



## Mill, socialism, and utilitarianism: on Helen McCabe's *John Stuart Mill, socialist*

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## Mill, socialism, and utilitarianism: on Helen McCabe's *John Stuart Mill, socialist*

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Helen McCabe's excellent book builds a patient, detailed, nuanced case for thinking of Mill as a socialist. The depth of her scholarship, and the care with which she constructs the argument, make this book indispensable for scholars of Mill—and for those interested in the development of socialist thought.

We are used to thinking of Mill as a liberal, and of course as a utilitarian, and to debating whether those two commitments are compatible with each other. McCabe's book focuses attention on an equally interesting question. Was Mill's socialism compatible with his liberalism? It also raises, but does not discuss as much, the question of whether his socialism was compatible with his utilitarianism. All three edges of the triangle (utilitarianism, liberalism, socialism) are interesting.

Consider the relationship between socialism and liberalism. If we wish, we can define these doctrines so that they are incompatible with each other. But it is more interesting—and, as the thesis of McCabe's book exemplifies, truer to the history of ideas—to allow that they may be compatible with each other in interesting ways. For example, if we emphasise the conceptual or factual connections between being free and having resources—or standing in relations of equality with others, or taking decisions in concert with others—we may dissolve the apparent tension between liberalism and socialism. Under this sort of view, for me to be free in the relevant sense requires that I am able to do certain sorts of things, which itself requires command of resources, relationships of equality, and perhaps some form of collective decision making. This view may or may not be correct, but it is certainly a recognisable and important political outlook, and one that lies in the intersection between liberalism and socialism.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a different way that an individual could be both a liberal and a socialist. They might think that liberalism is appropriate for some circumstances, and socialism is appropriate for others—even if they think that liberalism and socialism are distinct and incompatible. This sort of circumstance-dependence is a natural stance for utilitarians to take, since the implications of utilitarian principles vary so much with changes in circumstances. So, a different way of reconciling liberalism and socialism in the case of Mill would be to postulate that he favoured 'liberalism for now, socialism for later'. A third possibility is that he thought both that liberalism and socialism bleed into each other, and that the emphasis between them should shift with changes in circumstances. The discussion in McCabe's book suggests that this third possibility may provide a more accurate picture of Mill.

Now consider a different edge of the triangle: the relationship between socialism and utilitarianism. It is not surprising that a utilitarian would support a form of socialism, at least in some degree and in some circumstances. That is so, at least, if we understand 'socialism' as a commitment to certain kinds of social arrangement, rather than as an underlying principle or reason that may conflict directly with utilitarianism. If being in favour of certain kinds of distribution of property, or reforms to property rights, or rules of suffrage, or any other social arrangement, is constitutive

of socialism, then utilitarians can be socialists. Moreover, it should not be surprising if they were, given familiar considerations about the diminishing marginal utility of resources. Very crudely, we would expect to increase total utility by reducing inequality of resources and by establishing more equal social relationships.

Of course, this is too crude. Utilitarian support for any set of social arrangements will be contingent on the effects of establishing and maintaining that set of arrangements. If the costs of establishing it are too high, or it is too difficult or costly to maintain, utilitarians will favour some alternative scheme.

One interesting question about Mill, therefore, is what his view was of the cost and difficulty of transitioning to socialism. To establish different distributions or forms of property right, for example, requires depriving some people of what they currently own or reasonably expect to own in the future. These considerations of ‘security’ have been an important brake on support for socialism within the utilitarian tradition. As McCabe explains, they disposed Mill against revolutionary forms of socialism (141–5). But even if the transition to socialism in a particular polity is entirely peaceful and consensual, it is not guaranteed to respect people’s rights—since members of that polity may have obligations to third parties elsewhere that they can no longer fulfil. As McCabe notes, Mill saw correctly that the peacefulness of a transition is not in all cases necessary for it to maximise utility (145). It would be interesting to know also whether he thought it always sufficient.

A further question is whether, once established, socialism would maximise utility. Social arrangements do not have determinate effects all by themselves, but only against a background of other circumstances. Among these are the sentiments and dispositions of the people occupying the society in question. Mill’s interest in the development of sentiments through history is well-known, and so a natural question is whether he thought that socialism-friendly sentiments were merely possible, or also likely to develop. A utilitarian who believed that socialism would maximise utility if certain possible sentiments came to exist, but who also thought that this change in sentiments was unlikely, would be a socialist of a sort. But if they thought this development of sentiments likely or inevitable their support would seem more full-blooded. It would be interesting to know more about Mill’s optimism, or lack of it, on this question.

In the recent philosophical literature it is taken pretty much for granted that utilitarianism is not a deeply egalitarian doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Though there are utilitarian reasons for reducing inequality, they seem to run out at a crucial point: namely, just when someone becomes too difficult or costly to help. If someone has expensive needs—for example, expensive medical needs—it may become clear that funding them produces less utility than could be produced by using those resources in some other way. Egalitarians may then say that, even so, justice requires that this person’s expensive needs are met. On the face of it, the utilitarian must disagree. In cases where we face a choice between giving a large benefit to a well-off person (or group), or a small benefit to a worse-off person (or group), egalitarianism seems to point in the opposite direction to utilitarianism.<sup>3</sup>

It is obviously a mistake to equate these modern articulations of egalitarianism with the sort of socialism that attracted Mill. Nevertheless, as an acute utilitarian with an extremely sophisticated understanding of its implications for moral and political issues, it would be surprising if Mill never grasped this conflict, and fascinating to know what he might have thought of it. By bringing questions such as these to the foreground, McCabe’s book breathes new life into the discussion of Mill’s thought.

## Notes

1. Left libertarianism also lies somewhere in this intersection. For example, see Philippe Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All* (Oxford, 1995). McCabe comments briefly on the resemblance between Mill’s views and some left libertarian ideas (57–8 and 240).

2. Amartya Sen's arguments that utilitarianism is not deeply egalitarian have been very influential. Amartya Sen, 'Equality of What?' in S. McMurrin (ed.), *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1980), 195–220. For a partial defence, see Mark S. Stein, *Distributive Justice and Disability: Utilitarianism against Egalitarianism* (New Haven, 2006).
3. Derek Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', in Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams (eds.) *The Ideal of Equality* (Basingstoke, 2000), 81–125.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).