

J.S. Mill - On Liberty

Carlo Martini

Winter Semester 2011



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how to contact me:

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- office hours: **Wednesday 9:30 - 11:30, or by appointment**

about the seminar:

www.martinicarlo.net/teaching

- **Credit-points**
 - 2 c. p. - attendance and homework
 - 6 c. p. - attendance, homework, final paper (not recommended)
- **Readings and assignments**
 - Required readings
 - Homework: three short section reviews
- **Student participation**
- **Assessment Deadlines (send your reviews by:)**
 - **November 15th** (1st review) - **December 20th** (2nd review) - **February 7th** (3rd review)

section reviews:

- **Section = the section of the book that is assigned each week.**
- **Review (made of):**
 - **1000 words (ca. 2 pages, use word-count)**
 - **a summary of the main points that Mill makes (ca. 500 words)**
 - **a personal critical assessment of the points made (ca. 500 words)**
- **Typical questions for a critical assessment: ➤ Are the points the author makes clear? ➤ Is the argument a logical argument? ➤ Does the argument contain mistakes? ➤ Is the author leaving important objections unanswered? ➤ Does the argument apply in all or only in special cases? ➤ Are there counterexamples to the statements that the author makes? Etc. (Challenge the text as if it was written by your classmate! Get creative!)**

bibliography:

- Burns, J.H. 1957. “J. S. Mill and Democracy 1829-61” *Political Studies* 5(2):158-175.
- Burns, J.H. 1959. “Utilitarianism and Democracy” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 9(35):168-171.
- Mill, John Stuart. 2008. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Edited by John Gray. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Oxford World’s Classics).
- Wilson, Fred. 2011. “John Stuart Mill”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/mill/>



BUY!

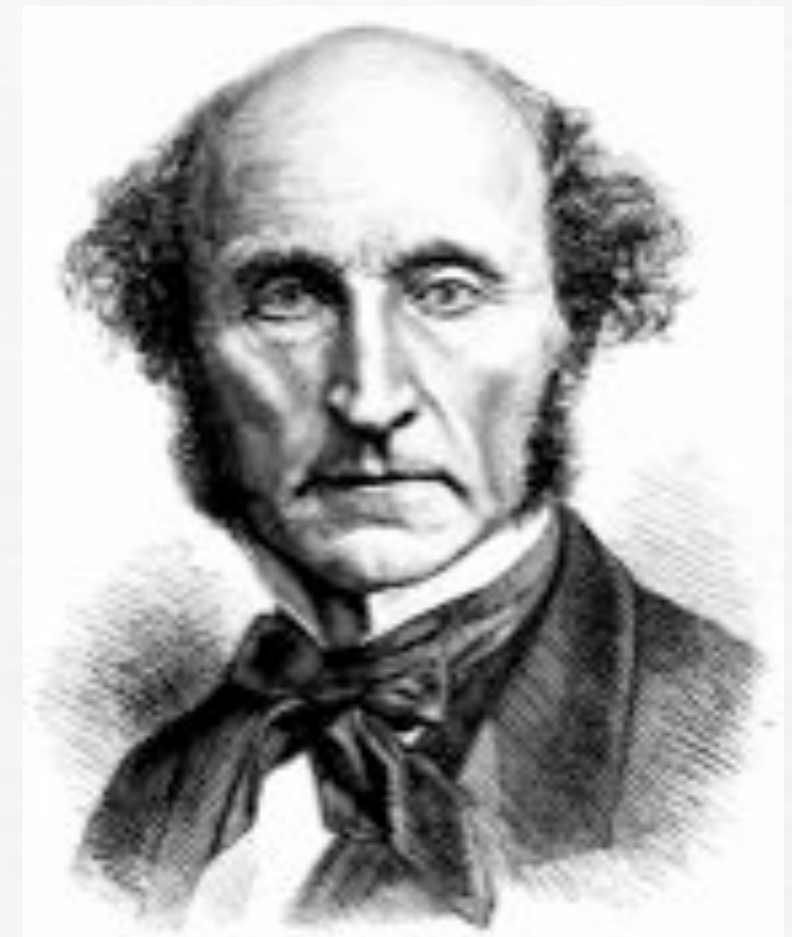
LECTURE 1

Introduction



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A. John Stuart Mill

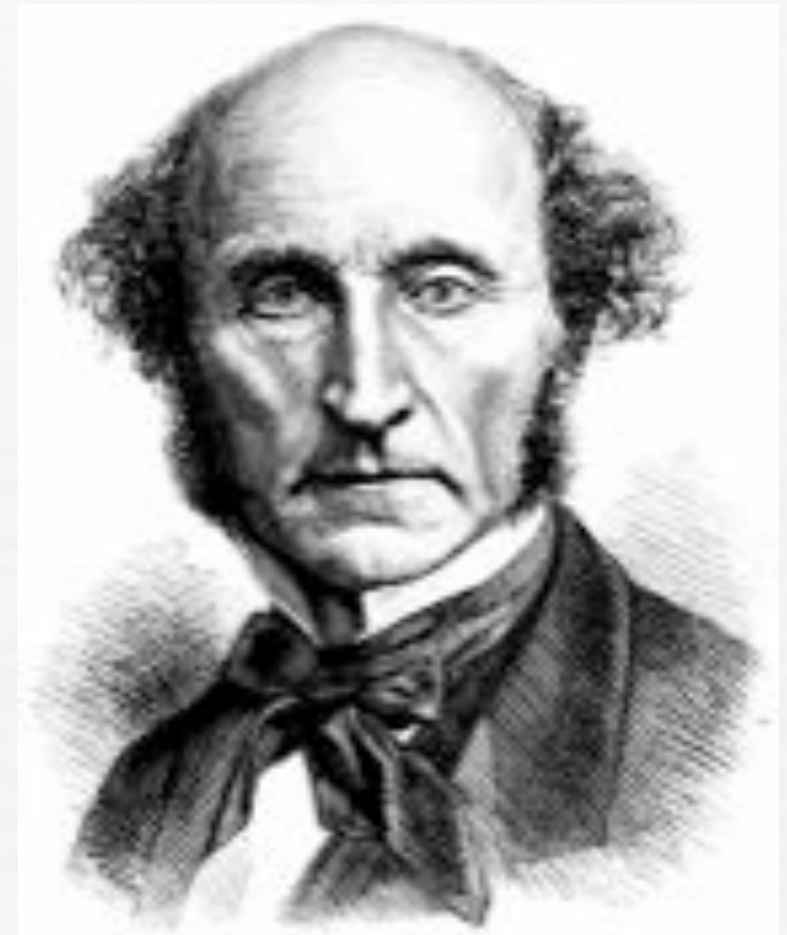


His father's goal was to have young Mill carry on the legacy of Utilitarianism after he and Jeremy Bentham had died.

A. John Stuart Mill

MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS:

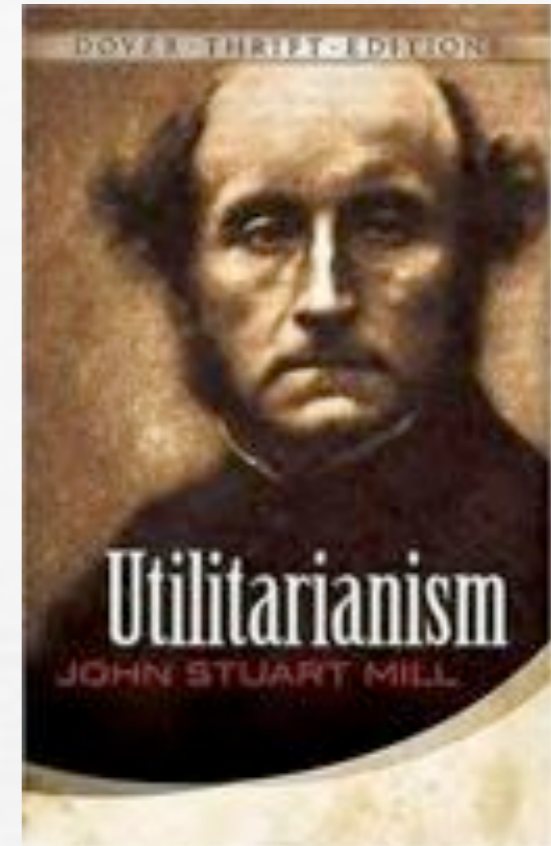
- Empiricism - *System of Logic* (1843)
- Political Economy - *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) and others
- Moral and Political Philosophy - *On Liberty, The Subjection of Women, Considerations on Representative Government, Utilitarianism*, and others



B. Utilitarianism

UTILITARIANISM:

- Ethical Theory
 - Evaluate ethical matters
 - Answer ethical questions
- e.g. What is “good” vs. “bad”, “moral” vs. “immoral”, what “ought to be done” vs. “ought not to be done”.



Utilitarians evaluate the morality of an action in terms of the consequences which that action produces. N.B.: actions can be *personal* ones as well as *public* ones (policies, etc.).

B. Utilitarianism

BENTHAM:

- Two fundamental principles:
 - Pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain are the two aims of all human action.
 - Politics and government should maximize overall happiness
- Question: are the two principles compatible?



Bentham's answer: the principles are reconciled in practice (*invisible hand*).

B. Utilitarianism

PROBLEMS IN BENTHAM'S THEORY

- Pleasure in Bentham is a mental state.
- Pleasures are all equivalent with one another, in particular, they can be compared and summed/subtracted.
- There is no difference between a pleasure that is felt under constraint and one that is the outcome of a free choice.



The problems that Bentham's utilitarianism encounters lead Mill to change the theory.

C. Grey's introduction to Mill (I)

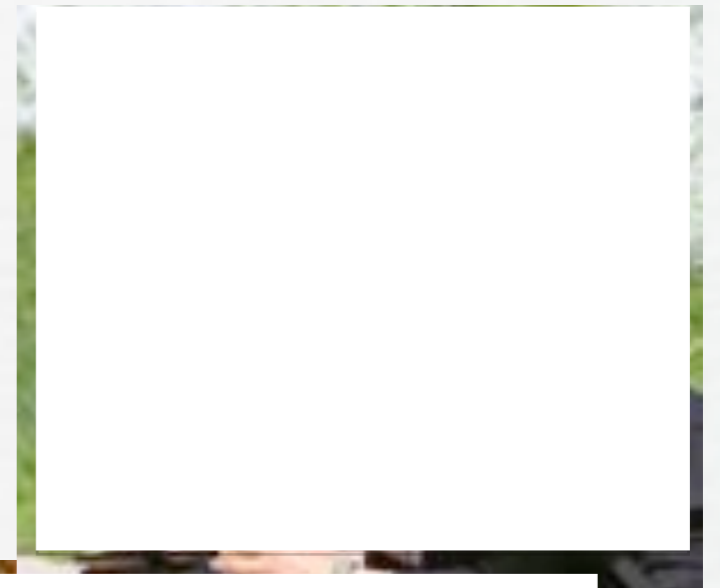
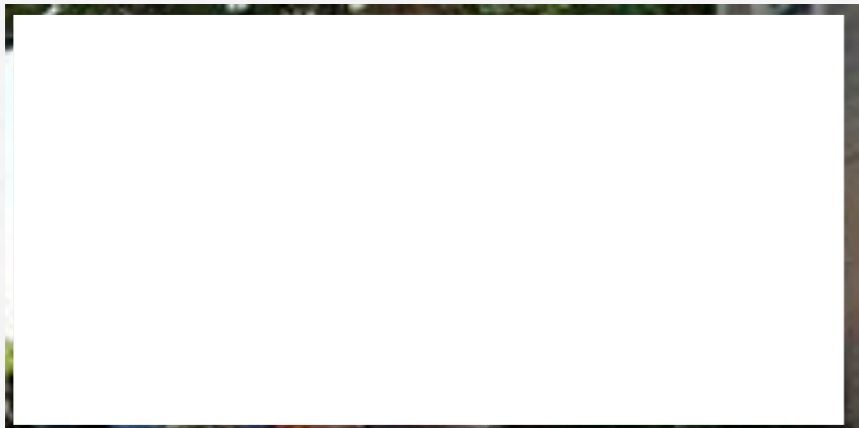


C. Grey's introduction to Mill (I)

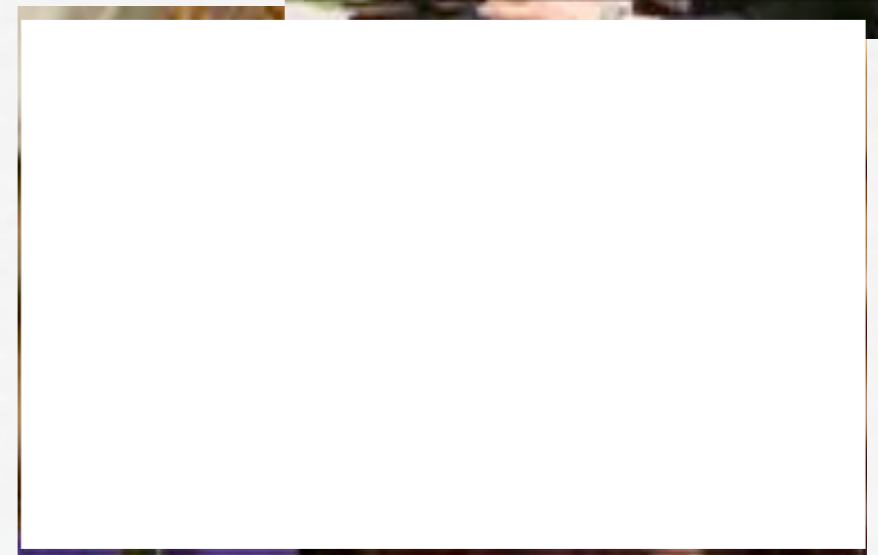
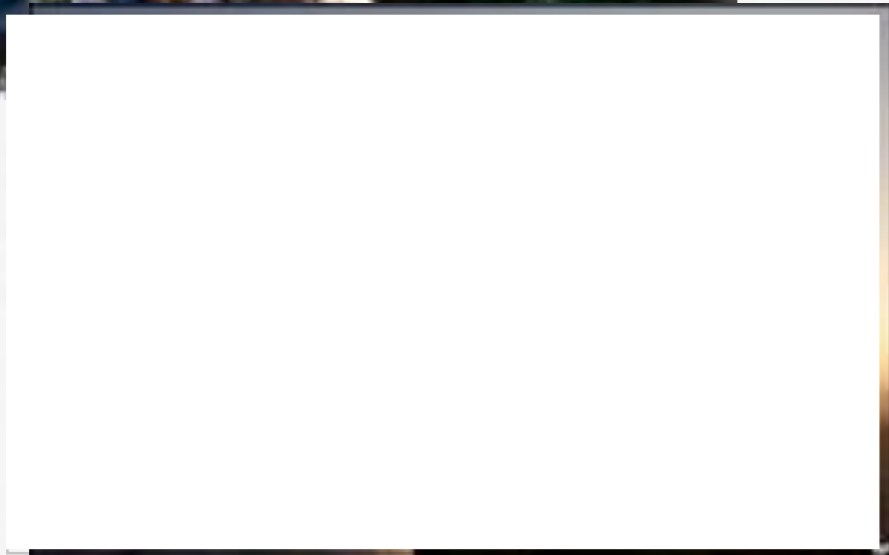
“[...] for human beings, happiness is found typically in activity, and not merely in having sensations or experiences of a certain kind. [...] a happy life is one in which his activities and projects are reasonably successful, and in which the demands of his nature are reasonably satisfied. [...] Mill's conception of happiness [...] is not open to the devastating counterexamples of Huxley's Brave New World, or Nozick's experience machine. [...]”

C. Grey's introduction to Mill (II)

How do we compare and sum pleasurable experiences among individuals?



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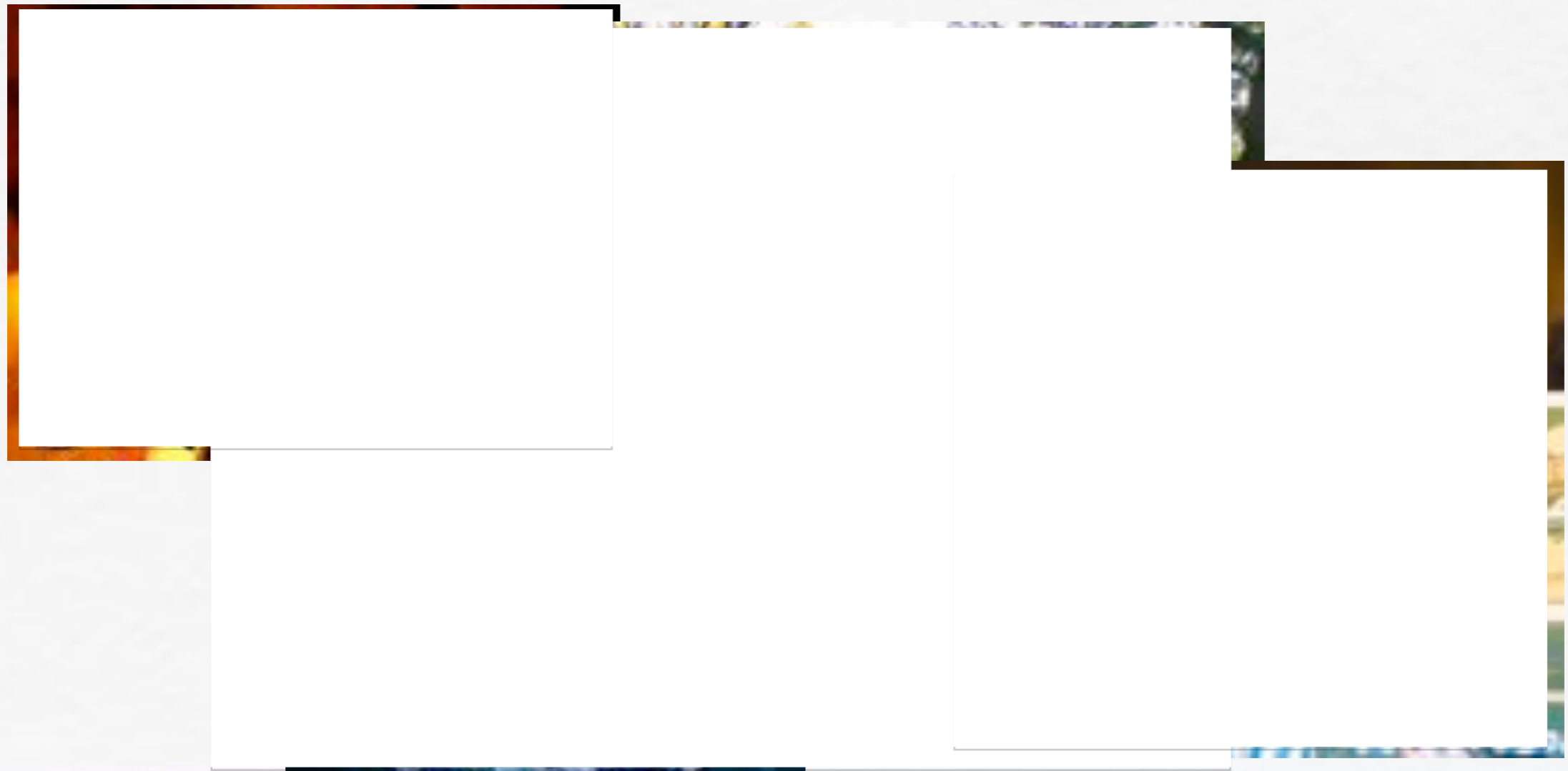


C. Grey's introduction to Mill (II)

“[...] as members of the same species, we have common needs, such that no happy life is achievable if they are not met. [...] In On Liberty, Mill argues that a sphere of non interference, in which persons can make autonomous choices, is necessary if they are to enjoy the happiness of individuality. [...] our natures are diverse and complex, so that there is no one form of life, no one set of pleasures in which we can all find happiness. [...]”

C. Grey's introduction to Mill (III)

Are all our actions in some way maximizing the total social utility or even our own utility (= happiness in Mill's sense)?



C. Grey's introduction to Mill (III)

“[...] The pleasures and forms of life adopted under conditions of autonomous choice are privileged above all others [...] the activities of autonomous persons which are not harmful to the interests of others should be protected within a sphere of liberty and non-interference. [...]”

Some questions for the next 14 weeks

- What is '**Utility**' / '**Pleasure**' in Mill?
- Are 'pleasures' **mental states** or something else?
- An important concept in Mill is that of moral agents (= the subjects in a moral theory) as "**progressive beings**"?
- What type of political **Utilitarianism** does Mill endorse?
- Is Mill developing a moral **theory** or is he expressing a number of non-systematized **liberal principles**?