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John Stuart Mill on the Political Significance of Higher Education

Lee Ward 

Department of Political Science, Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA
Email: Lee_A_Ward@baylor.edu

Abstract

While a number of recent studies highlight John Stuart Mill's role as a "teacher of the people," his reflections upon the political significance of higher education have received relatively little attention. I argue that Mill's 1867 St. Andrews Address was both a defense of liberal education against influential arguments for religion- and science-based models of higher education, and a call for elites educated in reformed universities to shape a public vision for the construction of a polity committed to liberal principles. I conclude that Mill's St. Andrews Address can contribute to debates about the role of the university in contemporary liberal societies.

Keywords: higher education; John Stuart Mill; liberalism; religion; science; Victorian education

Several recent studies highlight John Stuart Mill's role as a "teacher of the people" in liberal societies committed to the principle of individual freedom and representative government.¹ However, his reflections on the political significance of higher education have received little attention. This is perhaps not surprising given the common impression that Mill did not see the British universities of his time as sources of progress in national life, and his well-known admonition against a government monopoly over education, which he feared would produce "despotic power" over the opinions and sentiments of the public.² It would be inaccurate, however, to conclude that Mill either dismissed the importance of university education per se or rejected the positive impact

¹See, for instance, Dana Villa, *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 255–74; and Alec Arellano, "Mill on Deference and Democratic Character," *Political Research Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (2021), 1125–36.

²See Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 72; Bruce L. Kinzer, *England's Disgrace: J.S. Mill and the Irish Question* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 160; Christopher Harvie, *The Lights of Liberalism: University Liberals and the Challenge of Democracy 1860–86* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), 39; and John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 3, *Principles of Political Economy: Books IV and V*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 974.

of educational reform on political life. Even though Mill was the product of an elaborate utilitarian pedagogy supervised by his philosopher father, James Mill, and was later the doyen of Victorian intellectuals, he famously never attended or taught in a university; thus, his relation to issues of higher education was long-standing and complicated.

In one of his earliest writings, "Reform in Education" (1834), Mill encouraged the Parliamentary Committee on National Education to imitate the "spirit of the Prussian government," a reference to the Prussian Ministry of Public Instruction's approach of working with local committees in a collaborative framework that integrated the modern research university and secondary and elementary schools into a complex, mutually supporting system of national education.³ In the article "Civilization" (1836), Mill excoriated the "existing constitution of the two Universities" in England, by which he meant both their organizational structure and intellectual ethos, for being incapable of producing minds "not the creatures of their age, but capable of being its improvers and regenerators."⁴ In this piece Mill directly correlated conservative opposition to the 1832 Reform Act with the cultural impact of "the principle which has always been the foundation of the English universities"; namely, that "our business is not to make thinkers or inquirers, but disciples."⁵ Moreover, given the sectarian character of the English universities, Mill concluded that, as a potential means of educating a political class capable of representing the entire nation, "the Universities are absolutely null."⁶ Decades later, on the eve of the university reforms of 1854 that effectively ended the Anglican monopoly over higher education in Oxford and Cambridge, Mill continued to insist that in "the English universities no thought can find place, except that which can reconcile itself with orthodoxy" as defined by these "ecclesiastical institutions."⁷

Mill applauded the reforms introduced by the 1854 Act, even going so far as to include a note in the 1859 reprint of "Civilization" indicating his satisfaction with Parliament for having exercised its "right of interference" to help reduce the sectarian character of English higher education and to modernize the curriculum by reserving more fellowships in science and math.⁸ But it was in the midst of the Irish university controversy during Mill's tenure as a member of Parliament in the mid-1860s that he was most directly involved in the politics of higher education in Victorian Britain. In the 1840s, in response to Irish Catholic and Presbyterian complaints against the Anglican control over the only university in the country, Trinity College in Dublin, the government of Prime Minister Robert Peel established the Queen's College system, with non-denominational institutions of higher education in Galway, Cork, and Belfast. However, this legislation proved to be yet another thorny aspect of Victorian-era Anglo-Irish relations that predictably was reduced to a sectarian dispute over whether to charter a Roman Catholic university or to require Catholic students to

³John Stuart Mill, "Reform in Education," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 21, *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 63–74.

⁴John Stuart Mill, "Civilization," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18, *Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 128.

⁵Mill, "Civilization," 140.

⁶Mill, "Civilization," 142–43.

⁷John Stuart Mill, "Whewell on Moral Philosophy" [1852], in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 10, *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 167–210. The quotes are on pp. 167–68, respectively.

⁸Kinzer, *England's Disgrace*, 160.

attend non-denominational schools in the Queen's College system. When the Irish university controversy roared back to life in 1866 with William Gladstone's outreach to Catholic voters as the Liberal Party leader in the House of Commons, including a proposal for reform of the Queen's College system allowing greater autonomy for institutions of Catholic higher education, Mill expressed deep concern about any attenuation of the principle of non-denominational higher education. In a March 1868 House of Commons debate, Mill even concluded that "an unsectarian education of the highest branches" of Irish society "is by far the greatest benefit we have yet conferred on that island."⁹

It was in this historical and political context that Mill offered his most important considerations on the role of higher education in liberal society in his 1867 "Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews." By the 1860s, Mill's *System of Logic* (1843) and *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) had become standard texts in British universities, and in 1865 the student body of St. Andrews in Scotland elected Mill, despite his protestations, to serve a three-year term in the largely, but not purely, honorary role of rector of the University.¹⁰ At the time a busy member of Parliament, Mill delayed performing the only obligation actually attached to this honor until some two years later. The "Inaugural Address" is both one of Mill's later works (of his major writings published in his lifetime, only *The Subjection of Women* [1869] would follow), and also his most extensive reflection upon the meaning and mission of the university. The St. Andrews Address has been characterized by commentators in various ways: as a rather disappointing and pedestrian argument for generic intellectual freedom;¹¹ as a bold appeal for incorporating the Socratic method into higher education;¹² as a stirring defense of classical education;¹³ as a formula to replicate Mill's own idiosyncratic education,¹⁴ and, on the contrary, as a critique of utilitarian ideas on education;¹⁵ and as a proposal that in scope is wildly unrealistic for any actual university curriculum.¹⁶

I propose that Mill's intention in the St. Andrews Address was more emphatically political and more directly engaged in Victorian-era debates about higher education than these commentators suppose. While Mill's call for plural voting rights for educated people as a means to improve the intelligence of the electorate is well documented,¹⁷

⁹Kinzer, *England's Disgrace*, 158.

¹⁰See Harvie, *Lights of Liberalism*, 38; and Anna Jean Mill, "The First Ornamental Rector at St. Andrews University: John Stuart Mill," *Scottish Historical Review* 43, no. 136 (Oct. 1964), 131–44.

¹¹Alan Ryan, "J.S. Mill on Education," *Oxford Review of Education* 37, no. 5 (Oct. 2011), 653–67.

¹²David Sullivan, *Education, Liberal Democracy and Populism: Arguments from Plato, Locke and Rousseau* (London: Taylor & Francis 2019), 113, 115.

¹³Philip Kitcher, "Mill, Education, and the Good Life," in *John Stuart Mill and the Art of Life*, ed. Ben Eggleston, Dale Miller, and David Weinstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 192–212; and Nicholas Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 328.

¹⁴Graham Finlay, "Mill on Education and Schooling," in *A Companion to Mill*, ed. Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 504–17.

¹⁵Francis Alexander Cavenagh, introduction to *James & John Stuart Mill on Education* (1931; repr., Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishers, 1979), xxiv.

¹⁶Alexander Bain, *John Stuart Mill. A Criticism: With Personal Recollections* (London: Longmans, Green, 1882), 126.

¹⁷Mill, "Considerations on Representative Government," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 19, *Essays on Politics and Society, Part 2*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 473–75.

what goes largely unnoticed today is his prescription in the St. Andrews Address to transform the university as an institution into an instrument of liberal statecraft.¹⁸ That is to say, Mill employed his most thorough treatment of higher education as a blueprint for the university, presenting it as one of the central institutions responsible for forming a political elite capable of molding public opinion in support of liberal politics among Britain's newly enfranchised classes.

Mill's efforts to align the academic mission of the university with the moral and social priorities of a liberal polity rested on the pivotal distinction he drew between education in the "larger sense" and education in the "narrower sense." Mill describes education in the "larger sense" as a potentially inexhaustible topic that pertains to the development of human character "with the express purpose of bringing us somewhat nearer to the perfection of our nature." This capacious notion of education as *Bildung* extends far beyond specific institutions of learning and includes the family, churches, and the wide range of associations and dialogic venues that characterize complex modern societies. Education in the "narrower sense" has a more specific social and temporal meaning as "the culture which each generation purposely gives to those who are to be its successors."¹⁹ Early in the address, Mill declares that the transmission of the "accumulated treasures of the thoughts of mankind" assumes political significance as "the stage of education which is the appointed business of a National University."²⁰ Thus, insofar as Mill identifies that the specific aim of the address is to review "every essential department of general culture" as it pertains to the university, we can interpret his purpose in delivering the address as an act of political judgment. But before we can understand how Mill came to believe the universities can contribute toward the construction of a liberal polity by enlightening the "busy and imperfectly prepared" public, we must try to situate the St. Andrews Address in the larger Victorian period debates about higher education.²¹

Situating the St. Andrews Address

As one commentator aptly expressed, in the 1850-1870 period "the theory and practice of liberal education was exposed to the most serious examination of which the Victorian mind was capable."²² The political impact of this period of self-examination was profound, as by the latter part of the nineteenth-century the post-reform old universities would come to have effectively "nationalized" the education of the governing elite.²³ Mill was very much part of the conversation in this period.

Mill's involvement in these debates fell into two distinct categories: the first had to do with the debates sparked by the conflict in England between supporters of

¹⁸An important exception is Nancy Hirschmann, *Gender, Class, and Freedom in Modern Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 253.

¹⁹Mill, "Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 21 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 217, 218.

²⁰Mill, "Inaugural Address," 248, 218.

²¹Mill, "Inaugural Address," 220, 232.

²²Ralph White, "The Anatomy of a Victorian Debate: An Essay in the History of Liberal Education," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 34, no. 1 (Feb. 1986), 38.

²³Harvie, *Lights of Liberalism*, 14.

scientific education and defenders of religious education, and the second related to perennial higher education debates in Scotland between the traditionalists and so-called Anglicizers. As we shall see, Mill's account of liberal education strove to navigate a course between what he took to be a Scylla and Charybdis dilemma—of religious sectarianism on the one hand, and scientific determinism on the other.

At the time, the most prominent exponent of the utilitarian theory of higher education, with its emphasis on scientific, practical education, arguably was Herbert Spencer. Spencer is today best known (perhaps infamously) as the chief popularizer of the social application of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, but he was also a political liberal who served alongside John Stuart Mill in 1866 on the Jamaica Committee, created to call attention to human rights abuses under British rule in the colony.²⁴ In an early work, a pamphlet titled *The Proper Sphere of Government* (1843), Spencer excoriated the prevailing model of classical education as an instrument of "spiritual bondage" in which "men neglect the rich stores of real knowledge within their grasp, to follow fashion over the barren waste of grammars and lexicons."²⁵ Spencer further developed his educational theory in a series of writings during the 1850s, collected as a single volume in 1861 entitled *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical*, in which he attacked the regnant customs in English higher education. For Spencer, the basic problem is that "our universities" impart an intellectual spirit that celebrates the ornamental and neglects the useful, and thus higher education has "but little bearing upon action ... while knowledge aiding the arts of life have a very subordinate place."²⁶ Spencer's conception of the kind of knowledge that truly "concerns the business of life" is fundamentally scientific.²⁷ Simply put: "What knowledge is of most worth?—the uniform reply is—Science."²⁸ By "worth," Spencer meant practical utility—not artistic beauty—inasmuch as "to all such as are occupied in the production, exchange, or distribution of commodities, acquaintance with Science is in some of its departments, of fundamental importance."²⁹

Science is not, however, restricted to a calculation of economic benefits. For Spencer, the primary importance of scientific education is epistemological in that it trains the rational faculties to operate in a "methodic way."³⁰ That is to say, science is not just a technical field of study, but rather reflects a critical approach to reality that makes constant appeal to individual reason and never accepts truth claims "on authority alone."³¹ Science is, then, foundational and accordingly, the learning of science should

²⁴Harvie, *Lights of Liberalism*, 126-27.

²⁵Herbert Spencer, "The Proper Sphere of Government," in *Spencer: Political Writings*, ed. John Offer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 38-39. In terms of higher education, utilitarianism found concrete institutional expression in the establishment of the University of London in the 1820s, which did not grant a degree in theology and became in time a secular alternative to the Anglican establishments at Oxford and Cambridge.

²⁶Herbert Spencer, "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?" in *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects* (London: Dent, 1911), 2.

²⁷Spencer, "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?," 20.

²⁸Spencer, "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?," 42.

²⁹Spencer, "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?," 19.

³⁰Spencer, "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?," 6.

³¹Spencer, "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?," 40.

be systematic. Spencer thus insists, ostensibly following Francis Bacon, that a “rational curriculum” presupposes the “relative value of knowledges” and the exalted status of science.³² This means that the entire approach to higher education must be transformed to reflect the priority of science. Spencer tended to view the humanities as at best a “pleasing luxury.”³³ In practical terms, this required removing some of the traditional subjects of classical education from the curriculum entirely, and radically reinterpreting others to reflect the scientific basis of all knowledge per se. For instance, history as taught in English universities, with its focus on battles and court intrigue, “has not the remotest bearing on our actions.”³⁴ Similarly, Spencer questioned the importance of fine art as part of higher education by rejecting the notion that “aesthetic culture” is a “fundamental requisite to human happiness.”³⁵ While Spencer recognized the usefulness of language study as a way to prepare young people for “the duties of life,” his concern for utility compelled him to largely abandon classical education and adopt “training in which the modern languages shall have a share.”³⁶ Presumably, French or German better prepare English students for the “duties of life” than Greek or Latin.

The most influential expression of the view advocating the religious basis of higher education in Victorian Britain was undoubtedly that of John Henry Newman. The political context of Newman’s masterpiece, *The Idea of a University* (1853), was his involvement in establishing a Catholic university in Dublin during the early phase of the Irish university controversy in the 1850s. Mill was familiar with the contentious disputes arising from the opposition of English Catholic leaders to the creation of the National Board School system in the Elementary Education Act of 1870 and, of course, Mill himself played a part as a member of parliament during the later phase of the Irish university controversy, when changes to the Queen’s College system rocked the Gladstone Ministry in 1866–1867.³⁷ But the intellectual significance of this debate extended beyond the contours of Britain’s sectarian education policy.

So influential was Newman’s treatment of the university that, arguably, the observations of other major figures in the Victorian higher education debate, including John Stuart Mill, can “legitimately be seen, even where they were not consciously intended, as responses to the kinds of claims Newman staked out,” as one commentator wrote.³⁸ Newman was the mirror image of Spencer, insofar as theology was for Newman what science was for Spencer—namely, the central element of higher education. As Newman explains: “Religious thought is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge.”³⁹ While the university is structurally independent of the

³²Spencer, “What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?” 6.

³³Richard Silberman, “Herbert Spencer on Education—Prophet or False Prophet?” *Journal of Education* 184, no. 2 (2003), 85–122, 110.

³⁴Spencer, “What Knowledge is of Most Worth?” 10, 26.

³⁵Spencer, “What Knowledge is of Most Worth?” 30.

³⁶Spencer, “What Knowledge is of Most Worth?” 84.

³⁷For the response of English Catholic leaders to the education reforms of the mid-nineteenth century, see Eric G. Tenbus, “Defending the Faith through Education: The Catholic Case for Parental and Civil Rights in Victorian Britain,” *History of Education Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (August 2008), 442–43, 449.

³⁸White, “Anatomy of a Victorian Debate,” 41.

³⁹John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1853; repr., London: Aeterna Press, 2015), 55.

Church, Newman claims, “practically speaking, it cannot fulfill its object duly ... without the Church’s assistance.”⁴⁰ While his audience may have mainly been middle-class Catholics in Ireland, the group from whom the new Catholic university would most probably recruit students and who were naturally concerned specifically about higher education’s relation to the Catholic Church, Newman’s conception of the university as an agent of the Church teaching extended to the debate about higher education’s general purpose. Newman objected vehemently to the separation of religion and education embedded in the belief that places “teaching secular knowledge in the University Lecture Room, and remanding religious knowledge to the parish priest, the catechism, and the parlour.”⁴¹ For him, theology was the fundamental discipline through which “all branches of knowledge are connected together.”⁴² In his “high theological view of the university,” it was an “intellectual absurdity” to have “so-called universities” (such as the utilitarian University of London) that do not foreground theological studies.⁴³ But it is in terms of the embattled existence of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland that this “theological view of the university” assumed special urgency: “If the Catholic Faith is true, a University cannot exist externally to the Catholic pale, for it cannot teach Universal knowledge if it does not teach Catholic theology.”⁴⁴

Newman advanced theology as the master subject that provides the rubric for understanding the value of all the other academic disciplines. The closest relationship among subjects is, not surprisingly, that of theology and philosophy: “University teaching without Theology is simply unphilosophical.”⁴⁵ In a clear bow to the Catholic tradition of Thomas Aquinas, Newman embraced classical philosophy: “While we are men, we cannot help, to a great extent, being Aristotelians, for the great Master does but analyze the thoughts feelings, views, and opinions of humankind,” but, he hastened to add, “granting Theology is a real Science, we cannot exclude it, and still call ourselves philosophers.”⁴⁶ Philosophy and education more generally are not driven by utility, and do not aim toward “the increase in physical enjoyment and social comfort.”⁴⁷ Rather, the unity of knowledge hinges on religion: “You will break up into fragments the whole circle of secular knowledge if you begin the mutilation with the divine.”⁴⁸ This predisposition in favor of a model of education directed toward the needs of the soul and development of character underlies Newman’s remonstrance to the teaching of political economy in universities, which he insisted derives from “ethical or theological objections.”⁴⁹ The university in its Catholic emanation stands, then, as a bulwark against the

⁴⁰Newman, *Idea of a University*, 1.

⁴¹Newman, *Idea of a University*, 39.

⁴²Newman, *Idea of a University*, 75.

⁴³Newman, *Idea of a University*, 17.

⁴⁴Newman, *Idea of a University*, 150.

⁴⁵Newman, *Idea of a University*, 36.

⁴⁶Newman, *Idea of a University*, 44, 82. Avery Dulles suggests Newman may have later adopted a more deferent posture to church authority in response to Pope Pius IX’s condemnation of certain forms of “rationalism” in 1854. See Dulles, *Newman* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 131.

⁴⁷Newman, *Idea of a University*, 87.

⁴⁸Newman, *Idea of a University*, 26.

⁴⁹Newman, *Idea of a University*, 68–69.

fixation on supposed “useful knowledge” that risks reducing all human thought into mere inputs of mechanical processes.

The St. Andrews Address also located Mill at the center of what was by then a long-standing debate about Scottish higher education. As the result of a series of Royal Commissions in the 1830s–1870s on the state of the Scottish universities, educators in the country tended to identify with one of two groups: Scottish traditionalists and so-called Anglicizers.⁵⁰ The traditionalists defended the central role of philosophy in the curriculum and supported a general education approach requiring one- or two-year foundation courses in philosophy, language, and science. Anglicizers sought to imitate the old English universities by focusing on classical education, especially ancient languages, which they believed trained the mind to work from concrete detail and rigid procedure toward mastery of the other specialized disciplines. Mill has been described as a supporter of the Scottish traditionalists because of his insistence on the importance of the study of philosophy in university curriculum.⁵¹ But, as I shall argue, this is inaccurate because in the St. Andrews Address, Mill firmly endorses both philosophic studies and the retention of classical languages, in addition to the adoption of relatively new disciplines such as physiology and political economy. That is, Mill’s liberal education bridged the divides of the Scottish higher education debate of the period.

Mill’s Defense of Classical Education

The first half of the St. Andrews Address is what one commentator calls Mill’s “counterblast to the recent attack” on classical education by Herbert Spencer.⁵² Mill and Spencer were acquaintances and shared many concerns about the problems confronting liberal societies. Mill, much like Spencer, sought to limit interventions of the state into social and economic life. Moreover, Mill unequivocally endorsed modern advances in science and technology, as he reminded his audience at St. Andrews: “Our whole working power depends on knowing the laws of the world.”⁵³ Clearly no Luddite, Mill gladly accepted the value of scientific education, but he rejected the binary character of the “great controversy” stirring the debate over higher education in Victorian Britain: “The vexed question between the ancient languages and the modern sciences and arts: whether general education should be classical—let me use a wider expression, and say literary—or scientific?”⁵⁴ To this weighty query, Mill could “only reply by the question, why not both?” For Mill, the tendency to view higher education in exclusionary terms reflects a certain lack of both imagination and ambition. Science and literature are manifestations of humans’ two core mental capacities in that “scientific education teaches us to think, and literary education to express our thoughts.”⁵⁵

⁵⁰For the classic study examining the debate between Anglicizers and Scottish traditionalists in Victorian Scotland, see George Elder Davie, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and Her Universities in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961), 26–30, 88–89.

⁵¹Anna Jean Mill, “First Ornamental Rector,” 140. See also Sheldon Rothblatt, *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), 169, 177.

⁵²Cavenagh, introduction to *James & John Stuart Mill on Education*, xvi.

⁵³Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 233.

⁵⁴Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 220.

⁵⁵Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 221.

If we need both to think and to express our thoughts, why not incorporate both forms of mental training into higher education?

Whereas Spencer made the argument to include the study of modern languages in the “rational curriculum,” Mill thought these tongues best “learnt out of school.”⁵⁶ But for Mill, ancient languages retained their valence in the university because classical literature and philosophy continued to provide “an admirable foundation for ethical and philosophical culture.”⁵⁷ Mill agreed with Anglicizers in Scotland because the “regular and complicated structure” of ancient Greek and Latin grammar helps to discipline the intellect.⁵⁸ The best preparation for acquiring modern languages is by strengthening their classical underpinning: “Universities do enough to facilitate the study of modern languages, if they give a mastery of that ancient language which is the foundation of most of them.”⁵⁹ But in another sense, Mill also supported Scottish traditionalists with his claim that classical philosophy offers a rich and distinctive perspective on the great moral and ethical questions in human experience: “The Greeks and Romans are unlike all of us [modern Europeans],” and thus provide a bracing challenge to conventional ideas, without being so culturally dissimilar as to render proficiency in their language and philosophy unrealistically demanding, even for educated people. It is not therefore too onerous a burden to read classical works in their original language. Mill thus concluded that classical education is valuable even if only for focusing the too easily self-satisfied modern mind on diverse, accessible, and yet complex works that inspire the intellect toward “enlightening and liberalizing pursuits.”⁶⁰

Mill did not, however, argue for the superiority of ancient knowledge *tout court* over modern arts and sciences. Rather, he assured his Scottish audience that in crucial respects he was very much a committed modern: “I consider modern poetry to be superior to ancient, in the same manner, though in a less degree, as modern science.” Remarkably, in contrast to Spencer’s emphasis on modern scientific methods, Mill asserted the great improvement in human knowledge related not solely, or even primarily, to scientific progress, but as much to a heightened awareness of a level of “meditative self-consciousness” and the edgy, “brooding” character of modern individuals revealed by contemporary psychology. Modern arts and sciences have uncovered “depths in the human soul which Greek and Romans did not dream.” But Mill’s endorsement of the idea of historical progress and his commitment to a concept of intellectual history embedded in changing social and material realities did not make him insensible to the value of ancient idealistic philosophy. The classical thinkers, with their “perfect model,” show us at least “what excellence is, and make us desire it.”⁶¹

But how precisely does classical knowledge contribute to modern peoples’ understanding of politics through the great ethical and moral questions of the age? The key is the study of “the dialectics of the ancients”; “human invention,” in Mill’s description, “has never produced anything so valuable.” For Mill, the value of ancient dialectics

⁵⁶ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 224.

⁵⁷ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 230.

⁵⁸ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 228.

⁵⁹ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 224.

⁶⁰ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 227.

⁶¹ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 230.

extends far beyond the specific arguments of Aristotle and Plato, and instead provides higher education a model of “the way to investigate truth, on those subjects, so vastly important to us.”⁶² The dialectic model is adaptable to a variety of academic disciplines and methodological approaches. But it also allows us to remain, in Mill’s view, committed to the idea of objective truth, as he urges: “To question all things: never to turn away from any difficulty, to accept no doctrine ... without a negative criticism” does not inspire “scepticism about the reality of truth, or indifference to its pursuits.”⁶³ In contrast to Spencer’s unmistakably materialistic scientific bent, Mill offered ancient dialectics as a model for critically engaging the great moral and ethical questions that animate the humanities and social sciences. In the St. Andrews Address, he implicitly identifies this spirit of dialectical examination with the institutional structure of the university itself as it serves to integrate, however imperfectly, the various claims of knowledge made on behalf of research within the discursive platform of a comprehensive curriculum.

One of the reasons Mill rated modern poetry as a comparatively greater improvement over ancient knowledge than modern science was his elevated valuation of the science of logic, which he believed was “carried to a high degree of perfection by Aristotle” in the classical period.⁶⁴ Whereas Spencer marginalized “the most abstract science, Logic,” Mill sought to demonstrate that logic is the foundational science and the “intellectual complement of mathematics and physics.”⁶⁵ However, its contribution to knowledge acquisition is more formal than substantive: “Its function is, not so much to teach us to go right, as to keep us from going wrong.”⁶⁶ The chief virtue of logic, according to Mill, is that it trains the mind to identify and operationalize formal rules, and in this way, it is “the great dispenser of hazy and confused thinking.”⁶⁷ Mill cannot resist observing that even the arch-empiricist “Lord [Francis] Bacon” had the good sense to recognize that practice alone is “not sufficient without principles and rules.”⁶⁸ For Mill, reducing all knowledge à la Spencer into epiphenomena of the scientific method undermines our sense of the role that the university, with its manifold departments and intellectual foci, ideally can play in building upon the rich and complex theoretical foundations of academic study.

This does not mean that Mill rejected the value of scientific education per se. But, in terms of the mission of the university, he did not value the practical effects of scientific knowledge so much as the role studying science plays in training the mind, and even building character: “As classical literature furnishes the most perfect types of the art of expression, so do the physical sciences those of the art of thinking.” Mill singles out mathematics for particular praise inasmuch as it can be applied to astronomy and “natural philosophy” in order to produce the “most complete discovery of reasoning.”⁶⁹

⁶² Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 229.

⁶³ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 230.

⁶⁴ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 238.

⁶⁵ Spencer, “What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?,” 15; Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 238.

⁶⁶ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 238.

⁶⁷ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 239.

⁶⁸ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 240.

⁶⁹ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 234.

Mill valued the inductive methodologies that provide the empirical building blocks of knowledge: “All men do not affect to be reasoners, but all profess, and really attempt, to draw inferences from experience.”⁷⁰ Mill identifies the university as perhaps the unique institutional venue equipped to forge the “union of induction and deduction,” in which, for example, a program of study involving the basic principles of human psychology can be examined (Mill lauds the “brilliant success” of such a program at Scottish universities) alongside the elements of a “Philosophy of History” through which students can be initiated into “the cause and explanations ... of the past life of mankind in its principal features.”⁷¹

In the years following Mill’s St. Andrews Address, Spencer expressed resentment at being, as he perceived, the object of Mill’s criticism. He pointedly contended that despite their efforts, Mill and “the Utilitarians generally” were unable to illuminate the “connexions between conduct and consequence” because they did not engage in “that study of physical science at large which conduces to an ever-present and vivid consciousness of cause.”⁷² Indeed, clearly still smarting decades after the address, Spencer complained that Mill’s expressed concern that “the Classics” were in danger of “being over-ridden by Science” was rather unfair: “Considering that Science was but just beginning to raise its head, and to obtain a grudging recognition in the high places of learning, it seemed to me the note of alarm was scarcely called for.”⁷³

Regardless, Mill’s call to arms in defense of classical works spoke directly to his concern that the denizens of the modern university would forget that its primary mission was not practical training, but the transmission of an intellectual culture that allows a liberal society to maintain and hopefully progress “the level of improvement which has been attained.”⁷⁴

Mill’s Defense of Secular Education

Mill was sympathetic to several of the main features of Newman’s idea of the mission of the university. They agreed that higher education should not include practical, professional training. They also both expressed concern about the risks of academic overspecialization and had serious reservations about the hegemony of science in the revised curriculum. They disagreed profoundly, however, on the question whether university education should be religious or secular in nature. Long before the St. Andrews Address, Mill’s attitude toward education had always skewed in favor of a secular approach. As he related in his *Autobiography*, Mill was “one of the very few examples, in this country [England], of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it. I grew up in a negative state with relation to it.”⁷⁵

In the latter portions of the St. Andrews Address, Mill probed the relation between religion and the universities and reached the conclusion that “it is beyond their power

⁷⁰Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 236.

⁷¹Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 237, 242, 225.

⁷²Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*, vol. 2 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), 89–90.

⁷³Spencer, *Autobiography*, 156.

⁷⁴Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 218.

⁷⁵Mill, “The Autobiography,” in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 1, *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. J. M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 45.

to educate morally or religiously.”⁷⁶ In stark contrast to Newman, Mill advanced a highly privatized conception of religious and moral instruction: “It is the home, the family, which gives us the moral or religious education we really receive.”⁷⁷ These kinds of activities are beyond the sphere of, and are inaccessible to, higher education. Mill’s endorsement of the quintessentially liberal idea of state neutrality toward religion seems to situate the university in the public realm, or at least as a civil society institution much more political in nature than churches or the private family. Thus, Mill declares: “The only really effective religious education is the parental—that of home and childhood.”⁷⁸ Notably, Mill does not exclude the possibility that the university may exercise a certain “moral or religious influence,” but this consists less in any express teaching “than in the pervading tone of the place,” which imbibes a sense of duty and moral seriousness drawn from acknowledging that “all knowledge is chiefly a means to worthiness of life.”⁷⁹

This tone of moral gravity is exemplified by what Mill identified as “the ethical teacher.”⁸⁰ In contrast to the explicitly sectarian mission of Newman’s theologically centered university, Mill’s “ethical teacher” understands it is not his or her duty to impose one’s moral judgment on pupils. Mill is happy to concede that “the various Churches, established and unestablished” are fully entitled to train their clergy and teach their doctrines as they wish, but this religious education has no place in the university: “The proper business of an University is different, not to tell us from authority what to believe, and make us accept the belief as a duty, but to give us information and training, and help us to form our belief in a manner worthy of intelligent beings.”⁸¹ By definition, the professor in an “ecclesiastical institution” cannot be an “ethical teacher” because, as Mill explained in an 1852 essay, “of what value is the opinion on any subject, of a man of whom everyone knows that by his profession, he must hold that opinion.”⁸²

As a sitting member of Parliament when the Irish university question that had first prompted Newman’s intervention in the early 1850s roared back to life in 1866, Mill was keenly attuned to the political ramifications for a society trapped in the “labyrinth” of theological disputations.⁸³ At St. Andrews, Mill acknowledged that theological polemics strained even the most accommodating pluralist discursive frameworks, for “religion is the subject of all others on which men’s opinions are most widely at variance.”⁸⁴ While hesitant to promote metaphysical disputes, Mill did entertain the possibility for a limited form of moral and religious instruction in the university. In keeping with the Scottish traditionalists, he welcomed the teaching of moral philosophy in universities, but he wished “it were more expository, less polemical, and above all less dogmatic” than it is typically taught. In this way, teaching moral philosophy

⁷⁶ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 247.

⁷⁷ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 248.

⁷⁸ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 249.

⁷⁹ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 248.

⁸⁰ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 249.

⁸¹ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 250.

⁸² Mill, “Whewell on Moral Philosophy,” 168.

⁸³ Kinzer, *England’s Disgrace*, 121–24.

⁸⁴ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 249.

would satisfy both the ethical demands of the educator and still be loyal to the university's mission to convey what the "best and wisest" thinkers had to say about the great subjects of religion and morals.⁸⁵ Likewise, Mill accepted that religious studies understood in historical and comparative context could also have a place in the university: "Christianity being a historical religion, the sort of religious instruction which seems to me most appropriate to an University is the study of ecclesiastical history."⁸⁶

With respect to actual teaching of theology—the core of Newman's idea of a university—Mill's position was perhaps surprisingly complicated. On one hand, he accepted for all practical purposes the dominant hold the established Church had over higher education. But Mill was encouraged that the "old English Universities," while not as enlightened as their Scottish counterparts, were at least at that time "doing better work than they have done within human memory in teaching the ordinary subjects of their curriculum."⁸⁷ This general raising of standards had, in Mill's view, allowed the emergence of a new commitment to "free and manly enquiry," and was beginning to convince English scholars that to renounce the "free use of the understanding, is to abdicate their own best privilege."⁸⁸ He even expressed some hope that the rising consciousness of academic freedom would breed a new generation of reformers within the Church of England: "Let all who conscientiously can, remain in the Church. A Church is far more easily improved from within than from without."⁸⁹ But Mill insists: "An University ought to be a place of free speculation." To those destined for the clerical profession, Mill implores them that "whatever you do, keep, at all risks, your minds open: do not barter away your freedom of thought."⁹⁰ One witness to the address recorded that this invocation of intellectual autonomy aroused "vociferous applause" from the St. Andrews theology students in attendance.⁹¹

Arguably, the only real connection between religion and Mill's idea of the university is the role higher education can play in the development of taste and affects conducive to spiritual reflection. Insofar as the university remains committed to teaching the classical humanities, it will continue to foster the "natural affinity between goodness and cultivation of the Beautiful." For Mill, the idea of "perfect beauty" informs the education of "human character," much as the poetic ideal seeks to improve nature itself.⁹² In art, Mill explains, "perfection is itself the object."⁹³ Mill's openness to the possibility of transcendence of the material realm foreshadows the argument of his posthumously published "Utility of Religion" (1874), in which he endorsed a non-supernatural "Religion of Humanity" that encourages cultivating "unselfish feelings,"

⁸⁵ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 248.

⁸⁶ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 249.

⁸⁷ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 250. See also Kinzer, *England's Disgrace*, 160; and Ryan, "Mill on Education," 664.

⁸⁸ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 250.

⁸⁹ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 251.

⁹⁰ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 250.

⁹¹ Finlay, "Mill on Education and Schooling," 514.

⁹² Mill, "Inaugural Address," 255.

⁹³ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 258.

and whose saints include Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, George Washington, and Jesus.⁹⁴ The ideal university, which keeps classical knowledge alive within the context of an ever-deepening institutional norm of respect for academic freedom, uncovers the true meaning of Goethe's purported dictum that "the Beautiful is greater than the Good, for it includes the Good, and adds something to it."⁹⁵ That is, as the "University supplies as a preparation for the higher uses of life" the program of liberal education, it imparts understanding of the scientific, practical good (what is real), but it does so within the broader epistemological framework of the ideal of beauty, or "perfection in execution."⁹⁶

These "higher uses of life," while products of secular education, are not entirely insensible to the appeal of inspired wisdom. Indeed, Mill includes an unmistakable reference to the Gospel of Luke 8:6, in which he, echoing the Evangelist, warns that "the good seed may not fall on a rock, and perish without reaching the soil in which it might have germinated and flourished."⁹⁷ In Mill's idea of the university, the institutional mission is to develop the mental faculties of the student so as to engage critically with both conventional opinion and the store of collected wisdom from the classical tradition, as well as modern natural science. The closing sections of the St. Andrews Address thus recall the opening lines, in which Mill boldly proclaims that the "express purpose" of the university is to bring human beings "somewhat nearer to the perfection of our nature."⁹⁸ This perfection, however, defies purely theological or scientific explanation inasmuch as the reward for liberal higher education is not "earthly or heavenly" gain, but rather lies in "the deeper and more varied interest you will feel in life."⁹⁹

Building a Liberal Public

In a series of early articles from 1831 entitled "The Spirit of the Age," Mill expressed his view that it is a primary social and political fact that elites dedicate themselves to education, and the common people defer to their natural leaders.¹⁰⁰ But in periods such as the one in which he delivered the St. Andrews Address, what he calls an "age of transition," the general public lose their faith in educated elites and have recourse to largely uneducated individual judgment, generally to deleterious effects.¹⁰¹

I propose that in the address, delivered thirty-six years later, we witness Mill's mature effort to restore the political connection between educated elites and the public through

⁹⁴Mill, "The Utility of Religion," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 10, 420-22. See also Robert Devigne, *Reforming Liberalism: J.S. Mill's Use of Ancient, Religious, Liberal, and Romantic Moralities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 143-45.

⁹⁵Mill, "Inaugural Address," 255. The editor of volume 21 of Mill's *Collected Works*, John M. Robson, suggests that this reference is more probably attributable to Thomas Carlyle (255).

⁹⁶Mill, "Inaugural Address," 256.

⁹⁷Mill, "Inaugural Address," 257.

⁹⁸Mill, "Inaugural Address," 217.

⁹⁹Mill, "Inaugural Address," 257.

¹⁰⁰For a good discussion about the "Spirit of the Age" articles, see Hirschmann, *Gender, Class, and Freedom*, 250-52.

¹⁰¹Mill, "The Spirit of the Age," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 22, *Newspaper Writings, Part I*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 238-43.

the reformed university. That is, Mill sought to mobilize public opinion under the leadership of liberal elites educated along the lines laid out at St. Andrews. On one level, the goal of higher education is deeply personal, as it seeks to produce “capable and cultivated human beings.”¹⁰²

There is also, however, a more distinctly social, and even civic, dimension to the mission of the university outlined in the St. Andrews Address. While Jürgen Habermas astutely attributed to Mill’s *On Liberty* a pivotal role in the articulation of “the idea of the discursive public sphere,” I would add that the later St. Andrews Address situated the reformed university at the heart of this liberal political project.¹⁰³ Indeed, the address practically concludes with Mill’s appeal to the transcendent value of higher education: “All merely personal objects grow less valuable as we advance in life; this [the intellectual and moral development produced by higher education] not only endures but increases.”¹⁰⁴ I now want to illuminate Mill’s vision in the address of how higher education can support liberal politics.

An important theme throughout the St. Andrews Address is the idea of leadership. Mill defined “liberal education” as “the education of all those who are not obliged by their circumstances to discontinue their scholastic studies at a very early age.”¹⁰⁵ The privileged classes have access to instruction that combines general education with a degree of technical expertise. Mill was convinced that it is this combination of intellectual breadth and proficiency in their “principal occupation” that produces a “body of cultivated intellects” capable of fashioning an “enlightened public.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, the true benefits of extending education across society is that it generates a broader public capable of recognizing those with superior knowledge and accepting their leadership. Mill states: “The elements of the more important study being widely diffused, those who have reached the higher summits find a public capable of appreciating their superiority, and prepared to follow their lead.”¹⁰⁷ Mill is not, however, naive about the challenges posed in modern times, when liberal elites need to address “almost all writings to a busy and imperfectly prepared public.”¹⁰⁸ But the civic promise of modern higher education rests on the capacity to form “minds capable of guiding and improving public opinion on the greater concerns of practical life.”¹⁰⁹

Liberal statecraft is not partisan, in Mill’s view, and rather aspires to the elimination of civically debilitating factionalism. Mill cautions the St. Andrews students against becoming the “blind follower of a party.” Rather the role of educated elites in liberal society is to introduce modes of thought and discourse into public life that blend “general knowledge of the leading facts of life, both moral and material” with specialized knowledge “disciplined in the principles and rules of sound thinking.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰² Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 218.

¹⁰³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1996), 171. The quote is on p. 474.

¹⁰⁴ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 257.

¹⁰⁵ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 232.

¹⁰⁶ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 223.

¹⁰⁷ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 223–24.

¹⁰⁸ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 232.

¹⁰⁹ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 224.

¹¹⁰ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 224.

Mill seems confident that the culture of intellectual freedom exemplified in the university will encourage a broader societal norm cherishing critical reason with respect to “conflicting opinions which are offered to us as vital truths.”¹¹¹

In particular, Mill highlighted the complex relation between science and politics. Mill recognized that the greater part of scientific knowledge and discovery would remain the preserve of the few, but he insisted that it was in the national interest to promote a basic scientific education “diffused among the public”; otherwise, “they never know what is certain and what is not, or who are entitled to speak with authority and who are not.”¹¹² Mill asserts that while all human beings can in principle “ascertain truths,” in practice most people “do it very ill, and could not get on at all were we not able to fall back on others who do it better.”¹¹³ Liberal statecraft requires inculcating a degree of civic responsibility among the educated classes to defend against the danger that the general public will “either have no faith at all in the testimony of science, or are the ready dupes of charlatans and imposters.”¹¹⁴ The classically trained political representative and civil administrator provides, then, a salutary counterweight to the authority of the Spencerian natural scientist. Without this guidance, Mill feared the public might become “mere instruments” in the hands of scientific experts, “who would reduce us to slavery” by subjecting the practices of self-government entirely to the dictates of scientific authorities.¹¹⁵

How did Mill foresee the practical application of these principles in the liberal university? The St. Andrews Address approaches this question by way of highlighting aspects of the university curriculum that have important public and civic dimensions. The first subject he discusses in this way is physiology. Physiology was also a feature of Spencer’s science-based program of study, but for Mill its utility is less as a supplement to biology, and more as a foundation for enlightened public policy.¹¹⁶ Mill claims that the “science of the laws of organic and animal life” ought not to be the “exclusive property of a particular profession,” because it has such manifest public value.¹¹⁷ Some degree of familiarity with the basic elements of physiology should be a part of any public official’s education, for in Mill’s view, “there is hardly one among us who may not, in some position of authority, be required to form an opinion and take part in public action on sanitary subjects,” especially “the true conditions of health and disease.” Mill affirms that physiology offers the best introduction to “the difficult questions of politics and social life” precisely because this aspect of the natural sciences is the “most serviceable” to the public, being “the nearest” concern to practically everyone.¹¹⁸

Another subject of university education to which Mill ascribed great public significance was the study of international law. Mill contended that a university curriculum teaching the outlines of the “civil and political institutions” of one’s country has a direct

¹¹¹ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 234.

¹¹² Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 233.

¹¹³ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 234.

¹¹⁴ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 233.

¹¹⁵ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 234.

¹¹⁶ Spencer, “What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?,” 14.

¹¹⁷ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 240.

¹¹⁸ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 241.

bearing on the individual's understanding of the "duties of citizenship," not to mention providing liberal elites with some immunity against the totalizing tendencies of "any complete philosophy either of politics or of history," presumably in the Hegelian or Marxist mold.¹¹⁹ Mill extends this treatment of civil law into an argument for the value of international law, about which he professes: "I decidedly think [international law] should be taught in all universities, and should form part of all liberal education," not to be limited to lawyers and diplomats but extending "to every citizen."¹²⁰ As the public becomes ever more truly sovereign over the international conduct of nations, Mill's liberal university would help familiarize the public with "the established rules of international morality" essential to "the duty of every nation."¹²¹

While Mill eschewed Newman's argument about the direct unity between aesthetics and theology, he did point toward a view of aesthetic culture consistent with the cultivation of a certain kind of moral sympathy conducive to liberal ideals of tolerance and citizenship. Mill defines the aesthetic branch of knowledge as "the culture which comes through poetry and art, and may be described as the education of the feelings, and the cultivation of the beautiful." He insists that even if aesthetics is "subordinate" to moral and intellectual education, it is nonetheless "barely inferior to them."¹²² Mill valorizes the power of poetry and song to forge affective bonds of social sympathy, and even civic solidarity, judging that the patriotic songs of the writer Thomas Moore have done more to establish Irish national identity than all of the speeches of parliamentary leaders such as Henry Grattan.¹²³ The study of poetry potentially provides liberal statecraft with a political vernacular with which to speak to the moral sentiments of ordinary people. But perhaps the primary importance of aesthetic education is as an antidote to certain features of the British character, especially "commercial money-getting business, and religious Puritanism." Whereas among "Continental nations" virtue and goodness are generally thought to be matters of sentiment, he relates that among the British, "they are almost exclusively an affair of duty." Thus, "one of the commonest types of character" in Britain is the individual whose ambition is almost entirely self-regarding, directed to enriching himself and his family. For Mill, higher education can play a pivotal role in refashioning national character by cultivating a cultural appreciation for beauty that renders it pleasant to make the good of one's "fellow-creatures or of his country an habitual object."¹²⁴ That is: "If we wish men to practice virtue, it is worth while trying to make them love virtue."¹²⁵

In contrast to the puritanical tendencies that he thought were displayed among British people, Mill proposed a kind of higher education that combined cultivation of both "the conscience and the sentiments."¹²⁶ Poetry and song help individuals in

¹¹⁹ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 245 and 244, respectively.

¹²⁰ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 246.

¹²¹ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 246–47.

¹²² Mill, "Inaugural Address," 251.

¹²³ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 252.

¹²⁴ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 253. For Mill on national character, see John Stuart Mill, "Considerations on Representative Government," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 19, *Essays on Politics and Society*, Part 2, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1977), 546–52.

¹²⁵ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 253.

¹²⁶ Mill, "Inaugural Address," 253.

liberal society “learn to respect [themselves] only so far as [they] feel capable of nobler objects.” The focus of those “nobler objects” is, for Mill, to reinforce the mental habits produced by “the unselfish side” of human nature that allow individuals to identify one’s joy and grief “with the good or ill of the system of which we are a part.”¹²⁷ This feeling of solidarity in a liberal society broadly committed to individual freedom seems to require both the moral and intellectual elevation of the middle and working classes, in addition to the civic engagement of educated elites.

It is important, however, to recognize that Mill is careful in the St. Andrews Address not to succumb to unearned optimism about the transformative power of beauty and aesthetics. He offers a realistic assessment of the limitations on liberal politics, which is often compelled toward messy compromises. The political science Mill advocates for inclusion in higher education requires the “union of induction and deduction,” because “no political conclusions of any value for practice can be arrived at by direct experience.” The university cannot teach specific political experience, but “true political science” has an *a priori* dimension that allows insights deduced from tendencies known through “our general experience of human nature.”¹²⁸ The foundation of Mill’s political science coexists with his insistence that resolving the great questions hiding in the “sea of metaphysics” is not the proper object of higher education for most students. Apart from a select philosophical few, it suffices that “liberal education” provide only a summary view of what has been said on these abstract, speculative matters.¹²⁹

The “great interests of mankind as moral and social beings” are not philosophical subjects such as metaphysics, but rather “ethics and politics.”¹³⁰ Mill’s identification of political knowledge as a combination of induction and deduction means that in some sense, given the existing state of human knowledge, politics is not yet fully a science. While political knowledge may not yet provide ready-made conclusions, Mill recognizes the value of a “scientific spirit” applied to discover in particular instances the truths applicable to a given case. Mill does not dismiss the possibility of an objective science of politics, but he denies that any set of current political opinions can claim the “authority of established science.”¹³¹ At most, then, political science can help establish a common methodology to integrate various investigations into the “principal facts” of politics and society.¹³² But the notable exception to Mill’s general skepticism toward an authoritative science of politics is political economy, which he proclaims is the study approaching “nearer to the rank of a science ... than anything else in politics yet does.”¹³³ To those who defame political economy for being “unfeeling,” Mill responds, “If you are not selfish or hard-hearted already, Political Economy will not make you so.”¹³⁴

¹²⁷ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 254.

¹²⁸ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 237.

¹²⁹ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 243.

¹³⁰ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 243 and 244, respectively.

¹³¹ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 244.

¹³² Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 224.

¹³³ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 245.

¹³⁴ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 254.

The St. Andrews Address concludes in a practical manner with a call to service, as Mill tells the students: “You are to be part of the public who are to welcome, encourage and help forward the future intellectual benefactors of humanity; and you are, if possible, to furnish your contingent to the number of those benefactors.”¹³⁵ Herein Mill affirms the unique position of the university as an institution embedded in the active political life of a people, and yet whose academic mission points beyond to the timeless “treasure of thoughts” informing the human experience.¹³⁶ The liberal university is thus reflective of the self-governing public, even as it transcends the intellectual horizons of the society that gives it support.

Conclusion

In some respects, the St. Andrews Address is clearly a snapshot capturing the development of British higher education at a particular moment in history. In Mill, a historian of ideas finds an important intellectual of the Victorian period who consciously sought to reconcile the claims of modern scientific instruction and classical learning in a holistic account of liberal higher education that engaged with elements of the debate about higher education in England, Ireland, and Scotland. Illuminating Mill’s underappreciated role in Victorian-era discourse about the university arguably encourages us to revisit Mill’s other works with an eye to discerning their impact on higher education. This re-situating of Mill’s St. Andrews Address may also suggest new directions for fruitfully examining the contributions to debates about the university during this period made by other political liberals who, like Mill, are not identified with the Oxford and Cambridge professoriate, including not only Spencer but other influential figures such as James Martineau and John Morley.

The distinctive features of Mill’s argument in the St. Andrews Address illuminate a strain of liberal thought that challenges some of our assumptions about the higher education debate at the time. Mill is the modern who revered ancient dialectics, and the ardent secularist who encouraged spiritual contemplation through poetry and the arts. The diverse strains and influences in Mill’s thought perhaps reflect the moral conflicts and aesthetic anxieties characterizing the Victorian idea of liberalism. Indeed, arguably the breadth of Mill’s proposed curriculum reflects the quintessentially classical liberal suspicion toward any authoritative claims advanced by a single master branch of study. As an exercise in recovering the philosophical archaeology of liberalism, reexamining the St. Andrews Address yields handsome rewards.

While mindful of Alan Ryan’s caution that “wrenching Mill’s *Address* out of its historical context is not fruitful,”¹³⁷ I nonetheless want to suggest that Mill’s thoughts on higher education can contribute to modern debates about the role of the university in liberal society. Undoubtedly, contemporary higher education includes professional training that Mill opposed, and the central role he ascribes to classical languages may not be easily assimilable into broader conceptions of liberal arts today. But, arguably, Mill’s reflections on liberal education can complement and enrich

¹³⁵ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 257.

¹³⁶ Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 248.

¹³⁷ Ryan, “Mill on Education,” 665.

professional education, and a broader and modernized approach to texts and languages is certainly not out of keeping with the spirit of Mill's curriculum, which highlighted modern literature as well. This is not to mention that some preliminary education in STEM seems consistent with Mill's call for a broader scientific education. However, perhaps the most glaring omission in the St. Andrews Address is his failure to mention the education of women.¹³⁸ But given that Mill was the MP who introduced the 1866 bill to extend suffrage to women, his views on women's rights were well known, and his silence on female education at St. Andrews was perhaps a deliberate omission intended to symbolize the marginalization of women.¹³⁹

The themes raised by the St. Andrews Address are more directly relevant than ever as the liberal education core of the university comes under enormous pressure to justify its continued value in the face of increasing calls from administrators and governments to prioritize the STEM subjects (à la Spencer) and to improve integration of learning outcomes into a globalized labor and skills market.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, the call for academic freedom in research and teaching central to Mill's vision of the university continues to resonate not only with respect to religious higher education, but perhaps even more significantly today in the growing concerns about dangers posed to academic freedom by the ever-greater corporatization of the contemporary university.¹⁴¹ Even if Mill's presentation of the complex institutional dynamic in the university, which strives to balance preservation of the "accumulated treasures" of past thought with the liberating activities of free inquiry and knowledge discovery, is an ideal, it is one that continues to resonate with educators in liberal democratic societies.

The St. Andrews Address also perhaps helps us to frame more clearly the debate about the university in contemporary liberal society. Critics of liberalism such as Patrick Deneen charge that it produces a "pervasive anticulture" that destroys the possibility for any real engagement with the great texts traditionally held central to liberal education.¹⁴² For his part, Alasdair MacIntyre proposes, echoing Newman, that Catholic universities may be one of the only venues left in society in which scholars and students can preserve the great traditions of moral, religious, and political thought as living experience for modern people.¹⁴³ No serious reading of Mill's St.

¹³⁸For the problematic of gender and class displayed in the "Inaugural Address," see Hirschman, *Gender, Class, and Freedom*, 254–60; and Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 95–137.

¹³⁹See Ruth Abbey et al., "Women's Human Rights, Then and Now: Symposium on Eileen Hunt Botting's *Wollstonecraft, Mill and Women's Human Rights* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016)," *Political Theory* 46, no. 3 (June 2018), 426–54.

¹⁴⁰Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education," OECD Publishing, Dec. 2006, pp. 1–4, <https://www.oecd.org/education/imhe/37126826.pdf>.

¹⁴¹See Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, encyclical letter, August 15, 1990, part I.A.1.12. See also James Turk, ed., *Universities at Risk: How Politics, Special Interests and Corporatization Threaten Academic Integrity* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 2008); and Justin Cruikshank and Ross Abbinnett, eds., *The Social Production of Knowledge in a Neoliberal Age: Debating Challenges Facing Higher Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022)

¹⁴²Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 110–11.

¹⁴³Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 173–80.

Andrews Address could possibly discern a dismissive attitude from Mill toward great books and influential ideas of the past. It is certainly regrettable Mill did not frame liberal education with a view to encouraging cultural diversity beyond the Western tradition. But while Mill's support for colonialism is well known, his attitude toward education in the colonial context was complex. In the 1830s, in his position at the East India Company, Mill opposed efforts to completely anglicize Indian education, favoring rather an inclusive approach that utilized traditional Indian learning in addition to Western knowledge.¹⁴⁴ Mill's main concern at St. Andrews was to ensure that the university preserved the cultural classics in an environment largely immune from the demands for professional training and commercial application. Insofar as Mill defended liberal education in the university primarily as a source of personal mental and character development, not on purely academic or antiquarian grounds, his ideas about curriculum would arguably welcome cultural and perspectival diversity.

But the St. Andrews Address also alerts us to the possibility of more socially substantive ethical commitments in liberal education than we sometimes assume, inasmuch as Mill—often viewed as one of the arch-individualists among classical liberals—endorsed an important role for the university in promoting public service. In his encouragement for a degree of civic engagement among the educated class of Victorian Britain, Mill thus challenges contemporary cosmopolitans to pay more attention to the fundamental beliefs and moral sentiments of their fellow citizens both inside and outside the university as we strive to achieve greater social solidarity in diverse liberal societies. Mill's vision of the liberal university may, thus, offer inspiration for thinking through the problems of liberalism and the contemporary university from intellectual and moral resources within the liberal tradition itself.

Lee Ward teaches political theory and American political thought at Baylor University. He is author of many articles on the history of political thought, has edited and coedited three volumes, and has authored four monographs, most recently *Recovering Classical Liberal Political Economy: Natural Rights and the Harmony of Interests* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022). Lee thanks Alec Arellano, Susan Shell, Jeff Church, Ali Elyasi, and the *HEQ* reviewers for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Disclosure statement. The author has reported no competing interests.

¹⁴⁴See Lynn Zastoupil, "India, J.S. Mill, and 'Western' Culture," in *J. S. Mill's Encounter with India*, ed. Martin I. Moir, Douglas M. Peers, and Lynn Zastoupil (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 111–48.