



Reading Political Philosophy: From Machiavelli to Mill

Mill: Nigel Warburton and Janette Radcliffe-Richards

Nigel Warburton

I'm now talking to Janette Radcliffe-Richards, Reader in Bio-ethics, University of London, about John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*. She's also the author of *The Sceptical Feminist*, which is one of the most important philosophical works on feminism to have appeared in recent years. Janette, what's the relationship between *The Subjection of Women* and *On Liberty*?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

Mill is concerned about the anomaly in the treatment of women. He obviously holds the same views while he's writing on *The Subjection of Women* as he *On Liberty*, he says that we've got to a kind of stage in political thinking where we realise that freedom is best and that everybody should be allowed to rise by their own efforts. But, he says, we don't treat women this way. His main argument about women is to say that given that our society is a broadly liberal one at the time when he's writing, the treatment of women is a complete anomaly against the background of that Liberalism. So most of his arguments about the subjection of women are about saying how people who accept generally liberal principles are not applying them to women, and not even noticing that they don't apply them to women.

Nigel Warburton

So what he's saying is that we're inconsistent somehow in our treatment of women.

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

He says this is a complete anomaly, something which is entirely out of character with the rest of everything we do.

Nigel Warburton

So it's a logical point that he's making?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

I think it is, yes, and a great many of his arguments are pure logic, showing the inconsistency of his opponents' positions.

Nigel Warburton

So let's take an argument that he uses about what women are like, one of the main arguments in the text is that his contemporaries didn't know enough about the nature of women to make judgements about women's place in society.

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

He certainly says that. He says that we'll never know about the natures of the sexes as long as we've only seen them in their present relationship to one another. He in fact, in principle, takes a completely agnostic view about how different men and women are by nature, because he says they've been nurtured in such different environments and given such different educations, that that is possible enough to account for the differences we observe. So he's not going to the extreme that people went to later of saying, 'we know that environment causes all the differences', he's saying we just don't know, and therefore his opponents are not entitled to take claims about the difference of women as a premise for their arguments.

Nigel Warburton

So if people read Mill as saying that women and men are equal, they should be equal in terms of the respect they're given, equal before the law, but he's not saying they're the same in important respects?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

That's right. It's not part of his argument, it's clear he does believe that they are, for instance, intellectually equal. His own relationship with his wife left him in no doubt about that. But that's not part of his argument, that's a kind of side belief, if you like, which is not relevant. Because part of what he says is, in effect, if women really were so inferior you wouldn't need all these rules to keep them in their place because they wouldn't get out of their place. Give them free reign, given them opportunities and they will find their natural position. And the, if they are as inferior as you men say, they will end up at the bottom of the heap. But as you're keeping them there by all your rules, you're putting yourself in a position where you can't tell.

Nigel Warburton

Another argument he uses is that most men who are arguing about the nature of women are arguing from a single case.

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

Oh yes. He says to an almost laughable degree you can tell what a man's wife is like from by what he thinks of women in general. He says they've just got this one example before them, and the trouble is this one example is in a very peculiar relationship to him because she is legally dependent on him and therefore, as he says in other contexts, she has to be very careful about how she treats him and therefore he can't have a very deep understanding of what a woman is like.

Nigel Warburton

So in Mill's time the marriage relationship put a woman almost in a position of slavery.

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

Mills said from the point of view of the law, it put a woman *literally* in a position of slavery, because a husband had so many rights over a wife. To start with, divorce was almost impossible at the beginning of the period when Mill was working, you could only get it by Act of Parliament which was extremely expensive and therefore available to very few, and if a wife ran away from her husband because of cruelty of treatment, she would be sent back. Only the most extreme cruelty would allow for a legal separation. The man was the official guardian, one might say 'owner', of the children, and even if a separation happened because of the man's fault, a woman could be prevented from seeing her children altogether. She wasn't even their legal guardian if the man died unless the man had made her so in his will. It was really quite an extreme position from the point of view of law.

Now, of course, when mills said in public 'women are in a position of slavery', everyone just laughed because they said look at all these women idling you know while their husband go and earn the money, and they just dress up and go and visit their friends, and so on. And Mill had to emphasise, 'Of course I'm not saying that all women are treated like slaves, of course there are lots and lots of men around who don't take advantage of all these dreadful provisions but', he says, 'the important thing in any society is that you can't make the rules for the good people, you have to make them for the bad. Nobody doubts that if you give absolute power to somebody who's good, that things will be fine. The trouble comes because you're giving people power down', he says, 'to the basest and most ferocious. Every man has some woman chained to him', he says, 'down to the basest and most ferocious'.

Nigel Warburton

Are you saying then that Mill was just writing a polemic that responds to the situation he was in, a world in which women were treated – by the law – unfairly?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

He was arguing specifically for a change in the law. That was the whole purpose of *The Subjection of Women*. He was saying that at the moment women are legally subject to men,

and as of course they are kept out of the legislative procedure they have no hope of making any change in it. And furthermore, because they're kept out of male professions and therefore most ways of making money, they can't even support themselves independently, so they're forced into marriage and once in marriage they're in this position of legal subjection, and therefore at the mercy of any bad man.

Nigel Warburton

But that situation doesn't exist now, so why should we read the book at all?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

Well, apart from the fact that it exists in quite a lot of part of the world, which I hope feminists remember, it's very important because a lot of the kinds of arguments that Mill was resisting are still around. People aren't arguing for quite the same kinds of restraints but you do get very similar kinds of arguments, and quite apart from that, just learning the way these arguments work is very valuable in a whole lot of political contexts. It's not just the feminist context.

Nigel Warburton

So you're saying that mills provided an example of the way that we can apply logic to everyday social moral issues?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

He is indeed and if you learn the kind of techniques that come in *The Subjection of Women* you'll find yourself a very powerful political arguer. It's quite interesting because Mill is, as you know, the author of *On Liberty*, where he was arguing for a particular kind of political system to replace the hierarchical system which had gone before. He's following up the French Revolution, and all the rest of it. But what Mill is doing in *The Subjection of Women* is something which allows him to give a much tighter kind of argument, but because by then Liberalism on the whole had been accepted in Britain. As Mill says, everyone is expected to rise by their own efforts to find their own position in life. And he says this is best both for the individual and society. But he keeps pointing out that women have an anomalous position.

For instance, if you look at the kinds of arguments that men used to keep women in their position in the family, they would say things like 'women like it, it's the nature of women to be subordinate to men in marriage', and this is the kind of argument which you get a lot of now too. And Mill had three replies to this, they don't come together in this way in the book, you have to search around and find them in different places. But he says, 'Well, to start with, everybody knows that quite a lot of women are protesting about it, so you can't just go around saying no women protest, so first argument, your first claim about women's happiness is just false, you can see by looking. But second', he says, 'now what about all these women who aren't protesting. Are they happy in their marriage? Well', Mill says, 'we simply don't know, because women are in a position of legal subjection to men, and they have been brought up to think this is their whole life, and therefore they don't dare to object, and they don't even have it in their minds to object'.

Now notice he doesn't say here we know that women would protest if they could, he's saying that because of their legal subjection, the fact that they are not protesting is not a proof that they don't want to protest, so he says we just can't tell. So that's his second point. And his third point is even stronger. He says, 'If men are so confident that women are really happy in this state of subjection, why do they go to all this trouble to make a whole mass of laws preventing them from having any other occupation, keeping them tied down to the man when they're in marriage, when the whole idea is that that's where they want to be? If women wanted to be there you wouldn't need all these laws'. So Mill doesn't have to claim at any point that women really don't like marriage, or that they wouldn't be there, he just says, 'your claim can't justify this absurd set of laws'.

Nigel Warburton

So again it's the logic that he's concentrating on?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

It's the logic. He's got this three stage refutation of their argument, where he doesn't say at any point 'I know more about women than you do, I know more about the facts of how politics works'. He just says 'your own views do not allow you to reach this conclusion'.

Nigel Warburton

So that's what you meant by calling him agnostic on the nature of women?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

He's an official agnostic. I mean, it's clear that Mill thinks that the Victorian view of women is absurd, it's clear, but he doesn't need that for his argument. One of the interesting things about *The Subjection of Women* is how wide ranging it is. I tend to concentrate on the logical bits because they're so nicely decisive, but really what he's doing is trying to dislodge a deeply held set of prejudices, and it's quite interesting to see at the very start of the book he gives an account of how much he knows he has to overcome in the way of prejudices, and how useless it is to argue if people have a strong enough emotional feeling about it. But the way he goes about the argument is to say everything he can think of that would try and dislodge people's prejudices. So he goes into speculations about the origin of the subjection of women, he talks about women in different periods of history and different parts of the world because Mill worked for The East India Company so he knew quite a lot about India, and he would talk from his own knowledge about the success of women as rulers, for instance, even when they had a very inadequate education, he thought they had a natural ability to rule. He also speculated about ways in which women might be naturally different from men, without being inferior to them. But he doesn't use those as any essential part of his argument, those just things to try and loosen the prejudices.

Nigel Warburton

Now philosophers are often accused of living in ivory towers and not getting engaged with the real world. Mill wasn't like that at all, was he?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards:

Mill could not have been less like that, in fact one of the most modern things about Mill is the way when the 1867 Reform Act was going through, which extended the franchise considerably, including a lot more men in the vote, Mill tried to get 'persons' substituted for 'men' in the legislation. He wanted women to have the vote because he said that, 'Whatever conditions you apply to the franchise for men, this is a difficult political question that's quite hard to decide who should have the franchise, but whatever you decide about men you should apply the same to women, there's not a shadow of a reason', he said, 'for treating women differently'. Another rather nice thing is that when eventually Mill could marry Harriet Taylor who had been his long time intellectual collaborator – when her husband died – he actually signed a statement saying he thoroughly disapproved of all the unjust rights that marriage would give him, and he undertook not to make any use of any of them.

Nigel Warburton

So he's practising what he preached?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

He did indeed practice what he preached.

Nigel Warburton

Do you think it's fair to call Mill a feminist in this book?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

I certainly think so, I think he would have called himself a feminist, it's just that the word didn't come in until quite a bit later. But he's clearly, I would have said, one of the early feminists.

Nigel Warburton

And what do you think about the idea that a man could write a feminist tract?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

Well I don't see why not, because I regard feminism as a pursuit of justice for women and it seems to me that anyone can argue about justice.

Nigel Warburton

Some of Mill's critics writing today think that he didn't go far enough with his feminism.

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

A lot of feminists now say that Mill was nothing like radical enough because he seemed to take it for granted that women would keep their traditional role in the household, but it's important that Mill never said that this was what they ought to do or they ought to be forced to do it. He just thought that this would be the natural division of labour. And I think present day feminists, with their washing machines and goodness knows what else, tend to forget what the reality of domestic life would have been at a time when people had large families. Very few domestic appliances and a huge amount of domestic work to do. It really was a very heavy labour, and it would have been quite impracticable for any woman who didn't have to, to go out to work.

Nigel Warburton

On the theme of employment, Mill has quite a lot to say about excluding women from certain sorts of professions. For instance, he says that it's ridiculous to have laws prohibiting women from doing certain professions if they're incapable of doing them anyway because they wouldn't be able to do them. But another of his arguments is about the average woman if the average woman is weaker than a man, does it follow that women shouldn't be allowed into certain professions which require strength, for example?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

Well, of course not, because as he says, if a job requires strength there will be a requirement of strength to get into that job or only the strong will succeed at it so you don't need a rule to keep the women out. In fact he runs the logic of the exclusion of women from male professions in exactly the same way as he runs the logic of women and the subordination to men in marriage. Because he says, 'To start with, you know perfectly well that there are women who have done all these things you say women can't do, there aren't, may not be all that many of them, but there are some', and he says also, 'It's quite striking that all the things that women are forbidden to do are things that they have proved they can do, look at these good women rulers but women are not allowed to vote'. He then says, second move, 'Even if women haven't been very successful of these things so far, that's not the slightest proof that they couldn't be because we know they've been systematically deprived of opportunity'. Once again, he's not saying he knows they can do it, he's saying his opponents don't know they can't, and they depend on that for their argument. And third, as you've just said, if men really thought that women couldn't do these things they shouldn't need all these rules to keep them out because competition would exclude them anyway. So his claim is simply, if the average woman is less good than the average man at something, in a situation of open opportunity women will do less well at that thing, but that's not a reason for not having open opportunity.

Nigel Warburton

In our discussion so far, it makes it seem as if Mill is purely negative. He's taking arguments and showing what's wrong with them, but in fact he's got an ideal of marriage within the book that he wants to put across.

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

Well this is part of his attempt to block every kind of objection. He says at the beginning of the final chapter that the justice argument should be all that anyone needs, but if anyone needs any more incentive, let us just consider how much better life would be for everybody if we got this equality of women. And he starts giving a description which is absolutely charming, of what an equal marriage would be like where you're friends and where you take it turns of being the dominant and submissive or the leader and the led, and just tries to make it seem so delightful that everybody would wonder why they liked the present state of affairs

where women were subordinate to men. So yes, indeed. This is part of his attempt to give a whole picture, a complete re-think of the position of women.

Nigel Warburton

Are you suggesting he was a little naïve perhaps?

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

Well, it may have been a little naïve. I mean Mill did not have experience of marriage for very long, his marriage with Harriet Taylor was short because she didn't become a widow until quite late on in their acquaintance. They didn't have children. And also, they were both pretty exceptional people so whether you can take this as a pattern for all sorts of marriages I don't know. But certainly he was showing that for any man of intelligence this was much better a relationship to have with a woman than one where the woman was in his power and therefore couldn't contribute, develop properly.

Nigel Warburton

Janette, thank you very much.

Janette Radcliffe-Richards

You're very welcome.