

# Tolerant Imperialism: John Stuart Mill's Defense of British Rule in India

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**Abstract:** Some critics of John Stuart Mill understand him to advocate the forced assimilation of people he regards as uncivilized and to defend toleration and the principle of liberty only for civilized people of the West. Examination of Mill's social and political writings and practice while serving the British East India Company shows, instead, that Mill is a tolerant imperialist: Mill defends interference in India to promote the protection of legal rights, respect and toleration for conflicting viewpoints, and a commercial society that can cope with natural threats. He does not think the principle of liberty is waived for the uncivilized or that the West should forcibly reshape them in its own monistic image. Mill's tolerant imperialism reflects a tension between liberty and moral development that also surfaces when Mill thinks about the scope of government in civilized societies.

## I. Critics of Mill's Imperialism<sup>1</sup>

John Stuart Mill, an undisputed spokesperson for British imperialism, was a loyal employee of the East India Company for roughly half his life. He saw England and the Company as forces of progress that spread liberal values and improved mankind's capacity for individuality and the enjoyment of higher pleasures (*Rel* 10:422, 426; *AU* 1:145–46). He praised the improvements to India's infrastructure, health care system, and educational institutions that were made possible by the Company's introduction of modernizing technologies (*CW* 30:141–48).

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<sup>1</sup>References to Mill's works will be cited as "CW volume: page." Abbreviations: *AU* (*Autobiography*, 1873: in *CW* 1); *Civ* ("Civilization," 1836: in *CW* 18); *CW* (John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson et al. [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–1991]); *NI* ("A Few Words on Non-Intervention," 1859: in *CW* 21); *NW* (John Stuart Mill, *Newspaper Writings*, eds. Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986)); *OL* (*On Liberty*, 1859: in *CW* 18); *PPE* (*Principles of Political Economy*, 1848: in *CW* 2, 3); *Rel* (*Three Essays on Religion*, 1874: in *CW* 10); *RG* (*Considerations on Representative Government*, 1861: in *CW* 19); *SpA* ("The Spirit of the Age," 1831: in *CW* 22); *U* (*Utilitarianism*, 1861: in *CW* 10).

Mill's support of British imperialism may seem puzzling given that Mill defends toleration, liberty, and experiments in living.<sup>2</sup> How could the theorist who defends a principle holding that no one could "rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so" (*OL* 18:223–24) also defend a system of imperialism seeking to compel the improvement of others? Uday Mehta finds the defense of empire by liberals like Mill "ironic," given that liberals should be committed to toleration, self-determination, and human dignity.<sup>3</sup> The two positions—support of imperialism and defense of liberal values—have been reconciled in the past by understanding Mill's principle of liberty to apply only to civilized people and Mill to support despotism for the uncivilized. On this view, Mill did not think we should be tolerant of the practices and laws of peoples, like those living in India, whom he thought uncivilized.

Mill has been sharply criticized for championing despotism for non-Western peoples. Some critics charge him with ethnocentrically seeking to impose the individualist liberal values of his England on the rest of the world and advocating cultural assimilation.<sup>4</sup> Bhikhu Parekh sees Mill as willing to use violent and intolerant forms of coercion to impose a "monistic vision of the good life."<sup>5</sup> On Parekh's view, Mill, assuming some cultures are superior to others, wants to prevent the ascendancy of an inferior group by ruling out any form of diversity that emphasizes "ethnically grounded" or "traditional and customary ways of life, as well as those centered on the community." For Parekh, Mill is a "missionary" for liberal diversity and intolerant of nonliberal ways of life.<sup>6</sup>

Some of Mill's critics trace what they perceive as Mill's intolerant imperialism to racist attitudes.<sup>7</sup> Some link it to a lack of appreciation for radically different ways of understanding the world. Mehta argues that Mill, in

<sup>2</sup>*OL* 18:260–61, 275; cf. Elizabeth S. Anderson, "John Stuart Mill and Experiments in Living," *Ethics* 102 (1991): 4–26.

<sup>3</sup>Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3–4.

<sup>4</sup>Bhikhu Parekh, "Decolonizing Liberalism," in *The End of 'isms'? Reflections on the Fate of Ideological Politics after Communism's Collapse*, ed. Alexander Shtromas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 85–103; "Liberalism and Colonialism: a Critique of Locke and Mill," in *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*, ed. Jan Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh (London: Zed Books, 1995), 81–98; and Eddy Souffrant, *Formal Transgression: J.S. Mill's Philosophy of International Affairs* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

<sup>5</sup>Parekh, "Liberalism and Colonialism," 96; cf., "Decolonizing Liberalism."

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, "Superior People: The Narrowness of Liberalism from Mill to Rawls," *Times Literary Supplement* (February 25, 1994).

<sup>7</sup>Shiraz Dossa, "Liberal Imperialism? Natives, Muslims, and Others," *Political Theory* 30 (2002): 738–45; Vinay Lal, "Organic Conservatism, Administrative Realism, and the Imperialist Ethos in the 'Indian Career' of John Stuart Mill," *New Quest* 54 (1998): 54–64; Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial*

wanting to civilize Indians, completely ignores how Indians already have an integral way of life and a system of reference giving meanings to particular things.<sup>8</sup> Mill, according to Mehta's view, in confronting Indian forms of life so different from his own, lacks the humility needed to appreciate how Indian religions and traditions provided "dwellings in which peoples lived and had deeply invested identities."<sup>9</sup> Mill, overly confident in his own claims of knowledge, infantilizes Indians without understanding them. He assumes that Indian experiences were provisional and in need of correction and completion by enlightened guides.<sup>10</sup> This criticism of Mill's defense of British imperialism draws on a broader criticism of liberalism itself as the imposition of what is seen as peculiarly Western ideas of rationality, science, and progress. In seeing India as not yet civilized, Mill imposes a certain historical approach that dismisses folk beliefs that are not rationally demonstrable, including all "unreal, impossible and supernatural events."<sup>11</sup> In Mehta's words, Mill imposes a "cosmopolitanism of reason" that rejects the unfamiliar.<sup>12</sup> Mill wants the British to civilize India, thereby imposing a particular conception of how a people ought to live and what constitutes a good life, without recognizing the validity of different conceptions. Who, ask Mill's critics, is Mill to say that one has mismanaged one's life and is in need of benevolent interference, and why should we assume that civilization will always make all humans happy?<sup>13</sup>

While Mill certainly defends imperialism and a vision of historical progress against which he finds India wanting, I shall argue that many of the above criticisms misrepresent Mill's position. Mill defends what I call "tolerant imperialism" (section 2). He does want England to civilize India, but to civilize, for Mill, does not entail forced assimilation (section 3), nor should the despotism it involves deny the rights of or use power arbitrarily against Indians (section 4). Mill's critics fail to see how Mill tolerates even illiberal practices of Indians and recognizes the importance they play in their lives

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*Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 195–96.

<sup>8</sup>Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 82.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 27–28, 21, 212.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 44, 191.

<sup>11</sup>Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 58–59; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 10, 238.

<sup>12</sup>Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 20.

<sup>13</sup>Souffrant, *Formal Transgression*, 98–99, 121; cf. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 20, 44–45; Bruce Baum, *Rereading Power and Freedom in J. S. Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Jennifer Pitts, "Legislator of the World? A Rereading of Bentham on Colonies," *Political Theory* 31 (2003): 224.

(section 5). There are limits to the toleration Mill would allow, but this reflects, I shall argue, not a lack of respect stemming from racist attitudes (section 6), but rather a tension between liberty and moral development, both of which Mill values—a tension evident not only in Mill's concept of tolerant imperialism for the East but in the liberalism he advocates for the civilized and not so civilized peoples of the West (section 7).

## II. Tolerant Imperialism

The concept of tolerant imperialism may be perplexing to those who understand imperialism as the forced intervention in the affairs of others or the imposition of one's values on another people. One must walk a fine line in articulating the concept. I shall follow Voltaire's footsteps to introduce the difficulty. Toleration, writes Voltaire, is a condition in which "each individual citizen is to be permitted to believe only what his reason tells him, be his reason enlightened or misguided, provided he threatens no disturbance to public order."<sup>14</sup> Voltaire suggests toleration requires restraint in dealing with other nations. His reason is that we are all ants in a vast universe, and it is absurd to think God cherishes only my anthill.<sup>15</sup> Yet while a policy of toleration seems to entail leaving a "peace-loving people to live unmolested," Voltaire, a strong advocate of toleration, was not averse to exposing those with a "mental disease to the influence of Reason." Reason, he notes, is gentle, humane, tolerant, and makes coercion unnecessary.<sup>16</sup> Curing the mental diseases of foreigners sounds suspiciously imperialist and hardly tolerant, hence the puzzle: Can one coherently defend both imperialism and toleration?

The difficulty eases if we recognize the elasticity of the concept "imperialism." Though said by some to be a concept that is "morally bankrupt,"<sup>17</sup> or nearly useless,<sup>18</sup> "imperialism" does have a common meaning despite its variety of usages: it involves intervention in the affairs of others,<sup>19</sup> an imposition,<sup>20</sup> or control of what is not one's own.<sup>21</sup> The imposition need not transfer sovereignty but may be informal, perhaps based on trade or investment.<sup>22</sup> Impositions or interventions may take many shapes,

<sup>14</sup>Francois Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance and other Writings*, ed. Simon Harvey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 49.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 24–25.

<sup>17</sup>Robert Johnson, *British Imperialism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), viii.

<sup>18</sup>Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993), 7.

<sup>19</sup>Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Empire and Moral Identity," *Ethics and International Affairs* 17 (2003): 51.

<sup>20</sup>Souffrant, *Formal Transgression*, 135.

<sup>21</sup>Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 7.

<sup>22</sup>John Darwin, "Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion," *The English Historical Review* 112 (1997): 614–42.

ranging from purposeful and self-interested exploitation,<sup>23</sup> imposed assimilation,<sup>24</sup> and self-aggrandizement and domination,<sup>25</sup> to beneficent trusteeship.<sup>26</sup>

An example of how a word like “imperialism” refers to very different phenomena is James Fitzjames Stephen’s distinction among senses of “conquest.” Stephen, law Member of the Governor General in Council in India, was a contemporary critic of Mill’s political theory but like Mill, a strong defender of empire, so strong that Stephen does “not envy the Englishmen whose heart does not beat high as he looks at the scarred and shattered walls of Delhi or at the union jack flying from the fort at Lahore.”<sup>27</sup> Stephen is unembarrassed to say British Empire in India rests on conquest. But before we condemn Britain, he insists we distinguish different senses of conquest. The conquests of Genghis Khan and the early Moguls often involved enslavement and “massacres on the largest scale.” Some conquests destroy well-established political institutions, religion, or property. But the conquests of the Indian Empire were entirely different. In his rose-spectacled view, “they involved no injury . . . to either person or property,” “no interference with religion, no confiscation of property, and no destruction of cherished institutions or associations.”<sup>28</sup> Given that one reason he praises British Empire is its role in the abolition of practices such as sati, it is odd for Stephen to say empire did not destroy cherished institutions. His position is explained in part by his belief that in India “the persons conquered have as a rule been in no sense whatever the chosen representatives of any race or nation, or the heads of any institutions valued by those who lived under them.” Stephen notes, for example, that in the battle of Buxar, the British defeated Nobob Vixier of Oudh, who was invading Bengal for the second time. Stephen ultimately defends the conquest: “No wars recorded in history have inflicted less humiliation on anybody” or did so much good and so little harm; the consequences of English victory have been internal peace, the substitution of law and order for oppression and anarchy, and the introduction of principles

<sup>23</sup>Philip Marshall Brown, “Imperialism,” *The American Journal of International Law* 39 (1945): 84; cf. Martin Carnoy, *Education as Cultural Imperialism* (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1974), 32–33; Sidney Morgenbesser, “Imperialism: Some Preliminary Distinctions,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 3 (1973): 11–12; Mehta, “Empire and Moral Identity,” 57; Herbert Feldman, “Aid as Imperialism?” *International Affairs* 43 (1967): 231–32.

<sup>24</sup>Darwin, “Imperialism and the Victorians.”

<sup>25</sup>Eileen Sullivan, “Liberalism and Imperialism: J. S. Mill’s Defense of the British Empire,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (1983): 608–13.

<sup>26</sup>Brown, “Imperialism,” 84; cf. Johnson, *British Imperialism*.

<sup>27</sup>Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 306.

<sup>28</sup>James Fitzjames Stephen, “Foundations of the Government of India,” *The Nineteenth Century* 80 (1883): 545.

essential to civilization. Stephen notes that “conquest” is an unpopular word—just as imperialism is today; but he thinks this rests on a “shallow and ignorant sentiment.”<sup>29</sup> For Stephen, British imperialism is “[p]eace compelled by force” so that “all sorts and conditions of men in British India” will “tolerate each other.” Without it, Muslims would tyrannize over Hindus, and Hindus over each other.<sup>30</sup>

Stephen may be entirely wrong about whether British policy was for the good of India, or the extent to which it promoted peace and toleration, or preserved cherished institutions. But we should not be halted from pursuing these claims by a definitional stop sign. If we define imperialism as uninvited use of force to assimilate others for one’s own gain, tolerant imperialism makes no sense. But the concept is intelligible and important for understanding Mill’s political thought. To pave the way for what follows, I shall require that our understanding of imperialism commits to nothing more than what is common to its variety of uses: an intervention or imposition of some form; not all forms need be intolerant. It is important to add that any imposition, even mandatory literacy or vaccination campaigns, ultimately is underwritten by the threat or use of force in some form. A theory of tolerant imperialism sets limits on but does not disavow the use of coercion.

### III. What Mill Means by “Civilizing” Barbarians

The imperialism Mill defends differs from the imperialism most historians understand Britain to have advanced in India, namely, an intervention in fact motivated by the desire of investors and merchants to plunder India, which made many people in India worse off.<sup>31</sup> For example, the Company’s enforced monopolies of rice facilitated the 1770 famine that killed a third of the population in Bengal, and wealth flowed out of India, local artisans were forced into stealing or begging, and fledgling factories were ruined in competition with factories in Britain, contributing to the “peasantization” of India.<sup>32</sup>

The imperialism Mill defends is not self-interested but beneficent, not self-aggrandizing but reluctant. Intervention in the affairs of others is done not for

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 545–47.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 557–58.

<sup>31</sup>Darwin, “Imperialism and the Victorians,” 627–34; Carnoy, *Education as Cultural Imperialism*, 83–87.

<sup>32</sup>Rajat Kanta Ray, “Indian Society and the Establishment of British Supremacy, 1765–1818,” in *Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. William Roger Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2:514–15; D. A. Washbrook, “India, 1818–1860: Two Faces of Colonialism,” in Lewis, 3:408–14; but see Keith Windschuttle, “Rewriting the History of the British Empire,” *New Criterion* 18 (2000): 5–14; and Johnson, *British Imperialism*, 30–31, 123–24.



commercial advantage but for moral purposes, such as to end slavery, reconcile belligerents, end civil wars, or intercede for mild treatment of the vanquished (NI 21:111). It is enlightened and selfless, despite the fact that English statesmen are forced to develop self-interested motives to justify intervention as these are the only ones thought credible (NI 21:111–12). Mill is not denying that there were self-interested investors who sought to benefit from England's and the Company's presence in India. His point is that the only proper justification for that presence is the improvement, the civilizing, of the native peoples.<sup>33</sup> Mill believes that civilized people have a responsibility to promote the well-being of the uncivilized. A dependency that is not yet civilized, "if held at all, must be governed by the dominant country, or by persons delegated for that purpose by it," to facilitate its "transition to a higher stage of improvement . . . . We need not expect to see that ideal realized; but unless some approach to it is, the rulers are guilty of a dereliction of the highest moral trust" (RG 19:567–68). Mill's conditional "if held at all" suggests not that the British have a moral duty to enter every territory occupied by the uncivilized and improve them, only that where they are ruling over a dependency, they must govern beneficently for the moral improvement of the subjects.<sup>34</sup>

Mill's critics see Mill, in wanting Britain to civilize Indians, as ethnocentric and intolerant of non-Western ways of life. One reason they misrepresent Mill is they misunderstand what Mill means by becoming civilized. They understand Mill, in wanting to civilize Indians, to want Indians to give up their own traditions and customs and become Western. But this is not what Mill's texts and practice indicate he means by civilizing the backward.

In his essay "Nature," Mill suggests that civilization is marked by the conquering of nature. Opposing the medieval sentiment that we should not pry with nature, Mill thinks it our duty both to master nature with technology, as when man excavates wells, drains marshes, and turns away thunderbolts (*Rel* 10:381–82), and to overcome our instincts: "Nearly every respectable attribute of humanity is the result not of instinct, but of a victory over instinct" (*Rel* 10:393; cf. 383, 402; and *PPE* 2:367). We ought to suppress bad instincts, such as the "cruelty" he finds in the East and in Southern Europe (*Rel* 10:398), and to cultivate virtues such as veracity, which is not natural, savages being "always liars" (*Rel* 10:395).<sup>35</sup>

Mill emphasizes two ways in which civilized societies overcome nature: through the establishment of the rule of law and the development of cooperative ventures (*PPE* 3:706–8; *Civ* 18:119–24). With the rule of law, members of

<sup>33</sup>Cf. George D. Bearce, *British Attitudes Toward India 1784–1858* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982), 294–95.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. James Mill, "Affairs of India," *Edinburgh Review* 16 (1810): 138–44, 154.

<sup>35</sup>Mill does, however, suggest that man "necessarily obeys the laws of nature" and cannot emancipate himself from them (*Rel* 10:379). The sense in which Mill means we must conquer nature is that we must "alter and improve Nature" (*Rel* 10:380).

society respect the rights of other members and check their private passions and desire for vengeance by leaving the resolution of conflicts to an administration of justice (RG 19:377). They are raised from “a government of will to one of law” (RG 19:395).

Civilizing also involves developing cooperative efforts.<sup>36</sup> Cooperation allows projects to be undertaken that secure against the blows of natural calamities (PPE 3:706–8). Uncivilized societies are thinly scattered; have an unequal distribution of wealth; and lack commerce, manufacturing, or agriculture. In them, each person “shifts for himself,” and there is no law or administration of justice (Civ 18:120). “The savage,” in contrast to the civilized, “cannot bear to sacrifice, for any purpose, the satisfaction of his individual will” (Civ 18:122). Mill adds that a key ingredient of civilization is sufficient security of property to render the progressive increase of wealth possible (Civ 18:120), though Mill does not think civilization precludes a socialist or communist economic system (PPE 2:203–13).

Civilizing a people, for Mill, need not entail assimilating them so they become individualists or “English.” Mill saw civilization as a mark of progress, but in his essay “Civilization,” he worried about the threat it posed to liberal values, especially to individuality. Once we are civilized—interacting and cooperating with others—we risk getting “lost in the crowd” (Civ 18:132, 136) and suffer mischiefs associated with the “growing insignificance of the individual in the mass” (Civ 18:133–34). Parekh’s criticism, that Mill’s desire to civilize the world is a desire to impose individualist values on people who may be quite satisfied as members of tightly knit communities, fails to recognize how much Mill worried that civilization would undercut Western-liberal values. Mehta, who recognizes that for Mill the savage has “salutary qualities of individual will and courage,” qualities threatened by the civilizing process, fails to draw out the significance of Mill’s critique of civilization: Mill is not imperiously desirous to make India just like England.<sup>37</sup>

One of Mill’s arguments for civilization is that it places “human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar” (PPE 3:594), and such exposure may lead to challenges of traditional practices and values. But there is a crucial distinction between proselytizing or otherwise imposing a particular ideology, religion, or way of life on people regarded as semibarbarous, so as to make them like us, and what Mill actually has in mind by civilizing them. Civilizing a society, for Mill, does not mean forcing English ideas or the Bible down the throats of the natives. Doing so, he says, would be objectionable to “Asiatic eyes” and would make England’s interference

<sup>36</sup>Cf. John Robson, “Civilization and Culture as Moral Concepts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, ed. John Skorupski (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1998), 350 and n. 16.

<sup>37</sup>Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 99–100; cf. CW 20:274.



illegitimate. Just as English Protestants would not want their children placed in a Roman Catholic seminary, we should not expect Hindus to expose their children to the dangers of being made Christian (RG 19:570; cf. CW 30:81, 125). Mill's view is not unlike Stephen's view two decades later. Stephen also defends British imperialism as a means of civilizing India, by which he means introducing institutions that promote "peace, order, the supremacy of law, the prevention of crime, the redress of wrong."<sup>38</sup> For Stephen, Britain's role is to impose a regime of toleration and not to impose Christianity, a scientific worldview, or artistic styles, cuisines, or representative government.

Pointing to Mill's definition of "civilization" is helpful in addressing the concerns of those who criticize Mill's imperialism as ethnocentric and intolerant. For Mill, civilization involves not a monistic conception of the good life but only certain conditions, such as the rule of law and the ability to combat disease, famine, and natural disasters through cooperative ventures, which allow people to pursue their own experiments in living, alone or in community.<sup>39</sup>

This will not alleviate all of the concerns of Mill's critics. Many of those who see Mill as an intolerant imperialist draw not merely on Mill's general vision of civilizing backward peoples, but on specific passages in which Mill advocates despotism and seems to deny to colonial dependents the protections afforded by the principle of liberty. I now turn to this evidence.

#### IV. Mill on Despotism and the Applicability of the Harm Principle to the Uncivilized

Mill's commitment to toleration is apparent in his defense of the liberty of individuals to do as they please no matter how erratic or odd their choices, so long as they do not harm others. His principle of liberty, or the "harm principle," is that "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant" (OL 18:223). The phrase "of a civilised community" in this passage might be taken as a limiting condition of the harm principle. Mill distinguishes between the principles that apply to civilized and to noncivilized peoples. In *On Liberty*, Mill says that his "doctrine," apparently referring to the harm principle, "is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties." He is not speaking of children or of "backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered in its nonage" (OL 18:224). In the same paragraph, he defends despotism for the uncivilized:

<sup>38</sup>Stephen, "Foundations of Government of India," 554; cf. Sir Henry Sumner Maine, *Village-Communities in the East and West* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 67–76.

<sup>39</sup>This suggests one important sense in which Mill's imperialism is intolerant: it is intolerant of dependencies that do not wish to conquer nature and commercialize.

“Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.”<sup>40</sup> Mill reaffirms this position in his essay “A Few Remarks on Non-Intervention” of 1859, the same year he published *On Liberty*. Mill writes that “it is as little justifiable to force our ideas on other people, as to compel them to submit to our will in any other respect,” but where the other party “is of a lower degree of civilization,” then “the rules of ordinary international morality” do not apply, for these rules involve reciprocity and “barbarians will not reciprocate. They cannot be depended on for observing any rules. Their minds are not capable of so great an effort”; thus it is likely “for their benefit that they should be conquered and held in subjection by foreigners” (NI 21:118–21).

It is easy to conclude from these passages that Mill is intolerant of barbarians and denies they have rights.<sup>41</sup> To our ears, being “despotic,” “conquering,” and “subjecting” are hard to reconcile with tolerating, which is why it is so important to recall the fluidity an author trying to walk a difficult line in articulating tolerant imperialism may give to the words, as in Stephen’s defense of British “conquest.” What does Mill mean in saying despotism is legitimate for barbarians? In saying they may be “conquered,” to which of the senses of conquest that Stephen articulates is Mill’s meaning closest?

Mill’s critics take him to mean Britain may force Indians to become civilized.<sup>42</sup> The problem with that position is that Mill explicitly rejects it: “I am not aware that any community has a right to force another to be civilized” (OL 18:291). Here Mill rules out the use of force by one community against any other community and not merely against other communities that are no longer semibarbarous or barbarous. Here (OL 18:291) he does not rule out force applied to savages, who live in isolation and not in communities and whom Mill regards as less advanced than slaves (RG 19:394–96; but see Civ 18:122); but he does rule out force applied to a community. Asians, classified by Mill not as savages but as slaves to despots (Mill 1838b, 10:105; cf. CW 17:1562; but see *Rel* 10:398), may be barbarous or semibarbarous in Mill’s eyes, but they live in communities, and so he rules out

<sup>40</sup>OL 18:224; cited in Pitts, “Legislator of the World?” 201, and Drayton, *Nature’s Government*, 94, 227.

<sup>41</sup>Eddy Souffrant argues that Mill waives the harm principle for children and those not yet civilized (Souffrant, *Formal Transgression*, 8; cf. 70; cf. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (70, 99, 102). To support his claim that Mill is “careful to include only those individuals of maturity” as among those to whom the principle of liberty applies (57), Souffrant cites OL, CW 18:122, but OL begins at 18:217. Souffrant also cites CW 18:262. Here Mill recommends training people in youth “to know and benefit by the ascertained results of human experience” but says nothing about whether the harm principle applies to them.

<sup>42</sup>Parekh, “Decolonizing Liberalism,” 94; “Liberalism and Colonialism,” 95.

force to civilize them (OL 18:291).<sup>43</sup> Mill repudiates force for civilizing all but savages also in *Representative Government*, where he says the uncivilized who have advanced beyond a state of savagery require “not a government of force, but one of guidance” (RG 19:395). While Mill thinks slavery for savages in the “very early state of society” taught them obedience and industriousness, he argues that no civilized people in modern life should resort to slavery to impart civilization to those under their influence (RG 19:395), a distinction missed by critics who assume that for Mill, barbarians have no rights.<sup>44</sup> While Mill recognizes admixtures of nationalities as beneficial to the uncivilized, he calls not for their forced assimilation, as Parekh implies when discussing Mill’s views on the Bretons and Basques, but for their amalgamation, saying it is not beneficial to “extinguish types” and we should just soften “their extreme form.”<sup>45</sup>

The passage (OL 18:291) establishes that unlike savages, people living in a community, even an as of yet uncivilized community, may not be forced to be civilized. But we still do not know what Mill means in denying a right to force a community to be civilized since he does not say what sort of force can’t rightly be used. I shall argue that as an imperialist, Mill allows some sort of force, such as pedagogical coercion and the imposition of non-representative government that need not be consented to; but he (OL 18:291) indicates his imperialism is tolerant by ruling out other sorts of force. Other texts suggest that the sorts of force Mill rules out include violence, arbitrary and unjustified punishment, and other acts violating the rights of colonial dependents.

One sort of force that Mill does condone for children and the uncivilized is pedagogical coercion. Some of Mill’s critics, pressed to find passages in which Mill advocates violence, argue that pedagogical coercion is a sort of violence. Parekh, in a footnote to his claim that Mill condones violence, explains that “violence is often justified in pedagogical terms.”<sup>46</sup> Souffrant also argues that on Mill’s view, before maturity “one is subject to the requirements and teachings of society” and that such pedagogical coercion causes “great psychological and social costs to the individual.”<sup>47</sup> But Mill’s defense of

<sup>43</sup>Mill uses a number of classifications of people—savage, semisavage, slave, semi-barbarous, barbarous, and civilized—though he is sometimes slippery with these terms. Mill refers to people of India as “semibarbarous” in one work (RG 19:577) but in another as “barbarous” (NI 21:119), and he never makes clear whether the barbarous and the semibarbarous are to be treated differently. But he distinguishes Indians from savages.

<sup>44</sup>Souffrant, *Formal Transgression*, 122: Mill would not exempt “the child and the immature from the transactions of slavery.”

<sup>45</sup>RG 19:549–51; Parekh, “Decolonizing Liberalism,” 91.

<sup>46</sup>Parekh, “Decolonizing Liberalism,” 94 n. 30.

<sup>47</sup>Souffrant, *Formal Transgression*, 59–60. As both Parekh and Souffrant single out colonial educators as violent or psychologically coercive, it is unlikely they are

mandatory schooling does not indicate he thinks children and barbarians have no rights and are left unprotected by the principle of liberty. Mill addresses whether violence is an appropriate pedagogical tool in a newspaper editorial written in 1850. He opposes corporal punishment because it creates a bad habit and teaches the wrong lessons. It prepares one for being a bully and tyrant, and does not teach one to show respect (NW June 2, 1850, 1178). Mill is not opposed to flogging brutal adult ruffians (NW 1139–40; CW 28:272) and leaves open the possibility of corporal punishment for boys guilty of certain grave moral delinquencies,<sup>48</sup> but schools being state actors, these are cases of punishment for violating the harm principle, not of pedagogical coercion. As John Robson has argued, for Mill it is a legitimate goal to civilize savages and children but by moralizing, not punishing them.<sup>49</sup> That Mill opposes the use of violence on the uncivilized and violation of their rights against arbitrary and unjustified coercion is apparent in his outcry against Governor Eyre for imposing martial law and wrongfully flogging and executing Jamaican subjects in 1865.<sup>50</sup> Mill was critical of repression during the Indian Mutiny of 1857 as well (CW 16:1205–6, 1282).

The passages in his works of 1859 in which Mill defends “despotism” and “conquering” of the uncivilized do not show that Mill advocates the use of violence or disregards natives’ rights against unjustified coercion. Mill just does not say what he means by despotism there. In *Considerations on Representative Government* Mill uses despotism in very different senses. He says that India needs a vigorous despotism to civilize it, but he is critical of the dissolution of the Company for it would mean that the governing power in India will no longer have knowledge of Indians’ interests and could not be responsible to them, and this “is despotism” (RG 19:568). So there is a form of despotism he advocates that avoids a form of despotism he condemns.<sup>51</sup>

Mill’s failure to clarify what he means by despotism in the passages we have looked at forces us to other texts. These other texts suggest that the despotism Mill defends for semibarbarous or barbarous people involves government acting as a monopoly that provides exclusive alternatives without the

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invoking a Foulcauldian criticism of education per se, as that might apply to methods of education used by India’s internal or precolonial despots as well. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>48</sup>Michael Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 482–83.

<sup>49</sup>Robson, “Civilization and Culture,” 362. In OL 18:277, Mill rejects “pedagogical compulsion” in favor of pedagogical “persuasion” “when the period of education is past”; but children and the not yet civilized are still in the “period of education.” Still, Mill does not think pedagogical coercion entails enslavement or violence.

<sup>50</sup>CW 28:95, 106–8; Bernard Semmel, *Jamaican Blood and Victorian Conscience: The Governor Eyre Controversy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1962).

<sup>51</sup>In OL 18:266, Mill also uses two senses of despotism: a despotism that leaves room for and a despotism that crushes individuality.

consent of its subjects. Such a government would use pedagogical coercion, but not enslave, punish people arbitrarily, or use violence to force people to assimilate. In *Representative Government* Mill writes that “a rude people . . . may be unable” to suppress a desire for revenge and leave justice to the laws, so government may need to be despotic for them, to impose “forcible restraints upon their actions” (RG 19:377). Here despotism—in the sense of a government that is imposed regardless of whether a people accept it—is used to uphold rights and enforce toleration. In “Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform,” Mill writes: “That power should be exercised over any portion of mankind without any obligation of consulting them, is only tolerable while they are in an infantine, or a semibarbarous state. In any civilized condition, power ought never to be exempt from the necessity of appealing to the reason, and recommending itself by motives which justify it to the conscience and feelings, of the governed” (CW 19:324). Both passages suggest that for Mill, despotism is the use of power that need not be consented to, not arbitrary power.

That despotic government is one providing exclusive alternatives Mill suggests in the *Principles of Political Economy*. Here Mill distinguishes two exceptions to the *laissez-faire* principle of noninterference that he defends for civilized people. One exception is authoritative intervention that involves forceful interdiction and penalties. This sort of interference should be used minimally and only when acts affect the interests of others. The other exception is nonauthoritative intervention —“giving advice and providing non-exclusive alternatives.” For example, the state can force parents to educate children (PPE 3:948–49), but should not claim a monopoly on education: it can prescribe only that certain things be taught, not “how or from whom” (PPE 3:950). This sort of intervention may be used more liberally than authoritative intervention (PPE 3:937–8). A despotic government, for Mill, might refer to one in which non-authoritative intervention provided exclusive alternatives.

In being imposed without the consent of the subjects, despotism is opposed to self-government. Mill considers ruling India without serving the interest of the people to be single despotism of a bad kind, and believes Company officials with their ties to India were more likely than the government in London to know these interests (CW 30:49–51; RG 19:570–72). But he did not think that the people of India were ready to represent their own interests, be members of a legislative council, or hold other high positions.<sup>52</sup> In time they may be appointed to many higher administrative offices, and Mill even envisions the natives eventually serving on the council and running their government without England’s assistance (CW 30:65). Mill is in principle for self-government for all people: “[A]ll governments must be regarded as

<sup>52</sup>CW 30:51; RG 19:573–74; Abram L. Harris, “John Stuart Mill: Servant of the East India Company,” *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 30 (1964): 193; CW 30:65. For a dispute about what Mill means in saying Indians should not hold high positions, compare Stokes, *English Utilitarians and India*, 255, with Harris, 193–94.

extremely imperfect, until every one who is required to obey the laws, has a voice, or the prospect of a voice, in their enactment and administration" (CW 19:323). But representative government will not work if a people have yet to learn obedience or are too passive (RG 19:415–16). The point of despotism and pedagogical coercion is to prepare Indians for self rule, as a means to train people to walk alone (RG 19:396), and so Mill ultimately advocates their self-government, though he had no expectation this would happen anytime soon.<sup>53</sup>

The despotism Mill defends imposes a regime of legal rights that enforces toleration; it does not deny subjects their rights, or support their enslavement or arbitrary punishment, or require their assimilation. But it denies the subjected the opportunity to determine their own way of life or govern themselves, at least for a time. This is a concern to critics including Parekh, who argues that "demands for change must come from within." For Parekh, principles for determining what differences to tolerate "should be dialogically derived and consensually grounded, not arbitrarily imposed by a narrowly defined liberalism," and Mill, unwilling to engage in dialogue, would impose a regime of toleration rather than suggest it as a possibility for a people to choose on their own.<sup>54</sup>

Parekh criticizes Mill for failing to respect Indian autonomy by imposing liberal values on them. One might reply that to demand that Indians choose their own way of life is itself to impose liberal values by expecting them to be autonomous choosers of their culture.<sup>55</sup> Mill's more likely response would be to deny that British imperialism takes away the right of self-determination. Mill suggests that intervention does not violate this right where acts of coercion by other parties prevent self-determination. In "A Few Words on Non-Intervention," Mill defends French intervention in Algeria and English intervention in India (NI 21:118–19), explaining that without intervention, the native governments may fall prey to bands of ruffians (NI 21:120). Mill seems to think that before British involvement in India the principle of self-determination was already violated by prior acts of coercion, Asians having been slaves under despotism.<sup>56</sup>

Mill was not alone in pointing to pre-British India's despotisms to help justify British imperialism. James Mill had argued that without a British presence, India would be parceled out again into despotisms that involved bloody and ferocious invasions.<sup>57</sup> Stephen, too, appeals to the existence of

<sup>53</sup>Bearce, *British Attitudes toward India*, 292.

<sup>54</sup>Parekh, "Liberalism and Colonialism," 96, 97; "Decolonizing Liberalism," 85.

<sup>55</sup>Baum, *Rereading Power and Freedom in J. S. Mill*, 23; Baum, "Feminism, Liberalism and Cultural Pluralism: J. S. Mill on Mormon Polygyny," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 5 (1997): 239.

<sup>56</sup>CW 10:105; Harris, "Mill: Servant of East India Company," 201.

<sup>57</sup>James Mill, "Art. VII. Voyage aux Indes Orientales" (Review), *Edinburgh Review* 15 (1810): 363–84, 372.



oriental despots prior to a British presence in India to justify empire, as did Charles Wentworth Dilke and a number of influential Indian supporters of British Empire.<sup>58</sup> J. S. Mill points to the relevance of a prior act of coercion in a letter to Morley of Sept. 26, 1866. Mill addresses the question of whether the British should annex territories not presently under their control where the native rulers had no heir. He takes the position that where the leader of a real native state—one not conquered—failed to have an heir, the leader may adopt an heir, and the failure to have a natural heir would not be an excuse for England to annex the state; but Mill would not allow the dynasty to continue by adopting, had it been created by conquest (CW 16:1202).<sup>59</sup>

In 1832 when he defends child labor laws, Mill has already taken the position that a principle of nonintervention is inapplicable where there is prior coercion. He says he is a partisan of the “noninterference” philosophy “up to a certain point” because individuals can be presumed better judges of their own interests than governments as now constituted. But people are, in effect, coerced to go against their interests in a case where, unless everybody acts in a certain manner, no one will adopt the optimal rule, and so we need government to promulgate a compact that no one may exploit children by working them too hard (NW January 29, 1832, 400–1). The connection with his views on India is that in both cases he adheres to a principle of noninterference only if there is no prior coercion.

## V. Mill’s Toleration of Traditions, Even if Illiberal

While Mill thinks that Indians can be coerced to become civilized in a number of ways, he does not think they are without rights; he does not think they can be enslaved or arbitrarily punished. Nor does he intend British imperialism to deny the right of self-determination. This deflects several of the concerns of Mill’s critics, but concerns remain. One of the most serious is that the very notion of pedagogical coercion of Indians, of training them to walk alone, demeans them by failing to appreciate that Indians already have a set of traditions and beliefs in which they are at home.<sup>60</sup> Even if Indians lived under despots prior to British rule, they had their own intellectual traditions and

<sup>58</sup>Stephen, “Foundations of Government of India,” 545–46; Charles Wentworth Dilke, *Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English-Speaking Countries during 1866 and 1867* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1868), 226, 277, 355, 373–83; J. K. Majumdar, ed., *Indian Speeches and Documents on British Rule 1821–1918* (Delhi: Kanti Publications, 1987), 46, 85, 87–88, 136.

<sup>59</sup>The argument is not without its critics. Lal wonders why Mill should maintain “the invidious distinction between ‘real’ native states and others, and wonders how we identify a ‘really native’ state” (Lal, “Organic Conservatism”).

<sup>60</sup>Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*; Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*.

practices. While Mill cannot entirely avoid this charge, it loses some of its force when we recognize the ways in which Mill adopts a position of accommodation to and respect for native Indian culture and law, and toleration even of some illiberal practices.

Mill's language does not always express tolerance. He writes to Comte of how the "little-advanced civilization" of India is "frequently a cause of embarrassment to us."<sup>61</sup> He criticizes the contention of Turks that letting women walk with faces uncovered would topple their society, saying this is just "a mere bugbear to frighten imbeciles with" (NW August 17, 1850, 1181). Mill is critical of a number of Indian practices, such as infanticide, thuggee, sati, the "fraudulent practice" of witchcraft, and the "barbarous practice" of tragga.<sup>62</sup> In these and similar passages Mill shows a lack of tolerance, in Coleridge's sense of that word, but does not disavow a policy of toleration. Coleridge distinguishes toleration from tolerance. Toleration is an accepting attitude toward actions and is a virtue of laws; tolerance is the acceptance of opinions or intellectual commitments contrary to your own. Coleridge defends toleration but criticizes tolerance, as he thinks we should not use law to coerce people, but neither should we simply give in intellectually to opinions we think wrong.<sup>63</sup> In his 1831 letter to Sterling, Mill notes how Coleridge justly disavows tolerance, but that there is a good sense of tolerance, by which Mill must mean toleration (CW 12:74–78).

If Mill sometimes does not express tolerance, the policy he recommends for India is one of toleration. Contrary to Parekh's charge that Millian liberalism is "obsessively anti-tradition, anti-prejudice, anti-custom, anti-conformity, [and] anti-community," and Mehta's charge that Mill rejects Indian religions and traditions because he rejects what is unfamiliar in favor of a cosmopolitanism of reason, Mill does not dismiss the teachings and practices of Indians even as he welcomes their moral improvement.<sup>64</sup> Lynn Zastoupil has argued that under the influence both of the Romantic thinkers and of reformers like Elphinstone who wanted to preserve a "natural India," Mill came to take a conciliatory position on the issue of whether to respect Indian culture. Mill, valuing the "imagination," and appreciating the importance of "pre-existing

<sup>61</sup>*The Correspondence of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte*, trans. Oscar A. Haac (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 43.

<sup>62</sup>CW 30:122–25. Thuggee was a practice of stealing from and strangling people. Mill explains tragga as follows: A has a grievance against B, threatens B that A will kill or wound himself or someone else but not B, thereby entailing B's guilt (CW 30:123–24); see Mark Tunick, "John Stuart Mill and Unassimilated Subjects," *Political Studies* 53 (2005): 833–48, 835–36.

<sup>63</sup>Samuel T. Coleridge, "The Friend, vol. 1," in *Collected Works of Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 91–99.

<sup>64</sup>Parekh, "Superior People"; cf. Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 44–47; Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*.

habits and feelings" in shaping people was, unlike his father, unwilling to disregard India's past and treat its people as a tabula rasa that could be molded according to utilitarian dictates.<sup>65</sup> While Mill is committed to rationalism and "empirical proof" (*U* 10:234), he also recognizes the utility of beliefs that are not proven true. "Religion," he writes, "may be morally useful without being intellectually sustainable" (*Rel* 10:405; cf. 482). Mill defends the "principle that in the regulation of the imagination literal truth of facts is not the only thing to be considered"; "When the reason is strongly cultivated, the imagination may safely follow its own end, and do its best to make life pleasant and lovely inside the castle, in reliance on the fortifications raised and maintained by Reason round the outward bounds" (*Rel* 10:484–5). Rather than demanding a cosmopolitanism of reason, Mill, while committed to reason, recognizes its limits (*Rel* 10:481–85). While he thinks some harmful practices outside the bounds of reason should be abolished, Mill recommends gentle means of reform even for these, in recognition of the importance they play in peoples' lives. An example is offered by Zastoupil: Mill's lenient position toward banditry, or *bahirwattia*. Mill believes that the custom should be abolished but with as little intervention as possible, and recognizes "the impropriety of inflicting severe punishments" upon a people "merely for not at once renouncing the habits of their whole lives."<sup>66</sup> In an 1858 Petition supporting the East India Company's continued rule in India, Mill defends the Company policy of abstaining "from all interference with any of the religious practices of the people of India, except such as are abhorrent to humanity," and of conducting "suits, civil or criminal, against the natives" according to such rules "as may accommodate the same to the religion and manners of the natives" (*CW* 30:81).

Mill recommends other policies for India that do not reflect a position we would expect from someone who is "obsessively anti-tradition" or intolerant. One issue England faced was whether to annex Oudh or allow its king to

<sup>65</sup>Lynn Zastoupil, "J. S. Mill and India," *Victorian Studies* 32 (1988): 31–54, 38–40, 44; cf. Zastoupil, "India, J. S. Mill, and 'Western' Culture," in *J.S. Mill's Encounter with India*, ed. Martin Moir, Douglas M. Peers, and Lynn Zastoupil (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Javej Majeed, "James Mill's The History of British India: A Reevaluation," in Moir et al., 63–65, 55–56; and R. J. Moore, "John Stuart Mill at East India House," *Historical Studies* 20 (1983): 497–519, who argues it is unfair to imply Mill had no objection to forcing India to accept western civilization (516; cf. 506). Nancy Gardner Cassels notes some instances where Mill is tolerant ("John Stuart Mill, Religion, and Law in the Examiner's Office," in Moir et al., 176), but also notes illiberal practices Mill criticizes, such as the use of pressed labour, and infanticide (177). She notes Mill did not support using funds to discourage infanticide, and instead recommended reliance on moral influence (178).

<sup>66</sup>Zastoupil, "J. S. Mill and India," 45–46; Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 115. See Tunick, "Mill and Unassimilated Subjects," 836.

retain control. Moore argues that Mill has theoretical reasons rooted in his understanding of political economy for wanting annexation: the interests of the cultivating population were injured by the existing system with its "lawless usurpations and disorderly excesses of the Talookdars," the oppressive and often uncontrollable landlords working for the king.<sup>67</sup> Mill's political economy and social theory would dictate reducing taluqdari holdings and extending village settlements. But in 1837, when the situation deteriorated in Oudh, Mill instead recommended replacing the king with an heir: "[A]nnexation would remove the last major Muslim state in northern India and thus be unpopular among prominent Muslims. Second, the survival of Oudh would stand as a model of the Company's good faith, and if the heir should prove an unsatisfactory king then the annexation of the state might still be accomplished but with the advantage that the Company would be seen as having tried to avoid it." Mill wanted to avoid "permanent assumption of the state"; before doing this the state should try every intermediate course which might work.<sup>68</sup> Moore notes that there was also a secret despatch, not listed in Mill's list of his despatches but which he surmises Mill was influential in drafting, that suggests that if the king failed in reforming Oudh, the state should prefer measures that "effect the least possible change in the native institutions of the country . . . if the purposes of good government could thereby be secured." England's policy should be to preserve existing native dynasties and introduce systems of government that interfere in the least possible way. According to Moore's view, Mill defers to traditions and customs in India only for practical reasons.<sup>69</sup> But Mill's reluctance to annex Oudh or use force is consistent with his commitment to toleration, which he holds not merely for practical reasons but because he recognizes the value of customs and traditions that are not "abhorrent to humanity."

The respect Mill gives to India's teachings and traditions is evident also in his stand in the debate between Orientalists and Anglicists about education policy in India. Thomas Macaulay, member of the supreme council of India from 1834 to 1838, expressed the Anglicist position most provocatively in his "Minute on Education" of February 2, 1835. Macaulay addresses the question of whether an act of Parliament requires education in India to be in English, or in Arabic and Sanskrit. He admits he has no knowledge of the Eastern languages, but assures us he has formed a correct estimate of their value by reading celebrated works in translation, and concludes: "I have never found one among [the Orientalists] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." When we turn from works of imagination to works of

<sup>67</sup>Moore, "Mill at East India House," 501, citing Mill's "Maine on Village Communities," CW 30: 213–28.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 505, citing Mill's draft despatch of April 11, 1838.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 506 and n. 43, 518–19; cf. CW 30:15, and xlvii–xlix.

fact, "the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable . . . all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England."<sup>70</sup>

Turning to the content of the education, Macaulay asks, should we teach European science, or systems which "whenever they differ from those of Europe, differ for the worse . . . by universal confession"? Should we teach medical doctrines "which would disgrace an English farrier,—Astronomy, which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school,—History, abounding with kings thirty feet high, and reigns thirty thousand years long,—and Geography, made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter"? He says that fortunately Westerners in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries discovered Cicero and Tacitus and willingly soaked in their knowledge rather than confining themselves to Anglo-Saxon chronicles and Norman-French romances—without this, would England have been what she now is? "What the Greek and Latin were to the contemporaries of More and Ascham, our tongue is to the people of India."<sup>71</sup>

Macaulay, nevertheless, holds that "it is the duty of the British Government in India to be not only tolerant, but neutral on all religious questions." We should not try to convert natives to Christianity or encourage those who do, but we should not bribe men using state funds "to waste their youth in learning how they are to purify themselves after touching an ass, or what text of the Vedas they are to repeat to expiate the crime of killing a goat."<sup>72</sup> Macaulay states England's goal in a now famous line: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."<sup>73</sup> Macaulay's "Minute" is proof, if proof were needed, that critics attack no straw man when claiming British imperialists infantilized Indians and dismissed their beliefs, hoping to establish a cosmopolitanism of reason.

Macaulay's "Minute" was influential, its ideas on education reflected in Lord Bentinck's Resolution of March 7, 1835. It declared that "His Lordship in Council is of opinion that the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India; and that all the funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone."<sup>74</sup> This marked a greater shift toward an Anglicist policy that hoped

<sup>70</sup>Thomas Macaulay, *Speeches by Lord Macaulay*, ed. G. M. Young (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 349.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 350–51.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 357–58.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>74</sup>K. A. Ballhatchet, "The Home Government and Bentinck's Educational Policy," *Cambridge Historical Journal* 10 (1951): 224.

to educate the native learned class in English and rely on them to diffuse their knowledge to the masses.<sup>75</sup>

Mill came to diverge from Macaulay's position and lean toward the Orientalist policy that favored education in the languages, literature, and traditions of India. Mill wrote a letter to Horace Wilson, a leading proponent of Orientalist education policy, expressing support for Wilson and dismay at Bentinck's anglicizing policy. Wilson wanted to reserve government funds for education using Sanskrit and Arabic for India's learned class and for publication of Sanskrit and Arabic books, with no government support for teaching in English, vernacular languages, or modern subjects.<sup>76</sup> The Sirkins argue that Mill had not always taken a pro-Orientalist position, at least in dispatches that he authored on behalf of the Court of Directors. One dispatch of 1829 regards Oriental seminaries and publications as not useful. An 1830 dispatch approves of Wilson's Oriental seminaries, but what it approves are the modernizing measures it mistakenly believes are being carried out, such as classes in math, medicine in the European manner, and natural philosophy, and it recommends promoting only natives who become Europeanized and, thus, qualified for high employments: "[I]t was not approving the Orientalist policy of perpetuating traditional 'Hindu and Mahomedan peculiar studies' ... the applause was for Anglicist policies."<sup>77</sup>

But whatever critical stance Mill took toward Orientalist policy on behalf of the Court of Directors is changed in an important draft despatch of 1836 titled "Recent Changes in Native Education," determined by scholars to be Mill's work.<sup>78</sup> In it Mill agrees with Macaulay that England should train a "lettered class." But for Mill, this class must be trained in "institutions for the cultivation of the Oriental languages" that would be supported by the government. In addition, he argues that the administration of justice requires a knowledge of the classical languages of India and Hindu and Mohammedan law, a point Macaulay denied.<sup>79</sup> Mill supports stipends for the native colleges, though they would not exceed what is needed for subsistence.<sup>80</sup> Mill expresses fear of the effects of a sudden anglicizing policy change upon native attitudes; such changes are liable to misinterpretation and could excite alarm and cause disaffection and a fear that England was proselytizing. Change should be

<sup>75</sup>J. F. Hilliker, "Charles Edward Trevelyan as an Educational Reformer in India 1827–1838," *Canadian Journal of History* 9 (1974): 281–90; cf. Carnoy, *Education as Cultural Imperialism*, 98–100.

<sup>76</sup>Gerald Sirkin and Natalie Robinson Sirkin, "John Stuart Mill and Disutilitarianism in Indian Education," *Journal of General Education* 24 (1973): 232–33.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 239, 241.

<sup>78</sup>K. A. Ballhatchet, "John Stuart Mill and Indian Education," *Cambridge Historical Journal* 11 (1954): 228.

<sup>79</sup>Harris, "Mill: Servant of East India Company," 197; Macaulay, *Speeches*, 356–57.

<sup>80</sup>Harris, "Mill: Servant of East India Company," 200.



with great deliberation and caution.<sup>81</sup> But Mill defends Orientalist policy not merely for practical reasons. He recognizes the value of Indian thought and intellectual productions (CW 17:1687). Mill's despatch was countermanded by the president of the Board of Control, but a compromise was adopted in 1841, which gave limited countenance to the study of Oriental literature.<sup>82</sup>

Mill's critics accuse him of not being committed to toleration, self-determination, and human dignity for the uncivilized.<sup>83</sup> I have argued that in not seeking forced assimilation, in not waiving the harm principle for the "not yet civilized," in tolerating even some illiberal practices, and in his receptiveness to some features of an Orientalist education policy, Mill shows a commitment to human dignity and toleration. But he is unwilling, for now, to give Indians their own voice in their governance.

## VI. Mill and the Charge of Racism

Mill's proposed policy of education, while sympathetic to some of the Orientalist goals, still engrafts Western education onto the existing educational system, rather than recognizing Indian folkways as valid in themselves. There are limits to Mill's acceptance of systems of belief and practices that he does not think promote moral development. Mill thinks that England and some other European nations are more advanced than India and other societies not yet civilized. Mill's desire that England take charge in bringing about the moral development of Indians—and helping civilize them by assisting them in controlling nature and developing cooperative ventures—and his unwillingness, for now, to let Indians speak for themselves by allowing them a representative form of government—has been viewed by some critics as evidence that Mill thinks Europeans are intrinsically superior and that Mill's imperialism is essentially racist.<sup>84</sup> Before offering what I think is a more compelling account of why Mill, a committed liberal, defends British imperialism, it is important to respond to this charge.

A number of passages may seem to suggest that Mill is a racist. Mill implies that communities of European races are the only ones which have "any claim to the character of important communities" (*AU* 1:225); he stereotypes Native Americans as indolent (*PPE* 2:103) and improvident, failing to plan for the

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 195–200. Cf. Bearce, *British Attitudes toward India*, 283–84; Moore, "Mill at East India House," 500; Ballhatchet, "Home Government and Bentinck's Education Policy," 226–28. For criticism of Mill's 1836 draft despatch, including a suggestion that it is motivated by Mill's dislike for Macaulay, see Sirkin and Sirkin, "Mill and Disutilitarianism," 261–65, 285.

<sup>82</sup>Harris, "Mill: Servant of East India Company," 200–201.

<sup>83</sup>Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 3–4.

<sup>84</sup>Dossa, "Liberal Imperialism?" 739, 742; Lal, "Organic Conservatism"; Drayton, *Nature's Government*, 94, 227; cf. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 195–96.

future (*PPE* 2:168); he seems to concur with the view that the Chinese lack foresight and providence (*PPE* 2:168; cf. *OL* 18:271–72, 273–74); and he contrasts the lack of desire to accumulate wealth among the Indians, Chinese, and American Indians with the qualities of someone who has “reason” and is “sober” (*PPE* 2:170).

But concluding from these passages that Mill is a racist would completely misunderstand him. Mill’s argument in *Principles of Political Economy* is that all of these characteristics can be changed with a change in institutions and policies. This means that these differences in character are not inherent. The Chinese are “stagnant” and lack a desire to accumulate wealth, he argues, because they lack security of property, moderate and nonarbitrary taxes, and a system of land tenure that gives the cultivator the benefits of his labor (*PPE* 2:186). For Mill, this is true of all Asiatic populations and of the less industrialized parts of Europe: Russia, Turkey, Spain, and Ireland (*PPE* 2:187). In a passage that deals a crushing blow to the charge that Mill thinks there are inherent biological differences among races, Mill says that it is wrong to impute Irish backwardness and laziness to “a peculiar indolence and insouciance in the Celtic race.” It is “vulgar” to attribute “diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences”; rather, it is due to the cottier system that the Irish are “less addicted to steady routine labour.” “No labourers work harder, in England or America, than the Irish; but not under a cottier system.”<sup>85</sup>

Mill rejects the view that there are inherent differences based on race also in his debate with Carlyle over the Negro Question. Mill says Carlyle makes the vulgar error of “imputing every difference which he finds among human beings to an original difference in nature,” and even if there were such differences, they create no right to subdue a people (*CW* 21:93). James Hunt, founder in 1863 of the Anthropological Society of London, wrote an article attacking Mill for not being a racist. Hunt complains that Mill fails to see how inferior races are innately unfit, and that their unfitness is transmitted hereditarily. He is astonished that Mill cannot understand why a “Chinaman, under adequately favorable circumstances, should not become as good a sculptor as Phidias, or as inspired a poet as Shakespeare.”<sup>86</sup>

Mill thinks that England and other European nations are more advanced than societies not yet civilized, not because he thinks their peoples are

<sup>85</sup>*PPE* 2:319; cf. *CW* 6:501–2. In a cottier system, terms of contracts for land are determined by competition, and rent depends on population growth (*PPE* 2:315).

<sup>86</sup>James Hunt, “Race in Legislation and Political Economy,” *Anthropological Review* 13 (1866): 113–35, 120–21. Hunt’s article is identified by Varouxakis, who argues that while Mill may have vaguely pointed to racial origin as a factor in shaping national character, Mill’s main point is that these can be changed by institutions, historical accidents, and effort; see Georgios Varouxakis, “John Stuart Mill on Race,” *Utilitas* 10 (1998): 22. Others who reject the view that Mill is a racist include Moore, “Mill at East India House,” 518 n. 11; Harris, “Mill: Servant of East India Company,” 201–2; and Robson, “Civilization and Culture,” 340, 357–58.

naturally superior but, I shall argue in the final section, because certain authoritarian institutions were in force in Europe that created the conditions for advancement. Just as Europe once required civilizing institutions, Mill now thinks institutions are needed in India for its advancement, in part to overcome the adverse effects of prior acts of coercion. Those institutions must be despotic in the sense that they pedagogically coerce, promote exclusive programs, and rule without the consent of the governed, but they should not impose power arbitrarily or disregard native rights. Lacking a basis for thinking people in India are inherently incapable of eventual self-government, Mill envisions a day when Indians will govern themselves. Mill advocates not an intolerant despotism, but a despotism to ensure toleration.

## VII. The Imperialism of Mill's Liberalism in East and West

There are limits to the liberty Mill would allow those he regards as not yet civilized. But this is symptomatic of neither a lack of respect for them nor racist attitudes. Mill's willingness to impose a sort of despotism on India is best seen, rather, as a reflection of a tension between liberty and moral development, both of which Mill values, a tension that surfaces also when Mill thinks about the scope of political and social power in civilized societies. While liberty and individuality are, for Mill, conditions of continued moral development, they can come into conflict with the latter because moral development requires instruction, guidance, and other forms of leadership.

Those who reconcile Mill's liberalism and his defense of British imperialism in India by seeing Mill as applying different standards to different sorts of people fail to recognize that Mill defends both liberty and moral development for both East and West, for both the civilized and the not yet civilized. Mill neither defends liberty only for advanced societies nor sees imperialism and liberalism as mutually exclusive. Mill thinks Indians need to be civilized, referring in part to the need to alter and amend nature by overcoming private passions and to respect the rule of law; but Mill speaks of the need to check unrestrained private passions in England as well, where a number of people are still unable clearly to conceive of the rights of others (CW 19:327). Civilized societies such as England need leadership from above in the form of "persons of genius" to guide, to "discover new truths, and point out when what were once truths are true no longer," and to "set the example of more enlightened conduct, and better taste and sense in human life."<sup>87</sup> Their "half-instructed" members ought not to discard all authority and trust solely to their own judgment (SpA, 22:243–44; cf. 234). Mill recognizes, at the same time, the dangers of conforming to traditions and deferring to authority (OL 18:274–75). One of his most powerful statements in *On*

<sup>87</sup>OL 18:267; cf. U 10:211–12; Wendy Donner, *The Liberal Self: J. S. Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

*Liberty* is that “if a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode” (OL 18:270). While encouraging moral development and acknowledging the need for leadership, Mill also values individual autonomy.<sup>88</sup> Mill grapples with a tension between conflicting but essential values and tries to theorize forms of leadership that will secure both individuality and moral progress, seeking the appropriate mix. Mill sometimes changes his views about the proper mix.<sup>89</sup>

The forms leadership should take differ for civilized and not yet civilized societies, in Mill’s view. To achieve civilization, Europe in the Middle Ages had the benefit of leadership from above in the form of Christendom, which, despite defects that included the burning of heretics, “had at least a mission for curbing the unruly passions of mankind” (SpA, 22:306). The clergy, in addition to preserving all letters and culture, “set the first example to Europe of industry conducted on a large scale by free labour” (CW 20:240). It also was a voice for justice rather than vengeance: Mill notes the valiant though unsuccessful effort of the Church, through the “Truce of God,” to “mitigate the prevailing brutalities, by a forced suspension of acts of vengeance and private war during four days and five nights of every week” (CW 20:241). In *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill gives other examples of institutions that tamed and civilized: the Egyptian

<sup>88</sup>That Mill is elitist but not authoritarian has been noted numerous times. See Michael McPherson, “Mill’s Moral Theory and the Problem of Preference Change,” *Ethics* 92 (1982): 268; Jonathan Riley, “One Simple Principle,” *Utilitas* 3 (1991): 25; Skorupski, *John Stuart Mill*, 353; Donner, *Liberal Self*, 129; Bernard Semmel, *J. S. Mill and the Pursuit of Virtue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 14; C. L. Ten, “Mill and Liberty,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30 (1969): 50–51.

<sup>89</sup>Some of Mill’s essays, most notably “Spirit of the Age,” have been classified by Himmelfarb as among the “illiberal” works Mill wrote before coming under the influence of Harriet Taylor and after Taylor died, which Himmelfarb contrasts with the “liberal” works Mill is said to write under Taylor’s influence. See Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Introduction,” in *Essays on Politics and Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962); cf. Linda Raeder, *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2002). Rather than endorse Himmerlfarb’s “Two Mills” thesis, I see Mill’s shifts—sometimes emphasizing the need for authority, sometimes emphasizing the need to resist authority and promote individuality, as his grappling with a commitment to conflicting values, seeking the right mix. In rejecting the “Two Mills” thesis I follow Ten, “Mill and Liberty”; Peter Berkowitz, “Mill: Liberty, Virtue, and the Discipline of Individuality,” in *Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism*, ed. Eldon J. Eisenach (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1998); Donner, *Liberal Self*; McPherson, “Mill’s Moral Theory”; William Stafford, *John Stuart Mill* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 20–21; Semmel, *Mill and the Pursuit of Virtue*, 4–5, 10–13; and even Joseph Hamburger, who argues that Mill is consistently illiberal, in *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 212–13.

hierarchy, the paternal despotisms of China, and the “precious unorganized institution” of the Order of Prophets that kept up upon the ancient Jews an “antagonism of influences which is the only real security for continued progress” (RG 19: 396–97). Mill notes that the Egyptian hierarchies and paternal despots of China were fit instruments for bringing Egypt and China to a more civilized state, but they came to a permanent halt for “want of mental liberty and individuality” (RG 19:396). “Systematic antagonisms” of the sort provided by the Order of Prophets are necessary for a society to be permanently in a condition of both stability and progressiveness (CW 20:269). Europe achieved this essential “complex and manifold character of life” because it was not “free from a contest of rival powers for dominion over society.” Europe was able to coordinate action “among rival powers naturally tending in different directions,” and this was the chief cause of “the spirit of improvement” (CW 20:269–70). The salutary and indispensable influence in Europe of the Christian clergy became the parent of liberty because the spiritual and temporal were kept separate. For many centuries, the Catholic clergy did exert control, and doubters were abhorred. While during this time they were able to help parts of Europe reach a civilized state by “teaching [mankind] to set a value upon a distant end, paramount to immediate temptations,” their civilizing influence was checked because their lack of toleration became an obstacle to further improvement (SpA 22:304–307). The ascendancy of the Catholic clergy was desired “for that day” despite their great and flagrant vices, but the further progress of European civilization required that the reformation and toleration arise in the more advanced communities of Europe (SpA 22:306–7; cf. CW 20:273). Mill contrasts the historical developments in Europe with the dominance of “Mussulmans of old,” who succeeded in merging the supreme religious authority with the temporal, with the result that their society stagnated (CW 20:270); and with the condition of the Hindoos and Turks, who “subdued the minds of the possessors of worldly power,” thereby excluding “the possibility of material conflict of opinion” and accounting for those communities being “stationary” (SpA 22:305).

Europe having achieved a civilized state with systematic antagonisms, the form of leadership appropriate to it is different than the form appropriate for India, where because of prior despotisms and the effects of some of the prevailing religions, Mill believes a space still needs to be created for clashes and antagonism that are essential for moral progress. Mill sees that the English working class should not be “treated like children” even though he had an unfavorable view of their character, and he comes to argue that they should represent their own class and speak for themselves. Furthermore, members of Parliament can learn from them if they were given a voice; he is not willing to say the same yet of the people in India.<sup>90</sup> But he

<sup>90</sup>CW 3: 763, cited in Janice Carlisle, “Mr. J. Stuart Mill, M. P. and the Character of the Working Class,” in Eisenach, 152; Carlisle, 164–67.

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endorses pedagogical coercion in both East and West. Even the representative government he advocates for the civilized, including its less refined classes, harbors elements of imperium in demanding only that people voice their ideas, “right and wrong,” but not guaranteeing their proposals are accepted.<sup>91</sup>

Mill works out the tension between liberty and moral development in his writings about British rule in India by defending tolerant imperialism. Tolerant imperialism is, nevertheless, imperialism. One might think that any characterization of imperialism that appears sympathetic, such as Mill’s, will only encourage imperialists and can be used to cover all manner of sins. That is a risk I hope is outweighed by the potential benefit, in correcting misrepresentations of Mill, of refocusing debate about the relation of liberalism to Empire. The issue we should address with Mill in mind is whether it is a good idea to interfere in the affairs of other states in order to promote legal rights, respect and toleration for conflicting viewpoints and ways of life, and a commercial society that can cope with natural threats, given that such interference may threaten the hegemony of existing forms of life in which people have deeply invested identities but perhaps fewer alternatives, rather than the issue—false where Mill is concerned—of whether the West should forcibly reshape the rest of the world in its own image.

<sup>91</sup>Carlisle, “Mill and the Character of the Working Class,” 158.