

## J.S. Mill: The Subjection of Women

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### QUESTIONS ON SECTION I

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1. “So long as opinion is strongly rooted in the feelings, it gains rather than loses in stability by having a preponderating weight of argument against it.” (Mill, *Subjection of Women*, page 471) Can you explain this statement? Is the statement true? On what grounds can you assess whether the statement is true or false? That is to say, what type of evidence can you try to obtain, in order to know whether the statement is true or false?
2. Who has, according to Mill, the burden of proof, when we are discussing the subject of individual freedom of speech, action, etc.? How does that apply to the subject of women’s rights in *The Subjection of Women*?
3. Why does Mill, despite the fact that the burden of proof does not lay on him, have to deal with, and respond to, all the arguments which affirm the right to subject women and suppress part of their freedoms?
4. Mill asks a tough (both morally and theoretically) question: If the “evolution of society” has made it so that women have come to be dominated by men, doesn’t that constitute enough evidence and enough support to the conclusion that that is probably the best state of affairs for society? (cf. pp. 474-475) How does Mill answer that question?
5. How does the situation of the subjugation of women compare to slavery? What conclusions would Mill like to draw from the comparison of the two cases?
6. What does Mill say about the (historical) relation between Christianity and equality? (cf. pp. 478-79) For comparison, you can refer to Hegel’s *Early Theological Writings* (chapter 18): According to Hegel, the contribution of Christianity to the “Old World” was in establishing that all humans are equal on the grounds of the biological conception of “being human”, not on the idea of being part of the δῆμος (‘demos’ was, in Greek language, indicative of a political concept; namely, it denoted the subdivision of Attica, a region of Greece, into municipalities. Belonging to a demos was the condition for being a citizen, therefore for enjoying political rights such as different types of freedom.) According to Mill “to enforce it [the principle of equality] was the most arduous task which Christianity ever had to perform.” (p. 479). With those words Mill intends to indicate how strong, in the mentality of old Western civilizations, was the association between the right of being free and the belonging to a cast, or political/civil organization, rather than “being human”. On page 482 Mill explains that the system of classes was seen as “the only natural condition of human race.”: Aristotle had defended “natural slavery” in his *Politics*.
7. Mill draws a long historical line from the times in which the law of brute force was in place among mankind, to the time (his time) in which it is instead seen as a remainder of an old and surpassed social system (p. 480). The description of that historical process, by which the law of force was gradually recognized as an imperfect condition of humanity, is meant to show how it is not the case that all which was transmitted, from the early stages of human pre-history, by custom and by physical or biological condition, is as such justified and supported by reasons. Inheritance of customs or practices, that is, from human pre-history, is not in itself a justification for the maintenance of a certain custom

in the present social system. How do the previous considerations apply to the problem of the subjection of women? [Keep question 4 in Mind when answering this question.]

8. Mill's self critical stance puts forth the following objection: The comparison between the domination of humans on other humans (slavery) is not comparable to the domination of men over women; because whereas the former is arbitrary and the "effect of mere usurpation", the latter is "natural". How does Mill respond to this objection?
9. Another possible objection to Mill's initial arguments could be the following: The comparison between the domination of humans on other humans (slavery) is not comparable to the domination of men over women because in the latter domination occurs with the consent of the dominated party. In other words, women consent to being subjected to men (p. 484). How does Mill reply to this objection?
10. What is the difference between physical slavery and mental slavery? Why would men want to enslave women's mentally and through education, rather than physically, as it is done with normal slaves? (see p. 486)
11. If most forms of slavery, at least according to Mill, have been broken and surpassed in XIX-century England (p. 487) as well as in other parts of the world, why is it, then, that the subjection of women has not followed the same destine, but is rather still an accepted condition in most of the world?
12. What is Mill referring to when he talks about the peculiar character of the modern world? (see p.488)

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ON SLAVERY AND ON THE CONDITION OF WOMEN AFTER MILL: SOURCES FOR CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

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1. The AlJazeera Special Report on 21st century slavery:  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/slaverya21stcenturyevil/>
2. The *New York Times's* article by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn: 'The Women's Crusade.' Stable URL:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/23/magazine/23Women-t.html>