

Interpretation

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Professor Chris Barker's impressive new book on J. S. Mill has an appropriately ambiguous title: *Educating Liberty*. If "educating" is taken as a gerund, the title points to education acting on liberty to elevate it. Taken as a participial adjective, the "educating" is performed by rather than on liberty. The subtitle, *Democracy and Aristocracy in J. S. Mill's Political Thought*, suggests that Barker intends both meanings and views Mill as balancing the claims of equal freedom and wisdom. Barker presents Mill's search for this balance in five stimulating chapters: "The Aristocracy of Sex," "Industrial Aristocracy," "Expertocracy," "Mass and Elite Politics," and "Democratic Religion." As the chapter titles suggest, the emphasis falls somewhat more on the tutoring of liberty rather than by it, but Barker finds balance in each of these areas of Mill's thought.

Barker demonstrates a wide knowledge of Mill's works, of the secondary literature on Mill, and of political philosophy. He ranges widely in Mill's work because, he says, "I assume Mill wrote substantial and often even major works on a variety of topics for which he is often not properly credited" (203). Although presented as a review essay, "Auguste Comte and Positivism," for example, seems to Barker to be, in length and substance, a major work. He therefore gives it extended attention in assessing Mill's sociology of knowledge and his "religion of humanity." Barker also gives considerable attention to lesser-known works by Mill because he is particularly interested

in middle-level principles in Mill's thought. He emphasizes that even those who disagree on first principles may be able to agree on empirically established midlevel principles. In presenting Mill's more detailed views on a variety of still-living issues, Barker shows Mill's thought to have a surprising freshness and richness.

Barker's first chapter deals with Mill on the "aristocracy of sex," on liberty and equality in and beyond the household. Because arbitrary power diminishes both possessor and subject, Mill sought an end to women's legal, economic, and political disabilities. However, because his goal was to promote liberty, he sought reform not through "coercive laws or direct civic education by the state," but, as Barker says, by "changing the circumstances in which men and women associate together," thus facilitating "spontaneous changes" in their relations (12). That, of course, required the repeal of laws mandating inequality, such as *couverture* laws. Barker clarifies Mill's thought on such inequalities by placing it in the context of contemporary British law and practice. For example, he very effectively quotes Blackstone on *couverture*: "the husband and wife are one person in law," such that "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs everything" (21).

Although Mill sought an end to such subjection, he was not an ideologue about the relative roles of the sexes. His aim was true friendship between spouses and freely agreed-upon decision-making and division of labor. According to Barker, Mill regarded the household as "a school of liberty," teaching both parties that "performing one's social functions requires self-criticism, dependence, and even mutual subordination"—in Aristotle's terms, as teaching how to rule and be ruled (40). Mill thought each party would have his or her unique strengths and could teach the other. Thus, women "by nature and by nurture" are "better socialized in the arts of cooperation than men."

Barker contrasts Mill's account of marital friendship with Aristotle's in an extended and enlightening comparison. While Aristotle thought such friendship possible, he saw the household as an association of unequals. For this reason, he criticized "masterless" households as "democratic." Mill, however, favored domestic arrangements best suited for schooling spouses in liberty, arrangements not founded on power or dominance. Households should be free polities, with a politics of mutual persuasion or, in de Jouvain's terms, of the rallying of wills. However, Barker sees Mill and Aristotle agreed in finding a completely democratic household impossible, Aristotle

because of the supposed superiority of the male and Mill because authority would rotate, in Barker's words, "depending on the circumstances of the household and on the relative competence of the individual spouses" (42).

Here and elsewhere Barker demonstrates an extensive knowledge of feminist literature on Mill, on the household, and on the economy. He distinguishes various "waves" of feminism, with Mill seen as a founder of first-wave feminism. Barker's use of feminist writings is nonideological and very helpful in revealing what is distinctive about Mill's account of the household and the economy. It should also enhance the appeal of *Educating Liberty*. If not quite *Mill for the Millions*, the book is considerably more than just *Mill for the Millions*. It is Mill for feminists, social scientists and economists, democratic theorists, students of religion, and political philosophers, as well.

Barker's second chapter deals with Mill's political economy under the title "Industrial Aristocracy." He rejects the characterization of Mill as a laissez-faire economist, explaining that Mill's "commitment to intellectual and moral development" makes him "a social and political thinker first and a political economist second" (50). Critics of supposed inconsistencies in Mill's economic theory therefore miss the point. In Barker's words, "Mill's central preoccupation is the education of working men and women and the reformation of the characters and habits of the owners, managers and privileged classes who rely on unearned wealth" (51). The economic form he considered best suited to accomplish these educational tasks was small-scale cooperation. Although such associations would not necessarily make workers "more able to earn and spend," Barker thinks Mill's central concern was to allow workers "to improve their *moral* situation as agents capable of self-mastery," of achieving "mental independence," and of developing their moral and practical reason (71, 81, 83).

In a chapter on "expertocracy," Barker examines Mill's account of "the effects on liberal society of an ongoing revolution in social science" (82). In particular, he focuses on Comte's positivist sociology and his project of using it "to directly control moral and intellectual education" (84).

Barker views Comte, like Mill, as primarily an educator, "albeit with a rigorous and illiberal theory of how best to educate a scientific society." Barker contrasts Comte's approach with Mill's view that "scientific inquiry requires disorganized, experimental liberty" and he emphasizes Mill's prescience in seeing beyond the problems of democracy Tocqueville uncovered to the next great problem of "expertise suborning equality," a new elite threat

to democracy (86). In Barker's view, "Mill's criticisms of Comtian social control have not been sufficiently taken up by the scholarly tradition as a key contribution to the theory of educated liberalism" (108).

In the chapter "Mass and Elite Politics," Barker explains that "in Mill's neo-Aristotelian conception of the meaning of the political sphere, the political is the primary sphere of engagement, and politics offers 'the first step out of the narrow bounds of individual and family selfishness, the first opening in the contracted round of daily occupations'" (117). Mill's father and Bentham, however, accepted with complacency what they thought the entire classical and English-speaking liberal tradition taught—that people act solely or chiefly from self-interest. Although it is common to attribute Mill's divergence from this position to the influence of Tocqueville, Barker thinks that a more fundamental influence was Macaulay's famous review of James Mill's *Essay on Government*, which Mill had read ten years earlier. Macaulay argued that the desires prompting political participation are not limited to those for spoliation and oppression, but include, as well, "desires informed by concepts such as service and excellence, and shaped by feelings of sympathy and righteous indignation" (120). Barker quotes the *Autobiography* to show the lesson Mill drew: "my father's premises were really too narrow, and included but a small number of the general truths, on which, in politics, the important consequences depend" (120).

Because representatives of the majority might, nevertheless, be too self-interested in a narrow sense or too untutored to regard the wider or more permanent interests of the whole, Mill sought out ways of ensuring what Barker terms "the inclusion of higher grades of intellect in democratic government" (127). He found them in Hare's transferable vote, in plural voting, in nonsecret voting, in the prohibition of pledges, in commissions of experts to draft legislation, in indirect elections of presidents, and in various legislative arrangements, such as "the devolution of some responsibility to the local level, which is important in maintaining a participatory, engaged electorate" (128).

Barker's chapter on Mill's "democratic religion" presents his religion of humanity as the crowning element in his attempt to educate liberty. Thus, the *Three Essays on Religion* were Mill's response to liberal individualism and atomism: "his answer is to teach the equal but meritocratic social duties of Utilitarianism as the content of a civic religion, combined with *On Liberty's* doctrine of individualization in how views and opinions are held, and not to place religious belief in an uncriticizable and irrelevant private sphere" (162). Barker explains the elevating role of religion in this way: "Without religion,

Mill thinks, a market democracy cannot sustain the image and meaning of citizenship that is required to avoid mobocracy and shopocracy, that is, regimes that are driven by mere interests (selfishness)” (165).

There is much interesting detail in Barker’s account of Mill’s religious views. He surveys various critics, distinguishes Mill’s civic religion from Comte’s, weighs Mill’s criticisms of Christianity, assesses Mill’s idea of a finite God, and considers Mill’s views of toleration, as well as many related matters. He concludes the account by relating it to his general theory of Mill’s work: “I have argued that the best way of conceiving of educative power is as an internal balancing between vocally and passionately defended Utilitarianism and whatever existing customs and commitments one has” (192). He contends Mill’s religion of humanity would be liberal since taught and practiced “through images, by exhortation, and by example,” rather than by compulsion. The details of the account are much stronger than these concluding remarks.

In his final chapter, “Conclusion and Applications,” Barker examines theory and practice in Mill’s work and Mill’s incomplete account of the proper size of government. He tells us that Mill “claims (as libertarians do not) that more and less moral lives cannot be led without guidance, or what above he called ‘severe compression and repression,’ even if he thinks that the state is not the appropriate agent of constraint” (199). This may be generally true, but the use of the “severe compression and repression” phrase is misleading. The phrase is taken from a diary entry in which Mill criticizes Goethe and the Greeks for too symmetrical an ideal of life. Mill says of the Greeks that “the ideal of their philosophers, so far from being an ideal of equal and harmonious development, was generally one of severe compression and repression of the larger portion of human nature” (CW, 27:651–52). Rather than saying, as Barker suggests, that moral lives cannot be lived without “severe compression and repression,” Mill is more nearly saying that they cannot be lived with them, because they would suppress the “larger portion of human nature.”

Even if here, at least, Barker gets the balance in Mill between liberty and education slightly wrong, that does not affect the great value of *Educating Liberty*. It is an enlightening and thoughtful contribution to our understanding of Mill, and this review can only hint at the surprising richness of its content. Because of its insight, broad scope, and attention to often-neglected works, *Educating Liberty* is a worthy tool for widening our knowledge of Mill’s thought and its bearing on issues of democratic governance.