

The Subjection of Women

John Stuart Mill

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. The phrase ‘the subjection of women’ occurs quite often in this version, because it helps to keep things clear; in Mill’s original it hardly occurs except in the title. The chapter-titles are added in this version. So are the section-breaks and -titles; these are offered not as formal structure but only as rough guides to where new topics are launched.—As a background to this work, you should know: In 1830 at the age of 24 Mill formed an extremely close moral and intellectual friendship with Mrs Harriet Taylor; this continued, with no sexual impropriety, until her husband died in 1851, whereupon she and Mill married. She died seven years later, and the present work was written a few years after that.

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CHAPTER 1

The question can be raised

The object of this Essay is to explain as clearly as I can the reasons for following proposition:

The principle that regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong itself, and is now one of the chief obstacles to human improvement; and •it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality that doesn't allow any power or privilege on one side or disability on the other.

•For convenience I'll call this 'the Opinion'. I have accepted the Opinion from the earliest time when I had *any* views on social political matters; and instead of being weakened or modified •through the years• it has grown steadily stronger •in my mind• through reflection and my experience of life.

The task I am undertaking here will be hard work. . . . But don't think that the difficulty must come from the scarcity or obscurity of solid reasons for the Opinion. Rather, the difficulty is one that exists whenever something is being defended against a mass of *feeling*. Just because the opposing view is strongly rooted in feelings, it is •psychologically• strengthened rather than weakened by having the weight of argument go against it. If it were accepted as a result of argument, counter-arguments might shake the solidity of the conviction; but when it rests solely on feeling, •arguments against it don't shake it at all•: the worse it fares in the clash of arguments, the more convinced its adherents are that their feeling must have some deeper basis that the arguments don't reach! And while the feeling remains, it keeps erecting fresh walls of argument to repair the gaps that have been made in the old ones. And there are so

many factors giving intensity and deep roots to the feelings connected with our present subject—making them more intense and deeper-rooted than the feelings that gather protectively around •other old institutions and customs—that we shouldn't be surprised to find those feelings to be less undermined and loosened than any of the •others by the progress of the great modern spiritual and social transition; nor should we suppose that the barbarisms to which men cling longest must be less barbaric than the ones they shake off earlier.

Those who attack an almost universal opinion are faced with difficulties all the way. They have to be very lucky *and* unusually able if they are to get a hearing at all. It is harder for them to obtain a •trial than it is for any other litigants to obtain a •verdict. And if they do get a hearing, it subjects them to a set of logical requirements totally different from the ones imposed on other people. **(1)** In all other cases, the burden of proof is supposed to lie with the affirmative: if someone is accused of murder, it's up to his accusers to prove his guilt, not for him to prove his innocence. If there's a difference of opinion about the reality of an alleged historical event that doesn't involve strong feelings in anyone—the Siege of Troy, for example—those who say that it did happen are expected to produce their proofs before the other side can be required to say anything; and the most they are ever required to do is to show that the evidence produced by their opponents is of no value. **(2)** Again, in practical matters [i.e. in moral, social and political matters] the burden of proof is supposed to be with those who are against liberty—those who contend for. . . •any limitation of the general freedom

of human action or •anything that denies to one person or kind of person any privilege or advantage that others have. The *a priori* presumption is in favour of freedom and impartiality. It is held that there should be no restraint except what is required by the general good, and that the law should. . . .treat everyone alike except where dissimilarity of treatment is required by positive reasons of justice or of policy. [To say that there is a 'presumption' in favour of a practice is to say that the practice should be regarded as justifiable unless a case is made against its being so; the stronger the presumption, the stronger the counter-case has to be.]

But none of these rules of evidence will be allowed to benefit those who maintain the Opinion that I shall defend. It is useless for me to say:

Those who maintain that men have a right to command and women an obligation obey, or that men are fit for government and women unfit, are on the affirmative side of the question, and are bound to show positive evidence for their position or accept that it has been defeated.

It is equally unavailing for me to say:

Those who deny to women any freedom or privilege that is rightly allowed to men are opposing freedom *and* recommending partiality, so there is a *double* presumption against them; and they should be held to the strictest standards of proof, with the judgment going against them unless they argue successfully enough to exclude all doubt.

These would be regarded as good pleas in any ordinary case—but not in this one! Before I could hope to make any impression ·on the other side· I would be expected not only to answer everything ever said by the opposition, but to imagine everything that *could* be said by them. . . . And besides refuting all arguments for the affirmative ·anti-liberty

pro-discrimination· side, I'll be called upon for invincible positive arguments to prove a negative. And even if I could leave the opposite party with a host of unanswered arguments against them, and not a single unrefuted argument on their side, this wouldn't be regarded as much of an achievement; because a cause supported by universal usage and by such a great weight of popular sentiment is supposed to have a presumption in its favour, superior to any conviction that an appeal to reason can produce in intellects other than those of a high class. [In Mill's day a 'sentiment' could be a feeling, or a belief, or a practical attitude. In this version the word will be left unaltered. Decide for yourself what he means by each occurrence of it.]

I am not *complaining* about these difficulties. It would be useless to do so, because they are inevitable when one has to argue through •people's understandings against the hostility of •their feelings and practical tendencies. I am up against

practical principles in which people have been born and bred, and which are the basis of much existing order of the world;

I can hardly expect them to

surrender at the first argumentative attack that they aren't capable of logically resisting.

That would require them to rely on their own power of estimating arguments, and *that* can't happen until the understandings of the majority of mankind are much better developed than they ever have been. So I am quarreling with my opponents not for having •too little faith in argument but for having •too much faith in custom and the general feeling.

Reason versus 'instinct'

The eighteenth century is supposed to have regarded the reasoning elements in human nature as infallible; in reaction

against that, the nineteenth century attributes infallibility to the unreasoning elements. We have replaced the god-like status of Reason by a god-like status for Instinct; and we label as 'instinct' anything that we find in ourselves and can't find any rational foundation for. This idolatry is infinitely more degrading than the other; of all the false worships of the present day, this one is the worst and is the main support of all the others. It probably won't be dislodged until a sound psychology lays bare the real root of much that people now bow down to as 'intended by Nature' and 'commanded by God'. As regards the present question, I shall *accept*. . . that established custom and general feelings should be regarded as conclusive against me, unless this custom and feeling can be shown to have owed their existence down through the ages to causes other than their soundness, and to have derived their power from the worse rather than the better parts of human nature. Let the judgment go against me unless I can show that the judge in this case has been tampered with! This is a smaller concession than you might think, because proving this—i.e. proving that there's something bad and wrong about the causes of the feelings that oppose me—is by far the easiest part of my task.

If a practice is very general, this sometimes creates a strong presumption that it is—or at any rate *was*—conducive to praiseworthy ends. This is the case when the practice was first started (or later kept up) as a means to such ends, and was based on experience of how the ends could be most effectively be achieved. If the following were the case—

- When the authority of men over women was first established, that was the result of conscientiously comparing different ways of structuring the government of society;
- various other types of social organisation were tried—the government of women over men, equality between

the two, and other such mixed and divided structures of government; and

- people's experience of those convinced them that the best arrangement for producing the happiness and well-being of both women and men was the one in which women are wholly under the rule of men, having no share at all in public concerns, and each in private being legally obliged to obey the man with whom she has associated her destiny

—if *that* were the case (I repeat), that would provide some evidence that when the subjection of women was first adopted it *was* the best (though even then the social facts that recommended it may have since then ceased to be facts). But the state of the case is in every respect the reverse of this. **(1)** The opinion in favour of the present system. . . rests on theory only, for no other system has been *tried*; so that experience, as contrasted with theory, can't be claimed to have pronounced any verdict. **(2)** The adoption of this system of inequality never was the result of deliberation, or forethought, or any social ideas, or any notion whatever of what would be best for humanity or the good order of society. It arose simply from the fact that **from the dawn of human society every woman was in a state of bondage to some man, because she was of value to him and she had less muscular strength than he did**. Laws and political systems always begin by recognising the relations they find already existing between individuals, converting a mere physical fact into a legal right, giving it the sanction of society; their main aim is to replace

the assertion and protection of these rights by irregular and lawless conflict of physical strength

by

the assertion and protection of these same rights by public and organised means.

In this way, those who had already been *compelled* to obey became *legally bound* to obey. Slavery, at first a mere affair of force between the master and the slave, came to be governed by rules, and to be a matter of agreement among the masters: binding themselves to one another for common protection, the masters guaranteed by their collective strength the private possessions of each, including his slaves. In early times, most males were slaves, as well as all females. And many centuries passed—some of them times of high cultivation—before any thinker was bold enough to ask ‘Is it right? Is it absolutely socially necessary?’ about either of these slaveries. Gradually such thinkers did arise; and. . .at last the slavery of the male sex has been abolished in all the countries of Christian Europe; and. . .the slavery of the female sex has been gradually changed into a milder form of dependence. But this dependence, as it exists at present, is not an original institution, taking a fresh start from considerations of justice and social expediency—it is the primitive state of slavery lasting on through a series of weakenings brought about by the same causes that have softened all kinds of conduct and brought all human relations more under the control of justice and the influence of humanity. The subjection of women hasn’t lost the taint of its brutal origin. So the mere fact of its existence doesn’t create any presumption in its favour. Anyone who wants there to be a presumption in its favour had better try to get it from the fact that the subjection of women has survived, while many products of the same odious source have been done away with. And *that* fact is what makes the statement ‘The inequality of rights between men and women has no other source than the law of the strongest’ sound strange to ordinary ears.

That this statement should sound like a paradox is in some respects creditable to the progress of civilisation and

the improvement of mankind’s moral sentiments [see note on page 2]. We now live—i.e. one or two of the world’s most advanced nations now live—in a state in which the law of the strongest seems to be entirely abandoned as the regulating principle of the world’s affairs: nobody proclaims it, and in most contexts nobody is permitted to practise it. When anyone succeeds in doing so, he disguises it through the pretence that he has some general social interest on his side. This being the apparent state of things, people flatter themselves that the rule of mere force is ended; that the law of the strongest can’t be the reason for the existence of anything that has remained in full operation down to the present time. They think: ‘However any of our present institutions may have •begun, no institution can have been •preserved into this period of advanced civilisation except by a well-grounded feeling that it fits human nature and is conducive to the general good.’ They don’t understand

- the great vitality and durability of institutions that place right on the side of might;
- how intensely they are clung to;
- how the good as well as the bad propensities and sentiments of those who have power in their hands become identified with retaining it;
- how slowly these bad institutions give way, one at a time, the weakest first. beginning with those that are least interwoven with the daily habits of life; and
- how very rarely those who have obtained legal power because they first had physical power have ever lost their hold of it until the physical power had passed over to the other side.

That shifting of the physical force didn’t happen in the case of women; and this fact, combined with all the special features of this particular case, made it certain from the outset that *this* branch of the system of *right founded on might* would be

the very last to disappear (though its most atrocious features were softened earlier than several of the others). . . . So it isn't surprising that the subjection of women, as long as it doesn't proclaim its own origin and there is no discussion bringing to light its true character, isn't felt to jar with modern civilisation, any more than domestic slavery among the Greeks jarred with their notion of themselves as a free people.

Modern changes of attitude

The truth is that people of the present and the last two or three generations have lost all practical sense of the primitive condition of humanity. The only ones who can form any mental picture of what society was like in ancient times are the few who have •studied history or have •spent much time in parts of the world occupied by the living representatives of ages long past. People don't now realize how entirely, in former ages, the •law of superior strength was the •rule of life, and how publicly and openly it was proclaimed. (•Note the adverbs I have chosen•. I don't say 'cynically' or 'shamelessly', because those words imply a feeling that there was something in it to be ashamed of, and in those earlier ages only a philosopher or a saint could have room in his mind for any such notion.) History gives a cruel experience of human nature, in showing •that the regard due to the life, possessions, and entire earthly happiness of any category of people was measured precisely by what they had the power of enforcing; and •that all who in any way resisted authorities that had power, however dreadful might be the provocation, were opposed not only by the law of force but also by all other laws and all the notions of social duty; and were regarded by those whom they resisted as being guilty. . . .of the worst of all crimes, deserving the cruellest punishments

human beings could inflict. [A tiny change came about when masters found it convenient to make promises to their slaves, Mill says, but such promises were lightly regarded and not very effective. Then:] The ancient republics provided the first examples of a portion of human relations fenced around and governed by something other than the law of force; that is because they were from the outset based on some kind of agreement, or at any rate were created by a union of persons with about the same amount of power. The original •law of force remained in full operation between them and their slaves, and also (except when limited by explicit agreements) between a commonwealth and its subjects or other independent commonwealths; but still •its banishment even from such a narrow domain as that of relations among the powerful started the regeneration of human nature. It did this by giving birth to sentiments of which experience soon demonstrated the immense value, even for material interests, and which from then on only needed to be enlarged, not created. Although slaves were not part of the commonwealth, it was in the free states [Mill's phrase] that slaves were first felt to have rights as human beings. The Stoics were, I believe, the first—except so far as the Jewish law constitutes an exception—who taught as a part of morality that men had moral obligations to their slaves. After Christianity became ascendant, no-one could ever again have been a stranger to this belief, in theory; and after the rise of the Catholic Church there were always people who stood up for it. Yet enforcing it was the hardest task that Christianity ever had to perform. For more than a thousand years the Church kept up the contest, with hardly any perceptible success. It wasn't for lack of power over men's minds. The Church's power was prodigious. It could make kings and nobles hand over their most valued possessions to enrich the Church. It could make thousands of people. . . .shut themselves up in

convents to work out their salvation by poverty, fasting, and prayer. It could send hundreds of thousands across land and sea, Europe and Asia, to give their lives for the deliverance of the Holy Sepulchre [this is a reference to the Crusades]. . . . All this it did; but it couldn't make men fight less with one another, or be less cruel in their tyranny over the serfs and (when they could) over ordinary citizens. . . . Only by the growing power of *kings* was an end put to fighting (except between kings or competitors for kingship); only by the growth of a wealthy and warlike bourgeoisie in the fortified towns, and of a peasant infantry that proved more powerful in battle than undisciplined knights on horseback, were some limits set to the insolent tyranny of the nobles over the bourgeoisie and peasantry. •This tyranny was persisted in until long *after* the oppressed had acquired enough power to be able, often, to get conspicuous revenge; and on the Continent much of •it continued up to the time of the French Revolution, though in England the earlier and better organisation of the democratic classes put an end to it sooner, by establishing equal laws and free national institutions.

Slavery and absolute monarchy

. . . . People mostly don't remember or bear in mind how institutions and customs that never had any basis but the law of force *last on* into ages and states of general opinion that would never have permitted them to be *established*. Less than forty years ago Englishmen could still by law hold human beings in bondage as saleable property; within the present century they could kidnap them and work them literally to death. This absolutely extreme case of the law of force, condemned *even* by those who can tolerate almost every other form of arbitrary power. . . . was the law of civilised and Christian England within the memory of persons now

living; and in one half of Anglo-Saxon America, three or four years ago, not only did slavery exist but the slave-trade and the breeding of slaves expressly for that trade was a general practice between slave states. Yet not only was there more sentiment [see note on page 2] against it but (in England at least) less feeling or interest in favour of it than of any other of the customary abuses of force; because the motive for it was nakedly commercial, those who profited by it were a very small minority, and the natural feeling of all those who weren't personally getting anything from it was absolute loathing. . . . Then consider the long duration of absolute monarchy, *i.e.* monarchy with no legal controls or limits on how the monarch can behave or what laws he can pass. [Mill in his next sentence equates that with 'military despotism', presumably on the grounds that no monarch could have absolute powers if he didn't have control of the country's army.] In England at present almost everyone sees military despotism as a case of *the law of force*, having no origin or justification but that. Yet in all the other great nations of Europe it still exists, or ceased to exist only recently; and even now it is favoured by many people, especially but not exclusively by people with high social status and importance. [Mill's point here, he explains, is that absolute monarchy has proved to be remarkably durable despite two features that might be expected to weaken it:

- (1) Plenty of countries don't have it. And at most times in history there have been spectacularly prosperous and successful countries that were governed in other ways.
- (2) The immediate beneficiary of an absolute monarchy is the monarch, that one person; for everyone else this system is 'naturally and necessarily humiliating'.

In contrast with this, the system of the subjection of women

- (1) is universal; there are no vivid examples of prosperous rejections of it; and

(2) is immediately gratifying to half of the human race, namely the male half: 'The clodhopper exercises. . . his share of the power equally with the highest nobleman'.

And it has a third feature that favours its survival over absolute monarchy, namely:

(3) Anyone who is empowered by the subjection of women gets power over the person who is closest to him, and. . .]

. . . everyone who desires power desires it most over those who are nearest to him, with whom his life is passed, with whom he has most concerns in common and in whom any independence of his authority is oftenest likely to interfere with his individual preferences. . . . Also, the possessors of the power provided by the subjection of women are better placed than any absolute monarch to prevent any uprising against the system. Every one of the *subjects* lives under the very eye. . . of one of the *masters*, in closer intimacy with him than with any of her fellow-subjects; with no means of combining against him, no power of even locally overmastering him; and with the strongest motives for seeking his favour and avoiding giving him offence. In struggles for political emancipation, we all know how often its champions are bought off by bribes, or daunted by terrors. In the case of women, each individual of the subject-class is in a permanent state of bribery and intimidation combined. . . . If ever any system of privilege and enforced subjection had its yoke tightly riveted on the necks of those who are kept down by it, this has. I haven't yet shown that it is a wrong system: but anyone who can *think* about this must see that even if it is wrong it was certain to outlast all other forms of unjust authority. And when some of the grossest of the other forms still exist in many civilised countries, and have only recently been got rid of in others, it would be strange if

the one that is most deeply rooted had yet been perceptibly shaken anywhere. . . .

Natural?

Some will object that it's not fair to compare •the government of the male sex with •the other forms of unjust power that I have discussed, because *it* is natural while the others are arbitrary and brought about by mere usurpation. But was there ever any domination that didn't appear natural to those who possessed it? There was a time when the division of mankind into a small class of masters and a large class of slaves appeared, even to the most cultivated minds, to be the only natural condition of the human race! Aristotle, with his great intellect and his great contributions to the progress of human thought, held this opinion without doubt or misgiving; and his reason for it was the reason usually given for the dominion of men over women, namely that there are different natures among mankind, free natures and slave natures; that the Greeks were of a free nature, the barbarian races of Thracians and Asiatics of a slave nature. [And, Mill continues, the same was said by the slave-owners of the southern United States.] Again, the theorists of absolute monarchy have always claimed it to be the only natural form of government, descending ultimately from the authority of a father over his family, . . . which is older and more basic than society itself and, they contend, the most natural authority of all. Indeed the law of force itself has always seemed the most natural of all grounds for the exercise of authority—has seemed so, I mean, to those who haven't been able to find any other basis ·for their favoured form of tyranny·. Conquering races hold it to be Nature's own dictate that the feebler and more unwarlike races should submit to the braver and more manly, or, to put it more bluntly, that the conquered

should obey the conquerors. The smallest acquaintance with human life in the middle ages shows •how *supremely natural* the dominion of the feudal nobility over men of low condition appeared to the nobility themselves, and •how unnatural the conception seemed, of a person of the inferior class claiming equality with them or exercising authority over them. And it seemed almost as natural to the class held in subjection: the emancipated serfs and citizenry, even in their most vigorous struggles, never claimed a share of authority; they only demanded some limitation to the power of tyrannising over them. So true is it that 'unnatural' generally means only 'uncustomary', and that whatever is usual appears natural. The subjection of women to men is a universal custom, so any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural! . . . When people in distant parts of the world first learn anything about England, they are astonished to be told that England is under a queen; that seems to them so unnatural as to be almost incredible. To Englishmen it doesn't seem at all unnatural, because they are used to it; but they *do* feel it unnatural that women should be soldiers or members of parliament. In the feudal ages, on the other hand, war and politics were not thought unnatural to women, because they were not unusual; it seemed natural that women of the privileged classes should be of manly character, inferior in nothing but bodily strength to their husbands and fathers. The independence of women seemed rather less unnatural to the Greeks than to other peoples in ancient times, because of the mythical Amazons (whom they believed to be historical), and the partial example of the women of Sparta, who, though they were •by law just as subordinate to men as the women in other Greek states, were more free •in fact; they were trained to bodily exercises in the same way as the men, giving ample proof that they were not naturally disqualified for them. There can be little doubt that Spartan experience

suggested to Plato, among many other of his doctrines, that of the social and political equality of the two sexes.

Complaints

It will be said that •the rule of men over women differs from all these others in *not* being a rule a rule of force, •that it is accepted voluntarily, •that women don't complain, and are consenting parties to it. Well, the first point to make is that a great number of women do *not* accept it. Ever since there have been women able to make their sentiments known by their writings (the only form of going-public that society permits to them), increasingly many of them have protested against their present social condition; and recently many thousands of them, headed by the most eminent women known to the public, petitioned Parliament to allow them the vote. The claim of women to be educated as well and as broadly as men as men is urged with growing intensity and with a great prospect of success; while the demand for their admission into professions and occupations that have so far been closed to them becomes more urgent every year. [Mill speaks of movements along these lines in the USA and in some European countries. Then:] We can't possibly know how many more women there are who silently have such hopes, but there are plenty of signs of how many *would* have them if they weren't so strenuously taught to repress them as improper for their sex. •It may have occurred to you that these examples concern only certain parts or aspects of the subjection of women, not the whole thing. Nothing much follows from that, however. •No enslaved class ever asked for complete liberty at once. [The next sentence refers to a 13th-century rebel who during his brief time of power established a parliament that included representatives of the common people.] When Simon de Montfort called the representatives of the common people to

sit for the first time in Parliament, did any of them dream of demanding that such an assembly. . . . should make and destroy ministries, and dictate to the king in affairs of State? No such thought entered into the imagination of the most ambitious of them. The nobility were already claiming such powers; the common people claimed only to be exempt from arbitrary taxation and from the gross individual oppression of the king's officers. It is a political law of nature that **those who are subjected to any power of very long standing never begin by complaining of the power itself, but only of the oppressive use of it.** There's never any shortage of women who complain of ill-usage by their husbands. There would be infinitely more if complaints weren't apt to provoke the husbands to repeat and increase the ill-usage. That is what frustrates all attempts to •maintain the power but •protect the woman against its abuses. In no other case (except that of a child) is a person who has been proved judicially to have suffered an injury put back into the physical power of the culprit who inflicted it! That is why wives, even in the most extreme and long-drawn-out cases of bodily ill-usage, hardly ever dare make use of the laws that have been made for their protection; and if a woman is induced to do so—in a moment of irrepressible indignation, or through the interference of neighbours—all she does from there on is to reveal as little as possible and to beg off her tyrant from the punishment he deserves.

Affection

. . . Women are in a different position from all other subject classes in this: their masters require more from them than actual service. Men want not only the obedience of women but also their sentiments [see note on page 2]. All but the most brutish of men want to have, in the woman most nearly

connected with them, not a •forced slave but a •willing one, not a slave merely but a favourite. So they have done everything they could to enslave women's minds. The masters of all other slaves get obedience through fear, either of themselves or of some religious punishment. The masters of women wanted more than simple obedience, and they turned the whole force of education to get what they wanted. All women are brought up from their earliest years to believe that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men: not self-will and government by self-control, but submission and accepting control by someone else. All the moralities tell them that it is their *duty*, and all the current ideas about feelings tell them that it is their *nature*, to live for others—to set aside their own wishes and interests and have no life but in their affections. And by 'their affections' are meant the only ones they are allowed to have—those to the men with whom they are connected, or to the children who constitute an additional and unbreakable tie between them and a man. When we put together these three things—

- (1) the natural attraction between opposite sexes;
- (2) the wife's entire dependence on the husband, with every privilege or pleasure that she has being either his gift or depending entirely on his will;
- (3) the fact that it is only through the man that the woman can seek or obtain the principal object of human pursuit, namely consideration, or any objects of social ambition;

—it would be a miracle if the objective of *being attractive to men* had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character. And once men had acquired this great means of influence over the minds of women, an instinct of selfishness made them avail themselves of it to the utmost as a means of keeping women in subjection, by telling them that an essential part of sexual attractiveness

is meekness, submissiveness, and delivering all individual will into the hands of a man. [Mill goes on to say that if this kind of oppression-through-feelings had been built into other systems of servitude, they would have lasted longer, and would now be regarded as being just as 'natural' as the subjection of women, and would be challenged only by 'a thinker here and there'.]

The course of history

What I have said up to here is quite enough to show that *custom*, however universal it may be, doesn't create any presumption. . . .in favour of the arrangements that put women in social and political subjection to men. But I go further, and maintain that the course of history and the tendencies of progressive human society create a strong presumption *against* this system of inequality of rights; and that if we can infer anything from the whole course of human improvement up to now—the whole stream of modern tendencies—it is that this relic of the past is out of tune with the future and must necessarily disappear.

What is the special character of the modern world—the difference that chiefly distinguishes modern institutions, modern social ideas, modern life itself, from those of times long past? It is that human beings are no longer born to their place in life, and chained down by an unbreakable bond to the place they are born to, but are free to use their talents and any good luck that comes their way to have the kind of life that they find most desirable. Human society was for ages constituted on a very different principle. All were born to a fixed social position, and were mostly kept in it by law or debarred from any means by which they could emerge from it. As some men are born white and others black, so some were born slaves and others freemen and citizens;

some were born patricians, others plebeians; some were born feudal nobles, others commoners and serfs. A slave or serf could never make himself free; his only route to freedom was through the will of his master. [Mill continues with this theme: the centuries through which commoners couldn't become nobles; a noble father couldn't disinherit his eldest son; a worker couldn't be a shoemaker or tailor or carpenter or the like unless he was born into the guild controlling that trade or was admitted into the guild by its members; every activity regarded as important had to be conducted according to officially dictated rules; manufacturers were punished for introducing new and improved methods for their business. Then:] In modern Europe, especially in the parts of it that have gone furthest in all other modern improvements, diametrically opposite doctrines now prevail. Law and government don't prescribe who can and who can't conduct any social or industrial operation, or what procedures for conducting them shall be lawful. These things are left to the free choice of individuals. Even the laws requiring workmen to serve an apprenticeship have been repealed in England, on the grounds that wherever an apprenticeship is necessary its necessity will force it to happen. The old theory was that as little as possible should be left to the choice of the individual, and that as far as was practicable his conduct should be laid down for him by superior wisdom. Left to himself he was sure to go wrong. The modern conviction, based on a thousand years of experience, is that things that directly involve a person's interests never go right except when they are left to his own discretion; and that any regulation of them by authority, except to protect the rights of others, is sure to do harm. This conclusion was slowly arrived at, and not adopted until almost every possible application of the contrary theory had been made with disastrous result; but now the part of it that

concerns *work* prevails in all the most advanced countries and in most of the others that have any claim to any sort of advancement. The thesis is not:

All processes are equally good, and all persons are equally qualified for every task or trade;

but rather:

Freedom of individual choice is the only thing that leads to the adoption of the best processes, and puts each operation into the hands of those who are best qualified for it.

Nobody thinks it necessary to make a law that only a strong-armed man shall be a blacksmith. Freedom and competition suffice to make blacksmiths strong-armed men, because others can earn more in occupations for which they are more fit. In line with this doctrine, it is felt to be improper to adopt a general presumption that certain classes of persons are not fit to do certain things. Everyone now knows and admits that if some such presumptions do exist, none of them are infallible. Even if a presumption is well grounded in a majority of cases (which it probably isn't!), there will be a minority of exceptional cases where it doesn't hold: and in those cases it is unjust to the individuals and harmful to society to put barriers in the way of their using their abilities for the benefit of themselves and others. And in the cases where the unfitness is real, the ordinary motives of human conduct will usually suffice to prevent the incompetent person from making or from persisting in the attempt.

If this general principle of social and economic science is not true—if individuals, perhaps with help from the opinion of those who know them, aren't better judges of their own capacities and vocation than the government is—then the world should immediately abandon this principle and return to the old system of regulations and disabilities. But if the

principle is true, we ought to act as if we believed it. We *do* accept that someone's being

born black instead of white, or

born a commoner instead of a nobleman,

shouldn't fix his position throughout life, barring him from all the more elevated social positions and from nearly all respectable occupations. Well, we should accept the same thing regarding someone's being

born a girl instead of a boy.

Let us apply this to the legal requirement that a Member of Parliament must be a man. Even if we accept the strongest claims that are ever made about the superior fitness of men for this role, the legal requirement is still wrong. If it happens only once in a dozen years that this law excludes a woman who is fit to be an M.P., that exclusion is a real loss to society, whereas the exclusion of thousands of unfit persons is no gain. If the electors are disposed to choose unfit persons as M.P.s, there are always plenty of those to choose from! For any difficult and important job, there is always a need for more people who could do it well than are actually available, even with the most unrestricted field of choice: and any limitation of the field of selection deprives society of some chances of being served by the competent, without ever saving it from the incompetent.

At present, in the more improved countries, the disabilities of women are the only case but one in which laws and institutions take persons at their birth and ordain that they shall never in all their lives be allowed to compete for certain things. The one exception is that of royalty. [Mill says that the status of royalty, as something one has to be born into, is felt by everyone to be an exception; the case for it appeals to customs and traditions, which are given different weights in different countries; and he emphasizes that in the modern

world monarchs don't really *do* anything significant: what is ostensibly the work of the monarch is done by the prime minister, who isn't qualified for his role by birth, though he would have been disqualified for it if he were female. Mill sums up:] So the disabilities to which women are subject from the mere fact of their birth are the only examples of the kind in modern legislation. In no instance except this, which takes in half the human race, are the higher social functions closed against anyone by the sheer fact of birth which no exertions, and no change of circumstances, can overcome. . . . [Mill uses the phrase 'the higher social functions' to refer to political office (e.g. being a Member of Parliament), high positions in the civil service, and so on. The word 'function' occurs very often in chapter 3, and will be left unaltered there.]

The social subordination of women thus stands out as an isolated fact in modern social institutions—a solitary infringement of what has become their fundamental law, a single relic of an old world of thought and practice. . . . This entire discrepancy between one social fact and all the others that accompany it, and the radical opposition between its nature and the progressive movement that is the boast of the modern world. . . ., provides something to be thought about seriously by any conscientious observer of human tendencies. It raises a *prima facie* presumption on the unfavourable side, far outweighing any presumption that custom and usage could create on the favourable side. It should be enough, at least, make this an issue with two sides to it—like the issue between republicanism and royalty.

[Mill goes on to demand a real and fair discussion of the issue over the subjection of women. He warns against invalid appeals to experience. 'Experience can't possibly have decided between two courses of action when there has been experience of only one.' But experience can tell us something relevant:] Experience does say that every step

in social improvement has been accompanied by a step made in raising the social position of women; and this has happened so invariably that historians and philosophers have been led to *measure* •the civilisation of a people or an age by •the status that it give to women. . . . This does not of itself prove that the assimilation must go on to complete equality; but it surely creates some presumption that such is the case.

The 'nature' of women

And it's no use saying that the nature of the two sexes fits them for their present functions and positions. . . . Standing on the ground of common sense and the constitution of the human mind, I deny that anyone can know the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another. . . . What is now called 'the nature of women' is an artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others. . . . A hot-house and stove cultivation has always been provided for some of women's capabilities, for the benefit and pleasure of their masters. These sprout luxuriantly in this heated atmosphere and with active cultivation and watering; while other shoots from the same root, left outside in the wintry air with ice purposely heaped all around them, have a stunted growth, and some are burnt off with fire and disappear; and men—with that inability to recognise their own work that distinguishes the unanalytic mind—lazily believe that the tree grows •of itself in the way •they have made it grow, and that it would die if one half of it weren't kept in a vapour bath and the other half in the snow.

What is now the biggest obstacle to the progress of thought and the forming of well-grounded opinions about life and social arrangements is mankind's *unspeakable*

inattention to the influences that form human character. . . .

- Because a peasant deeply in arrears to his landlord is not industrious, some people think that the Irish are naturally idle.
- Because constitutions can be overthrown when the authorities appointed to serve them turn their arms against them, some people think the French incapable of free government.
- Because the Greeks •cheated the Turks whereas the Turks only •plundered the Greeks, some people think that the Turks are naturally more sincere.
- Because women (they say) don't care about politics except for an interest in politicians, the general good is thought to be naturally less interesting to them than to men.

History, which is now so much better understood than it used to be, teaches another lesson, if only by showing how enormously open human nature is to external influences, and how variable are human characteristics that are supposed to be most universal and uniform. But in history, as in travelling, men usually see only what they already had in their own minds. . . .

What are the natural differences between the two sexes?

In the present state of society we can't get a complete and correct answer to this; yet almost everybody dogmatizes about it, hardly anyone attends seriously to the only source for even a partial answer. The source I'm referring to is an analytic study of the most important topic in psychology, namely **the laws governing the influence of circumstances on character**. Why the emphasis on laws? Because however great and apparently ineradicable the moral and intellectual differences between men and women might be, the only evidence we can have for there being *natural* differences is negative: inferring that a given

difference •is natural from evidence that it •can't possibly be artificial. Natural differences will be what is left behind after setting aside every characteristic of either sex that can be explained through external circumstances. To be entitled to affirm that there is *any* difference between the two sexes considered as moral and rational beings—let alone to say what the difference is—one must have the profoundest knowledge of the laws of the formation of character; and since no-one yet has that knowledge no-one is yet entitled to any positive opinion about this topic. Regarding the lack of that knowledge: there is hardly any subject which, in proportion to its importance, has been so little studied! . . .

Indeed we have only rough and incomplete knowledge of what the differences between the sexes now are, never mind how they came to be that way. Medical practitioners and physiologists have discovered some of the differences in bodily constitution. . . .but they have no special qualifications for learning about the mental characteristics of women. *That* is a subject on which nothing final can be known, so long as the only people who can really know it—women themselves—have little to say about it and the little that they do say is mostly suborned, •by which I mean that women are usually under pressure not to tell the truth about their own mental abilities. It is easy to know stupid women: stupidity is much the same all the world over; a stupid person's notions and feelings will be simply the ones that are prevalent in the social circles he or she moves in. It's a different story with people whose opinions and feelings come from their own individual nature and faculties. It's a rare man who has any significant knowledge of the character even of the women of his own family. I don't mean knowledge of •their capabilities (nobody knows what those are, not even women themselves, because most of their abilities have never been called upon); I'm talking about •their actual

thoughts and feelings. Many a man thinks he perfectly understands women because he has had romantic relations with several of them, perhaps with many of them. If he is a good observer and his experience has been of the right kind, he may have learned something about one narrow part of women's nature—an important part, no doubt, but then there is all the rest. . . . In general a man's best chance of studying the character of a woman is by attending to his own wife. . . .and this is in fact the source from which any knowledge worth having on the subject has generally come. But most men have had the opportunity of studying only one woman in this way, so that usually one can infer what a man's wife is like from his opinions about women in general! To make even this one case yield any result, it has to be the case that

- the woman is worth knowing,
- the man is a competent judge, and
- the man can. . . .read her mind by sympathetic intuition or has nothing in his character that makes her shy of disclosing it.

This, I believe, is an extremely rare conjunction. It often happens that a husband and wife have complete unity of feeling and community of interests with respect to all external things, yet neither has any more admission into the internal life of the other than if they were mere acquaintances. Even when there is true affection, authority on the one side and subordination on the other prevent perfect confidence. Though nothing may be intentionally withheld, much is not shown. [Mill likens this to relations between a father and a son: even when there is real affection on both sides, there's a lot about a son's character that his father doesn't know. Mill takes this to illustrate the general thesis that] for two people to know one another thoroughly, they need to be not only intimates but equals. How much more true this

must be when one of the two is not only under the other's authority but has had it drummed into her that it's her duty to subordinate everything to his comfort and pleasure, and to speak and act only in ways that are agreeable to him! These are obstacles to a man's getting thorough knowledge of the only woman he has sufficient opportunity of studying. Add to this the fact that to understand one woman is not necessarily to understand any other woman; that even if a man studies many women of one social level or of one country, that won't enable him to understand women at other levels or in other countries; and even if he did *that*, those are still only the women of a single period of history. It is safe to say that the knowledge men can acquire of women, even as they have been and are—never mind what they could be—is wretchedly incomplete and superficial, and that it always will be so until women themselves have told all that they have to tell.

And this time has not come, and if it does come it will do so gradually. Only very recently have women been qualified by literary accomplishments and permitted by society to tell the general public anything. And very few of those have dared to tell anything that men, on whom their literary success depends, are unwilling to hear. If you remember how even a male author's expression of uncustomary opinions or what were regarded as eccentric feelings used to be (and sometimes still is) received, you'll get some faint conception of how hard it is for a woman, having been brought up to think custom and opinion her sovereign rule, to express in books anything drawn from the depths of her own nature. The greatest woman who has left writings behind her sufficient to give her an eminent rank in the literature of her country thought it necessary to prefix this motto to her boldest work *Un homme peut braver l'opinion; une femme doit s'y soumettre*—A man can openly defy public opinion; a woman

has to submit to it.¹ Most of what women write about women is mere sycophancy to men. In the case of unmarried women, much of it seems only intended to increase their chance of getting a husband. . . . Literary women are becoming more free-spoken, and more willing to express their real sentiments. Unfortunately, in this country especially, they are *themselves* such artificial products that their sentiments are made up of a small dose of individual observation and consciousness and a very large one of acquired associations. This will be less and less the case, but it will remain true to a great extent as long as social institutions don't allow to women the same free development of originality that is possible for men. When that time comes, and not before, we shall see, and not merely hear, as much as it is necessary to know of the nature of women, and the adaptation of other things to it. [That last sentence is exactly as Mill wrote it. You might care to think about what he was getting at when he wrote '... see, and not merely hear. . . .']

I have dwelt so much on the present obstacles to men's knowing the true nature of women because in this as in so many other things *opinio copiae inter maximas causas inopiae est*, .i.e. one of the great causes of ignorance is believing that one knows a lot; and there's not much chance of reasonable thinking on this topic while people flatter themselves that they perfectly understand a subject of which most men know absolutely nothing. Among other things, it is at present impossible for any man, or all men taken together, to have knowledge that would qualify them to dictate to women what is their vocation and what isn't. Fortunately, no such knowledge is required for any practical purpose connected with women's relation to society and to life, because. . . .that question rests with women themselves—to be decided by

their experience and the use of their faculties. . . .

One thing we can be certain of—that if something is contrary to women's nature you won't get them to do it by giving their nature free play! There is no reason whatsoever for mankind to interfere on nature's behalf for fear that nature won't succeed in carrying out its purpose. . . . If there's something they can do but not as well as the men who are their competitors, competition will exclude them from it; because what is being asked for is not protective duties and tariffs in favour of women, but only that the present tariffs and protective duties in favour of men should be recalled. If women have a greater natural inclination for x than for y, there's no need for laws or social indoctrination to make most of them do x in preference to y. Whatever women's services are most wanted for, the free play of competition will hold out the strongest inducements to them to undertake. . . .

The 'need' for compulsion

The general opinion of men is supposed to be that a woman's natural vocation is that of a wife and mother. I say 'is *supposed to be*' because judging from the present constitution of society one might think that their opinion was the exact opposite. Perhaps this is what they think:

The natural vocation of women is of all things the most in conflict with their nature: if. . . .any other job or pastime is open to them that has any chance of appearing desirable to them, there won't be enough of them who will be willing 'to be wives and mothers', .i.e. to accept the condition that is said to be natural to them.

If this really is what men in general believe, they should say so out loud. I would like to hear somebody openly expressing

¹ From the title-page of *Delphine*, a novel by Madame de Staël, a French romantic writer who died in 1817.

the doctrine (it is already implied in much that is written on the subject):

‘Society needs women to marry and produce children. They won’t do so unless they are compelled. Therefore it is necessary to compel them.’

The merits of the case would then be clearly defined. It would be exactly the same as the case of the slave-holders of South Carolina and Louisiana:

‘It is necessary that cotton and sugar should be grown. White men cannot produce them. Negroes will not, for any wages that we choose to give. Therefore, they must be compelled.’

An example closer to home is that of impressment:

‘Sailors absolutely must be had to defend the country. It often happens that they won’t voluntarily enlist. Therefore there must be the power of forcing them.’

[That is how the British navy used to acquire sailors: official ‘press gangs’ would kidnap men and force them into the service of the navy. The laws permitting this were still on the books in Mill’s time, though the practice had died out.] How often has this logic been used! and it would have been successful up to this day if it didn’t have one flaw, namely being open to the response:

‘First pay the sailors the honest value of their labour. When you have made it as well worth their while to serve you as to work for other employers, you’ll have no more difficulty than anyone else in obtaining their services.’

The only logical answer to this is ‘I will not’; and impressment is no longer defended, because people now don’t want to rob the labourer of his wages—don’t want to, and are ashamed

to. Those who try to force women into marriage by closing all other doors against them are open to a similar response. If they mean what they say, they must believe that men don’t make the married condition attractive enough to women to induce them to accept it for its own sake. . . . And here, I believe, is the clue to the feelings of men who really dislike the idea of equal freedom for women: the outcome they are afraid of isn’t women •being unwilling to marry (I don’t think anyone really has that fear), but women •insisting that marriage be on equal conditions. They are afraid that all women of spirit and capacity might prefer •doing almost anything else that they don’t regard as degrading to •marrying, when by marrying they’ll be providing themselves with a master—of themselves and of all their earthly possessions. And indeed if marriage *had* to be like that, their fears would be very well founded. I agree with them that few women who are capable of anything else would, voluntarily and knowing what they were doing, choose such a fate as that kind of marriage if they had any other way of filling a conventionally honourable place in life. If men are determined to have a despotic law of marriage, they are quite right—as a matter of mere policy—to leave women no choice about it. But in that case, everything that has been done in the modern world to loosen the chain on the minds of women has been a mistake. They never should have been allowed to become literate: women who read, and even more women who write, are as things now stand a contradiction and a disturbing element: and it was wrong to bring women up with any skills except those of a sex-slave or of a domestic servant.