Book Reviews

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Nicholas Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: A Biography* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. xx + 436.

The intending reader should not be misled by the subtitle; this is not the long-needed replacement of M. St John Packe's *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (1954). It does not provide a detailed account of Mill's life (which would require a far bigger book) nor does it systematically supplement Packe's account by reference to what was not available to him, namely the *Collected Works* and recent scholarship (for example, the work that has been done on Mill and India, on his period in Parliament and on his late-life activism in the women's movement). It is an *intellectual* biography, which contextualizes the life of his mind within a tradition of and a debate between 'great' thinkers, rather than for example within the political events of his day in England, Ireland, France and America with which he was so deeply engaged.

Capaldi states that he is providing a 'comprehensive' account of the thought, because no one has as yet 'wrestled with the whole of Mill and put it into coherent form'. Our intending reader should not take this as meaning a survey of all the major themes of Mill's thought. For in Capaldi's selective and focused account, many central components are summarily treated, or merely mentioned, or even ignored. So for example though he informs us that Mill in his *System of Logic* aimed to drive *a priori* philosophy out of its strongest bastion, mathematics, he does not go on to explain and discuss how Mill theorized mathematics as an *a posteriori* science. Associationism frequently comes up, but Capaldi never mentions Mill's distinction between mechanical and chemical association. His discussion of *Principles of Political Economy* has much to say about socialism, taxation and the proper limits of government activity, but does not tell the reader about the invariable laws of production, the theory of rent, or the theory of why a stationary state is inevitable. He devotes no more space to *The Subjection of Women* than to the unfinished, unrevised *Chapters on Socialism* and less than to the posthumous *Essays on Religion*.

We come nearer to what the book is about when Capaldi writes that he is trying 'to provide the big picture – a coherent vision of Mill'. This is an 'in-depth discussion of how Mill was in fact a Romantic' – one who had an expressivist conception of the self derived from German thought. Capaldi's is indeed the most thoroughgoing and ambitious attempt to explain Mill's thought as a synthesis of the enlightenment and romanticism. In such an interpretation, the *Autobiography* becomes his most important book (as arguably he thought it was) because it is an account of his own expressive self-realization. Capaldi also provides a positive and persuasive account of the influence of his wife, as one who did not change the main lines of his thought, but who performed the

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inestimable service of giving him a self-confidence previously undermined by his father.

What is less persuasive is the claim that Mill was closer to Kant and Hegel than to the Enlightenment. One senses a context here: Capaldi acknowledges his debt to the Liberty Fund of America, which has invited him to participate in and direct a number of colloquia on Mill. The book reads as a defence of Mill against American neo-conservative attacks on 'liberals' who, according to Capaldi, deny natural law, are unable to designate any form of behaviour as abnormal, deny freedom of the will, and consequently categorize almost everyone as a victim requiring liberation by some outside agency. Capaldi declines to present Mill as an advocate of liberalism, preferring to describe him as a defender of 'liberal culture', which promotes autonomy, self-discipline, free markets, entrepreneurship and strict limits to state action. Surely Mill *did* favour these; but to say that he advocated autonomy as the only intrinsic end is just as surely wrong. Capaldi even claims that Mill was a 'romantic deontologist' who believed that an action is right if it is autonomous. Such a claim could only be sustained if we judged that Mill did not mean what he said, or did not know what he meant; for he tells us plainly enough that right actions are ones producing good consequences – and by 'good' he does not monothematically mean autonomy. Mill insists that the components of the good – of happiness – are manifold. Moreover his ideal of the self lays as much stress on altruism as on autonomy, as *Utilitarianism* demonstrates. There he grounds the regard for the good of others, not as Capaldi contends upon something akin to Hegel's master/slave dialectic, according to which my autonomy is conditional upon the autonomy of others, but more simply and directly upon emotion, sympathy, fellow-feeling. Because Capaldi makes altruism secondary to, and derivative from, autonomy, he fails to appreciate the nature and intensity of Mill's commitment to socialism.

In accordance with his Kantian/Hegelian interpretation of Mill, Capaldi claims that Mill proposes a transcendental self capable of a freedom of the will which escapes causality, and that he was not a naturalist. Fully to answer these claims would require a detailed discussion: here it may suffice to remark that they flatly contradict the mainstream of Mill commentary (e.g. Ryan, Skorupski and Hamilton in the *Cambridge Companion*), that they are far from obvious readings of the *Logic* and of *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, and that they are not supported by a close analysis of those admittedly difficult and occasionally ambiguous texts.

It is a pity that a book produced to such a high standard in terms of paper, print and binding should contain so many typographical errors, especially in names and in quotations. There are even two quotations where sentences by Capaldi are incorporated as if they were part of Mill's text. There are errors of fact, too. Robert Owen never proposed a centrally planned economy; Lord Durham was never a Tory; Mill did not praise Proudhon (indeed, he thought him the most mischievous man in Europe and wished him dead); the novel made its appearance as a genre in the early eighteenth century, not the late; Comte did not invent phrenology (it was invented by Franz Joseph Gall in the late eighteenth century and popularized in Britain in the first two decades of the nineteenth); Mary Wollstonecraft was not a Unitarian. Britain was not moving from feudalism to industrialism in Mill's day – the last vestiges of anything

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that could remotely be labelled 'feudalism' – in the Scottish Highlands – had been swept away in the mid-eighteenth century. The summary account of religion in Britain from p. 340 is so crude as to be misleading and should have been omitted. Finally, and topically at the present time, Capaldi writes that 'he supported intervention to help where people were ready to adopt liberal culture'. But the main message of 'A Few Words on Non-intervention' is to reject (except in one rare and specific circumstance) a non-defensive declaration of war in order to secure 'regime change'.

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Russell Hardin, *Indeterminacy and Society* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. xi + 166.

This is a well-written book about problems of indeterminacy in social interaction and their inescapable nature: 'The general thesis of this book is that problems of indeterminacy in social interaction are important, pervasive, and often intractable and that they often afflict social theories' (p. ix). In the first chapter, *Indeterminacy*, Hardin characterizes indeterminacy and gives an overview of the book. The second chapter, *Basic Rationality*, argues that almost the only universally accepted principle of rationality is that 'one should choose more rather than less value'. This ordinal notion – assumed to satisfy transitivity – is not sufficient to yield determinate solutions in game theory. According to Hardin, the additional principles of rationality that have been added are controversial and fail to lead to determinate game solutions – notwithstanding some game theoreticians' claims. One of his favourite examples for showing this is the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma.

In the rest of the book several problems of rationality in social philosophy are discussed with the help of such famous historical writers as Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Bentham, Smith, Marx, Rawls, and Coase. Hardin argues that their accounts are all beset by some amount of indeterminacy. In chapter 3, *Mutual Advantage*, he takes mutual advantage to be the collective counterpart of self-interest. It should be noted that Hardin does not discuss social collectives and groups as entities in any serious sense but rather speaks of the 'aggregation-level', as he says. Mutual advantage is taken to be explicated in terms of Pareto betterness. In my opinion, this is not the only feasible rationality principle and it is not always applicable. In many contexts, groups can form views and goals by means of rational principles (such as majority voting). Compromises often result, and the Pareto principle need not be satisfied (see Tuomela 1995 for an account of group attitudes).

To give a flavour of the rest of the chapters, let me mention their titles: 'The Greatest Sum', 'Marginal Determinacy', 'Rules for Determinacy', 'Indeterminate Justice', 'Mechanical Determinacy'. They make for interesting (and largely non-technical) reading for those interested in the fundamental questions of social philosophy related on the one hand to moral questions (e.g. equality, justice) and on the other to efficiency.

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I would like to note that the notion of indeterminacy that Hardin works with is somewhat ambiguous. In general it seems to concern the notion of rationality in game theory: there are not rational solutions to all the situations of interaction that game theory deals with. Thus, Hardin is not directly concerned with indeterminacy as it affects our normal life – unless game theory successfully can capture it (and we know that it very often fails badly). Hardin does assert that 'the world is stochastic and so are our lives' (p. 121), but, as said, he is typically not directly concerned with matters related to ordinary life. Furthermore, it should be noted that the stochastic nature of the social world here seems ultimately to be an epistemic matter comparable to some extent with the stochastic nature of coin tossing, although he seems to deny that that is the case (p. 4).

On the whole, the book is interestingly and competently written. It can be recommended not only to specialists in game theory and social philosophy but also to academic audiences in general.

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Peter Singer, *The President of Good and Evil: Taking George W. Bush Seriously* (London: Granta Books, 2004), pp. v + 280.

Peter Singer has often been involved in public discussions on ethical issues, and has taken positions which earned him the ambiguous title of the 'most controversial' philosopher alive. With this essay on US President George W. Bush – which was published at the end of Bush's first term – he goes one step further, and throws himself into current political affairs. By focusing on the ethics of one of the most controversial politicians alive, he takes many risks, including that of being accused of confusing moral issues with brute political opportunism. But Peter Singer takes George W. Bush seriously. He assumes from the very start of his essay that the American president really means what he says whenever he refers to moral values and ethical principles. Hence, the question Singer asks is not whether there is a hidden agenda behind Bush's moral discourse (he does not, of course, exclude this option, which he calls the 'cynical view'), but rather whether Bush has adopted a coherent moral and ethical framework.

Singer's answer to that question is, somewhat unsurprisingly, clearly negative. Bush makes an extremely intensive use of vague moral statements (the most famous one being the biblical reference to the 'axis of evil' in international relations) which are often incompatible with each other, or obviously contradict actual policies implemented by his administration. Singer has scrutinized hundreds of speeches as well as several important decisions made by the White House, and found striking examples of this inconsistency. For instance, in the first part of his book, which is devoted to 'Bush's America', Singer shows that the very idea of a 'single nation of justice and opportunity' – a hackneyed slogan which dates back to Bush's 2001 inaugural address – is hard to reconcile with recent fiscal reforms, especially as they amount to cutting taxes on inherited

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wealth or to reducing the scope of public services. In this case, a seemingly egalitarian political discourse is oddly fuelling right-libertarian policies. Similar ethical failures can also be found in Bush's discourses and actions in international affairs, as is shown in the second part of the essay, which Singer entitled 'America and the World'. For instance, whereas Bush appealed to the precautionary principle in the case of Iraq, arguing that the United States should act pre-emptively because Saddam Hussein was representing an immediate threat, he repeatedly refused to take action against the threat of global warming and to comply with the Kyoto protocol, arguing that Americans should not be asked to change their way of life since it is 'a blessed one'.

From these examples, one could perhaps infer that Bush is a coherent libertarian indeed, since he is only setting individual rights above any other rights. But, as Singer stresses, this would be too simplistic: the so-called 'war against terror' launched by the Bush administration has arguably led to effective violations of individual rights, affecting American citizens themselves. Are these violations ethically acceptable, because they were designed to avoid greater harm to be caused by Muslim fanatics? If this were the case, Bush would not be so far from Singer's utilitarianism. Peter Singer rejects this burdensome ally: even if Bush could be a utilitarian of some sort in some cases (strongly biased however towards protecting American lives and interests), in other cases he clearly rejects utilitarian ethics. The most striking example is the fact that Bush decided not to fund research on stem cells derived from embryos, despite the fact that it could help in developing cures for major diseases, hence reducing pain and suffering on a very large scale. This decision, as many others, is also difficult to reconcile with a Christian ethic. Hence, Singer concludes, President Bush has adopted an 'instinctive approach' to ethical issues which is, at least for someone in his situation, conspicuously inadequate.

Well-documented and clearly written, this provocative essay provides a wonderful example of how analytic philosophy can play a crucial role in dissecting and informing contemporary political debates. Peter Singer is, to a certain extent, very harsh with President Bush, whom he accuses of not having progressed beyond the level of rigid moral reasoning reached by early teenage boys. But Singer's critical claims are always connected to a very careful argumentation, and illustrated with enlightening examples. When the time comes to close Singer's essay, the reader is puzzled to know how an electoral campaign in which moral issues were so prominent could lead to the re-election of such an incoherent moralist.

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Serena Olsaretti (ed.), *Desert and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. xi + 269.

There is renewed interest amongst political and moral philosophers in desert and its role in distributive justice. This interest prompted the conference

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held at Cambridge University in 2001 of which this collection is the product. One reason for the interest in desert, notes Olsaretti in her Introduction, is the rise of egalitarian theories of justice which emphasize the importance of individual choice and personal responsibility. A second is the increasingly acknowledged need to reconsider Rawls's rejection of desert as a principle of distributive justice. These trends, not surprisingly, inform the central questions that Olsaretti says confront present-day desert theorists. First, do the values of desert and equality necessarily conflict, or can they be reconciled? Second, is desert comparative (holistic) or non-comparative (individualistic), and how does this affect its role as a principle of distributive justice? While several contributors – Shelly Kagan, Samuel Scheffler, Owen McLeod, Thomas Hurka, David Miller and others – offer views on the latter question, Fred Feldman and Peter Vallentyne concern themselves with the complex relation between desert and equality.

Given the intuitive connection between responsibility and desert, egalitarians seeking to make their theories responsibility-sensitive cannot ignore the issues raised by desert. In 'Brute Luck Equality and Desert', Vallentyne undertakes to reconcile desert with weak equality. He argues that any plausible theory of desert must be a form of weak brute luck egalitarianism compatible with the neutralization of the differential effects of brute bad luck on the distribution of advantage. Were it otherwise, he says, it would make brute luck factors, which are irrelevant to desert, part of the desert basis.

But, in an effort to eliminate inequalities arising from brute luck, one can render too much of a person's situation immune to desert-based analysis. According to Vallentyne, desert cannot be based upon the unadjusted value of what one contributes since one's opportunities to contribute may be a matter of brute luck; nor can it be based upon the unadjusted value of one's effort since, as George Sher argues in 'Effort and Imagination' in this collection, one's capacity to make an effort may lie outside one's control. Rather, says Vallentyne, 'one's desert should be based solely on how responsibly one exercises one's choices' (p. 174). But this too is dependent in part upon brute luck. To prevent *desert* from becoming an empty concept, we must allow that desert can apply to aspects of one's situation over which one does not have full control. Sher, for one, is not troubled by this idea; and given the difficulty in specifying what, if anything, lies entirely within one's control, his seems the reasonable view to take. The onus then rests with defenders of responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism to show whether their views can be desert-sensitive in a thoroughgoing fashion without sacrificing the commitment to equality.

Turning to comparative and non-comparative justice, the central issue is whether desert, commonly seen as a non-comparative principle, can adequately serve as a principle of distributive justice given the demands of comparative justice. In 'Distributive Justice and Economic Desert', Scheffler modifies his previously held position that there is no legitimate form of prejusticial desert. Here he suggests that, while the idea of moral desert may play an essential role in our practice of treating each other as responsible agents, the more specific idea of prejusticial economic desert does not. If this is correct, says Scheffler, then non-desert theories of distributive justice are consistent with an appreciation of the more general role played by desert in our moral thought.

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Consequently, there is no *a priori* reason why such theories should not be seriously considered.

Like Scheffler, Miller aims in 'Comparative and Noncomparative Desert' to reconcile desert with comparative justice. But, whereas Scheffler distinguishes the desert that is compatible with holism (comparative justice) from that which is not, Miller distinguishes the holism of ideal justice from that of actual practice. Miller takes as his starting point Joel Feinberg's influential paper 'Justice and Personal Desert' (1963), teasing out Feinberg's triadic relation of the subject, the desert basis, and the mode of treatment deserved to show the extent to which the latter two components are comparative. Making room for a comparative notion of desert is one part of Miller's attempt to show, *contra* Scheffler, that this concept can play a significant role in discussions of distributive justice. The other part is Miller's argument that the demands of comparative justice are parasitic upon non-comparative justice. According to Miller, in ideal conditions, that a person should actually get what she deserves is obvious given the non-comparative demands of desert-based justice. Only in non-ideal conditions where non-comparative justice breaks down (because it is sometimes not possible for everyone to get what he deserves) is there an additional requirement of comparative justice that persons receive, in proportion to each other, benefits or burdens reflective of what they ideally deserve.

Of the two approaches, Miller's is perhaps the more appealing. Although Scheffler's thesis is modest, his attack on desert focuses too narrowly on economic desert, overlooking considerations like welfare, opportunities, rights and liberties, which, like primary goods, can be the currency of distributive desert. Given their normative underpinnings, such considerations could support the claim that the desert which is essential to our moral practices of praise and blame does play a central role in distributive justice. Scheffler's article is noteworthy, however, for suggesting an asymmetry between the minor role (in his view) that desert plays in distributive justice and the fundamental role that it plays in retributive justice. Miller, who also discusses retributive justice, offers a credible defence of desert as a principle of distributive justice while highlighting the complexities of the concept of *desert*. He demonstrates the importance of considering a range of cases before judging desert as either comparative or non-comparative.

This collection of original articles, commendable for the fresh insights it contributes to the growing debate about desert, combines detailed treatment of a variety of issues by prominent contributors with a clear and accessible Introduction that centres these contributions within a wider context. The articles are interesting and informative, though, at times, they seem isolated from one other. Given that the collection arose from a conference on desert and justice, greater cohesiveness perhaps might have been achieved. Despite this, the collection is a valuable resource for those interested in distributive justice, desert and egalitarianism, and the direction that debates on these topics will take in the near future.

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