjection of Women*. It is also the arrangement that feminists deny is mandated by Scripture.

Here are three points from Mill’s argument upon which I wish to build a partial case for feminism based on Mill’s social ethics.

**Partnership marriage**

Mill argues for a pattern of marriage based on partnership where strengths, weaknesses, gifts, and abilities (what he terms suitability and capabilities) are recognized and used. Feminists concur that a marriage based on this model will show greater sympathy and intimacy between the partners. There need be no final arbiter in marriage or business, especially when that arbiter is arbitrarily designated. A marriage based on a pattern of mutual decision making will also help reduce instances of tyranny by a frustrated wife.

Marriage based on husbandly rule is bound to frustrate a wife who is more gifted than her husband in important decision-making areas. It also denies the possibility that a wife may be hearing God’s voice more clearly than her husband. A model for decision making in feminist marriages would include elements of mutual deference, consideration of which partner the action would affect more, and which partner has greater skills or knowledge in that particular area. Decisions reached in this manner may take longer to reach, but they will have greater commitment by both partners and should have the added benefit of ensuring that the voice of God is rightly heard.

**Classism in the body of Christ**

In the final chapter of this work, Mill makes an observation, almost in passing, that brings an important point to mind. He makes reference to the fading fashion of fainting spells exhibited by “ladies” of a certain class, while women of the poorer classes, having differently trained constitutions, never exhibited this behavior. Poor women have never had the option of whether or not to seek waged employment. Yet the rhetoric coming from some patriarchalist preachers and writers fails to recognize this social reality and does not distinguish between the differing reasons women may have for seeking waged employment outside the home. On the other hand, feminists can be guilty of a different sort of elitism when they focus on such positions of prestige and authority as that of pastor.

A human body is made up of many parts, as is the body of Christ. Not all parts are pretty. Not all are highly esteemed. Not all are given much consideration. All are important for the body’s proper function. The great toe on your left foot may not seem like an important or essential body part, but it is vital to proper balance and the ability to walk easily. To the extent that patriarchyists argue against the social ills of working mothers, they forget that all body parts are essential for the body’s proper function.

Working mothers fulfill vital functions in society at large and within the body of Christ. They are more likely to have few skills and, consequently, more likely to fill low-waged positions. They are waitresses and church cleaners; they are secretaries and receptionists. They are often invisible, especially when they do their jobs well. Preachers may speak of the familial and social ills that are the result of mothers seeking to be pastors, doctors, and politicians where such women are termed “working mothers.” Rarely, however, do they recognize that there may be working mothers on the church’s payroll. And if a working mother is so fortunate as to have the education to place her on the church’s ministry staff, she may be rewarded with the title...
of “director” even though she is doing the same work as the male pastor who preceded her in the position.

This is classism in the heart of the body of Christ. And feminists are guilty of it, too, when we focus on and clamor after positions of prestige and authority. Instead, feminists seeking the good of the body of Christ should focus less on the head and more on the left great toe. They should work as diligently to assist working mothers, especially single mothers, in creating a Christ-centered home and life for their children as they do striving to gain access to positions of prestige and authority.

**Stewardship of spiritual gifts**

Feminists and patriarchalists alike recognize and celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit in bestowing gifts for the good of the body of Christ. Feminists are alone, however, in echoing the question Mill asks in chapter 3. Do we have so many men suited for some tasks that we can deny all women opportunity to fulfill them (64)? Mill looks at society and asks if we really benefit from the constraints placed on women and contends that society would benefit by a doubling of the mental resources available. Feminists look at the body of Christ and ask whether we are really functioning as one body when we deny the full functioning of some parts of that body.

Feminists concur with Mill on the need to lift the artificial restraints imposed on women because these restraints stifle the work of the Holy Spirit in bestowing and utilizing gifts for the benefit of the whole body. While recognizing that feminists sometimes slide into the error of rights language—claiming that “if I have a gift I must have the right to exercise it here and now”—we must also recognize that the Holy Spirit has been busy fulfilling the prophecy of Joel 2 for two millennia. The prophet Joel foresaw the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit would pour out gifts on men and women, young and old alike. Always to deny the expression of some of these gifts given to women does a disservice to the one who holds the gift. As Mill recognized in another context, that also does a disservice to those who might benefit from the full expression of that gift. It is a supreme disservice to the body of Christ and prevents the body from functioning as God intended.

Finally, a note about stewardship. Feminists give a hearty assent to Mill’s arguments about the availability of talent when compared to the need. Feminists would additionally note that it is poor stewardship not to fully use all the talent available. In the beginning, the first pair of humans were instructed to be good stewards over creation. There is such a great need that we cannot call ourselves good stewards of our human resources if we do not fully use all of those human resources available to us.

For instance, a certain woman may be uniquely gifted with insight into the problems encountered by trend-setting women in the culture and a heart for reaching them with the gospel; she may also be a wife and mother. She cannot be a good steward of that gift if she is to live her life encased within the relationships of wife and mother. In order to be a wise steward of that gift she must pursue a certain education, and she must be familiar with the workplace outside of the home. If she is to reach these trend-setting women, she must meet them in their field.

The harvest is ripe and the workers already few in number. We need all of the gifts of all of the members of the body of Christ.

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**Note**

John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (New York: Broadview, 2000; all page references are to this edition of the work).