

**Handout: A Millian Solution to the Paradox of Moral Progress**  
**Presented at the Workshop *The Idea of Moral Progress in the Utilitarian Tradition***  
**Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, 23-24th of May**

Abstract: In my paper, I will discuss a paradox resulting from John Stuart and Harriet Taylor Mill's defence of free speech in *On Liberty*. After I outline the paradox and reject their solution, I provide an alternative that is in line with Mill's philosophical outlook and outline some of its consequences.

§1. [Initial Question / Problem] (A) In *On Liberty* (OL), the Mills argue that honest dissent is necessary for both the discovery of new and the preservation of existing insights, especially moral ones. Since this is only guaranteed through freedom of speech, we should be concerned with its preservation. However, honest dissent is threatened by the process of discovering and preserving moral insights. As we progress and our insights grow, such dissent diminishes, making further progress increasingly more difficult. Thus, the process enabling our moral insights to grow appears to undermine itself. This is the paradox of moral progress (Seidel 2015). (B) Sometimes, people think of moral progress as consisting in the growth of moral insights – that is, moral knowledge or true moral beliefs (see Ross 1939: 20)<sup>1</sup>. Underlying this is the cumulative view, according to which our insights at a later time are more numerous than at an earlier one, as new findings are added to the old ones. At other times, moral progress is not identified as the growth of our moral insights but is linked to their development (CW *Liberty* XVIII: 250). Since both are intertwined, if the latter is threatened, so is the former.

§2. [How the Problem arises – Defending Freedom of Speech] We gain and preserve insights only if we test our beliefs against one another through honest dissent. This is only possible with freedom of speech (CW *Liberty* XVIII: 232). In this discussion, three considerations are relevant:

- Suppressed speech might be correct. (CW *Liberty* XVIII: 229–243)
- Even if it is false, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to sharpen correct views against it. (CW *Liberty* XVIII: 243–252)
- It might contain a portion of the truth. (CW *Liberty* XVIII: 252–257)

§3. [The paradox of moral progress stated] (1) Moral Progress consists in the accumulation of moral insights, which we can only obtain and preserve if a number of people hold false beliefs. Therefore, moral progress is only possible if people have false beliefs.

---

1 Kitcher (2019: 147-148) calls it the standard view of moral progress.

From this follows: (2) For moral progress to occur, a number of people must continue to err. However, it is to be expected that these false beliefs will diminish over time as moral progress unfolds.

□ Note on socialism: In OL, the Mills are not solely concerned with free speech, the freedom of association, and the freedom to live one's life according to one's plans are on their mind, too. Could a paradox also arise from their defences of those liberties? Perhaps a similar problem emerges in the development toward socialism. Current developments of the working classes – their growing appreciation for freedom and equality – favour a transition to socialism (see *CW Principles* III: 758–794). However, in order to sustain themselves, socialist enterprises must rely on certain shared qualities of their members and demand uniformity (*CW Principles* II: 209; *Socialism* V: 745–746; *Liberty* XVIII: 274–275). This uniformity could destabilise the enterprises, since without genuine pluralism, the qualities required may turn into dead dogmas.

§4. [In Defence of the Cumulative View] The Mills attempt to save the cumulative view by proposing that lost honest dissent be simulated. We must ensure that some people can defend the lost positions with the same skill and finesse as sincere proponents (*CW Liberty* XVIII: 251–252, 245). They offer two suggestions for how this might be practically implemented, drawing on the following examples:

- Socratic dialogues;
- medieval scholasticism.

There are three reasons why this likely will not work:

1. It directly contradicts their own claims. The Mills emphasise in several places that dissent must be sincere. (*CW Liberty* XVIII: 245, 249, 274–275; also *CW Bentham* X: 108; *Considerations* XIX: 396; *Centralisation* XIX: 613; *Representation* [2] XXVIII: 65–66)
2. It is psychologically unfeasible. They note that we humans suffer from various biases that we cannot overcome, even with the best intentions. (*CW Liberty* XVIII: 230, 244)<sup>2</sup>
3. It undermines their own argument for defending freedom of speech by questioning its instrumental value. One key reason for protecting pluralism disappears if we can simulate dissent.

§5. [A Millian Alternative to the cumulative view] In OL, the Mills also provide us with the resources to formulate an alternative to the cumulative view. A few paragraphs after presenting the paradox, they outline another model:

---

2 For an interesting overview of our biases: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_cognitive\\_biases](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases) (last time accessed 13.05.25).

“Even progress, which ought to superadd, for the most part only substitutes, one partial and incomplete truth for another; improvement consisting chiefly in this, that the new fragment of truth is more wanted, more adapted to the needs of the time, than that which it displaces.”  
(*CW Liberty* XVIII: 252–253)

We might illustrate and compare the two models with the following metaphor: According to the cumulative view (superadd), we collect new insights in encyclopedias, and once one is filled, we place it in our library. Over time, our library grows (e.g. Sarton 1937: 15–16; 1948: 39–40). According to the alternative view (substitute), once we possess a certain number of volumes, we remove an old insight in favour of a new one or replace an old volume with a new edition. Thus, over time, the size of our library remains the same. But (a) why can’t we simply add other truths to our library, and (b) what determines what truths we add? They hint at an answer for (a) shortly after that (*CW Liberty* XVIII: 253–254): We rarely or never add single beliefs to our collection but clusters of interconnected ideas whose integration into our belief system forces the disintegration of other established beliefs. To (b): Ideas we no longer pay attention to fade away (*CW Logic* VII: 681–682). Our attention ultimately focuses on what is deemed (more) important at a given time.

§6. [Some Consequences] I. There are good reasons to reject the idea that moral progress consists of accumulating moral insights. II. The Mills see a connection between our knowledge and our happiness (*CW Liberty* XVIII: 250); the latter JSM considers integral to moral progress (Schmitz 2024). However, there are no indications that JSM embraces sceptical conclusions (such as moral progress coming to a halt, etc.). In fact, he seems to combine a non-cumulative theory of knowledge acquisition with a cumulative theory of human happiness. Though our insights do not grow, our happiness does increase. Consider his approval of the Saint-Simonian narrative of the development of our beliefs (*CW Autobiography* I: 171, 245–247, 259–260; *Letter to d’Eichthal* XII: 35–36). According to this view, we are always in an organic or a critical period. In the former, people accept a belief system that claims to encompass all relevant truths. When people outgrow such a system and they abandon it. They enter a critical period, seeking a new one. At the same time, Mill believes our happiness grows continuously (*CW Logic* VIII: 913–914). That is to say: the collapse of a belief system does not necessarily lead to a decline in happiness. Possible explanation: Institutions are more robust than beliefs and can survive their transformation. Institutions are not necessarily tied to specific beliefs and can secure human happiness even through critical periods. One example of such a transformation is described by JSM:

“The most remarkable of those consequences of advancing civilization [...] is this: that power passes more and more from individuals, and small knots of individuals, to masses: that the importance of the masses becomes constantly greater, that of individuals less. [...] There are two elements of importance and influence among mankind: the one is property; the other powers and acquirements of mind. Both of these, in an early stage of civilization, are confined

to a few persons. In the beginnings of society, the power of the masses does not exist; because property and intelligence have no existence beyond a very small portion of the community, and even if they had, those who possessed the smaller portions would be, from their incapacity of co-operation, unable to cope with those who possessed the larger.” (CW *Civilization* XVIII: 121; *Principles* III: 766–767; *Duveyrier* XX: 297; *Tocqueville* [1] XVIII: 50; *Tocqueville* [2] XVIII: 162–163; *Utilitarianism* X: 232)

Even if there are negative consequences to this development, they are, on the whole, positive (e.g. the spread of democratic principles (CW *Civilization* XVIII: 126-127) or the promotion of cooperation (CW *Civilization* XVIII: 122; *Principles* III: 708, 769, 792-793; *Centralisation* XIX: 603-604) . Those developments are also too far-reaching to reverse. We have no choice but to adapt to them. Some Institutions are extremely robust and thus safeguard societies from falling beneath a certain threshold, like horizontal planks on a scaffolding we use to erect buildings (CW *Considerations* XIX: 388).

## Literature

Kitcher, Philip (2019): Interview with Philip Kitcher. In: *Praktische Philosophie in Globaler Perspektive* (3). Freiburg: Herder. pp. 145-155.

Mill, John Stuart Mill (CW): *Collected Works*.

quoted as Volume (XVIII) titel abbreviation (*Liberty*) and page number (253)

Ross, W. David (1939): *Foundations of Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sarton, George (1937): *The History of Science and the New Humanism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sarton, George (1948): History of Science. In: *The Life of Science. Essays in the History of Civilization*. New York: Henry Schuman. pp. 29-58.

Schmitz, Cyriak (2024): *Utilitarismus und moralischer Fortschritt. Eine philosophiehistorische Analyse*. Karlsruhe: Karlsruher Institut für Technologie. DOI: 10.5445/IR/1000169559

Seidel, Christian (2015): *Moral Progress, Moral Plurality, and Mill's Paradox*. Unpublished Manuscript.