

John Stuart Mill on suicide.¹

Íñigo Álvarez Gálvez²
(ialvarezg@u.uchile.cl)

Recibido: 13/05/2017

Aceptado: 22/06/2017

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo. 833783

Abstract:

John Stuart Mill didn't take his life; but he could have done it. Had he done it when he was twenty (as he planned), we would have never known what he thought about it. But he didn't. And many years later he wrote about nature, God, religion and autonomy. My aim in this article is to show how his thoughts about nature and theism affect in fact his stance about autonomy to commit suicide.

Key-words: Mill – Suicide – Nature – Religion – Autonomy.

¹ The Spanish version of this article was published in: *Acta Bioethica* 2016, 22(2), pp. 241-250. It is part of the Research Project number 1140721 (Fondecyt Regular): "La pregunta por la naturaleza del suicidio".

² Lawyer. PhD in Philosophy. Professor at University of Chile.

1. Introduction

John Stuart Mill didn't take his life³. But he could have done it in 1826. Had he had to defend his decision at that time, he would have probably based his ideas on the same conceptions about nature and human beings expressed many years later.

In this article I would like to show how Mill's essays about nature, about its origin, about religion and about the existence and attributes of God, are linked to his stance towards suicide. I think Mill has a favourable opinion about suicide and I believe that we can find some clues in other essays written by Mill at that time. Besides, we can find out another important connection in his mental crisis: Perhaps the best way to show Mill's position in favour of suicide is by remembering that he was on the verge of it in 1826⁴.

We can see those ideas about nature in three essays: "Nature", "Utility of Religion" and "Theism"⁵. Although these articles were written during a long period of his life, we can see in them, firstly, a unity of thought; and, secondly, that they are consistent with the ideas expressed in *Utilitarianism* or in *On Liberty*⁶.

2. Mill's ideas on nature, god and religion

In general terms, Mill thinks that nature is amoral; and that being so, one cannot extract from it useful moral principles or moral guides for life (Mill, 1985: 377)⁷. And what is more, if we were to interpret it in moral terms, we would say that all we see is the result

³ He died in his bed on May 7th., 1873, from erysipelas, contracted four days before (Packer, 1954: 507-508).

⁴ In a negative sense, some people –for example Rv Howowat- also link Mill's mental crisis (and his plan to commit suicide) to his ideas about religion, which –they say- were the result of his father's education (Stack, 2011: 184). In any case (accepting the negative or the positive interpretation), Mill's life was indeed the reflection of his beliefs, as Berlin says (Berlin, 1991: 132).

⁵ I will refer to these three essays as "Mill 1985". "Nature" goes from page 373 to page 402; "Utility of Religion" goes from page 403 to page 428; and "Theism" goes from page 429 to page 489. A brief description of the three can be found –for example- in McCloskey (1971: 161-173).

⁶ By the way, the death of Harriet Taylor (in 1858) apparently didn't affect him to the extent of making him change his mind in this respect (Mill, 1981: 193-195; Mill, 1996: 44).

⁷ As he puts it: "Conformity to nature, has no connection whatever with right and wrong" (Mill, 1985: 400).

of the cruelest, wickedest and most unjust human being⁸. Nature, as it is, cannot be our life pattern; and much less can it be seen as the work of a good and omnipotent being (in that case, what reason could we give for the existence of evil?; every imaginable atrocity could be justified on that basis)⁹. So, we can't find out anything morally useful from the way nature is or from the supposed intentions of God.

Religion, in fact, is a very bad adviser. If there is something useful as a life pattern it is the utility principle; and if there is any religion to be guided by, it is the religion of utility, the true religion of humanity, which leads human beings toward a progressive and constant moral perfection. We cannot deny that religion has been the traditional vehicle for morals, but that doesn't mean it is the only one. On the contrary, it isn't difficult to understand that the function that religion had in the past is not necessary anymore (Mill, 1985: 430). Nowadays we can hold similar ideas (about altruism, love, dignity, etc.) and reach the same goals on a different basis. The unlimited progress of our species, for example, can be a noble goal for our life (Mill, 1985: 420); struggling for general good, fighting for human excellence or making an effort to love the world, are noble goals too; and they are big enough for any human life, and good enough to become the source of our earthly happiness, beyond the anxieties about the future life (Mill, 1985: 421).

This doesn't mean, says Mill, that we should deny from the start all the references to the supernatural, but all of them are the result of our imagination, and only acceptable in so far as they are compatible with our scientific knowledge and with our moral sentiments (Mill, 1985: 429-430). In other words, those thoughts are only acceptable in so far as we reject the idea of an omnipotent creator and conceive life as the result of the opposition between a planned good and the ungovernable matter (Mill, 1985: 425). That being so we will also be able to explain the existence of evil and conceive ourselves as God helpers (Mill, 1985: 425, 489). Besides, we can link this to the idea of the religion of humanity, for

⁸ Speaking about nature events, he says: "All this, Nature does with the most supercilious disregard both of mercy and of justice" (Mill, 1985: 385).

⁹ Mill is less polite: "Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good which ever was framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism, can the government of Nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent" (Mill, 1985: 389). And later: "But if imitation of the Creator's will as revealed in nature, were applied as a rule of action in this case, the most atrocious enormities of the worst men would be more than justified by the apparent intention of Providence that throughout all animated nature the strong should prey upon the weak" (Mill, 1985: 399).

we can consider that general good and the progress of humanity are our main moral goals and, at the same time, defend the possibility (but just the possibility) of the existence of a benevolent being and a divine plan (Mill, 1985: 426).

No doubt some people need this kind of hope and comfort, but there are other people capable of enjoying this earthly life, feeling themselves as part of humanity, in constant progress, and never worrying about the future life (Mill, 1985: 427). These people know that they can find their true reward in this world and they understand that true happiness means to die when one has enjoyed from top to bottom the pleasures that life can offer and nothing is left to “stimulate curiosity and keep up the desire of prolonged existence” (Mill, 1985: 428).

I think this idea is totally compatible with the defense of suicide. As we have seen, Mill says that an important part of our happiness consists in dying when nothing else is left to desire. Of course, from an objective point of view, we can understand that this means that our life should finish by itself when it has lasted long and we have enjoyed it to its final moments, and never before that (whether we like it or not); but we can also understand that the crucial moment of death depends, in fact, on the particular interpretation of our own life, and that it can be pursued by ourselves as the last piece of our existence.

Anyway, the important issue is that even if we assume that Mill is against suicide, it's quite clear that he thinks that no religious doctrine would be strong enough to support this idea. In general terms, the doctrines which defend the existence of several gods or of an unpredictable god (as theism does) are valueless, for they are inconsistent with the existence of a world ruled by general laws (Mill, 1985: 432-433). Those other theories based on the idea of a general consent are worthless (firstly, because there's no such thing as a general consent, and secondly, because even if it existed, it could never be a sound basis) (Mill, 1985: 442). The same happens to those doctrines based upon the idea of a clear perception of our conscience (for we cannot build any knowledge upon it) (Mill, 1985: 444), and to those others which conceive God's mind as the first cause of everything (because it's not true that everything that exists has a cause –energy, for example- and because we don't need that answer when we have natural ones at our disposal) (Mill, 1985: 437-439).

In short, the only possible argument (for it is an empirical and inductive one) is the argument of the divine plan: in the same way we can tell there is a plan behind all the things made by man, we can see a similar plan behind the natural order, and we can infer from that the existence of someone who has the intention to do things as they are. Of course, this analogy is too weak, and that being so, we can only affirm that the idea of a divine planner is more likely than the opposite (also possible) (Mill, 1985: 449-450). It is not a certainty, but may be sufficient.

However, even if we accept this conclusion, this doesn't mean that we know everything about the nature of that divine planner. It would be sensible to think that a doctrine against suicide and based upon God's will should stand on some special divine attributes. But in this point the traditional doctrine is also too weak. If, as it has been said, the idea of a divine plan is the only defensible one, then we cannot affirm the divine omnipotence (for he who is omnipotent doesn't need any plan) nor the omniscience (because it is obvious that the defects of nature can't be the result of an infinitely wise creator) (Mill, 1985: 451-453). In conclusion, we have to think that either God has limited power and cannot make his plan in a better way (because the material he works with doesn't allow him to do everything he wishes), or He doesn't know how to do it (Mill, 1985: 455).

But that said, does this idea allow us to know anything about his intention for human beings? From what we know, perhaps we can say that he wanted things to be durable for a limited period of time; but from that we can infer nothing about his disposition related to human beings (Mill, 1985: 457). Perhaps he had benevolent purposes and he wanted us to be happy, but it is obvious that this goal couldn't be his only one, if we take into consideration all the pain that we see around us (Mill, 1985: 458)¹⁰. And the same can be said about divine justice, of which we find out no trace in nature (Mill, 1985: 459).

In brief, from natural theology we can reach the three following conclusions (provided always that God exists): first, that he has great but limited power (and we cannot know the reason for such bounds); second, that he has great but also limited intelligence; and third, that he wishes (or agrees with) the happiness of his creatures, although it seems

¹⁰ "But to jump from this –says Mill– to the inference that his sole or chief purposes are those of benevolence, and that the single end and aim of Creation was the happiness of his creatures, is not only not justified by any evidence but is a conclusion in opposition to such evidence as we have" (Mill, 1985: 458).

as if he has had other motives for his actions (so that happiness is not his only aim). Everything that goes beyond this point is just the result of our desires (Mill, 1985: 459).

We reach now our main point of interest. If we conceive God this way, we can also wonder about the creatures he made; in particular, about the attributes he gave us, and specifically about the property of immortality. Of course, our experience shows us that the death of our organism implies the cessation of our mental activity (Mill, 1985: 461). But our experience has its bounds too, and beyond them we can imagine that a divine being with a limited power and a relative benevolent will has given us immortality (Mill, 1985: 466)¹¹.

This is Mill's proposal about nature, about God's existence and attributes, and about immortality and revelation. It is clear that Mill considers himself sceptic or agnostic, since he says nothing definitive beyond science and denies what it seems to be incompatible with it (for example, omnipotence or omniscience). He admits that all we can say is that we don't know whether a creator exists or not; that, in the case he exists, he is just the creator of order but not of the universe (matter and energy are not part of his creation); that he has limited power and limited benevolence; and that perhaps (but just perhaps) he gave us immortality (Mill, 1985, 482). In his own words: "The whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of Belief into that of simple Hope" (Mill, 1985: 483).

We can be hopeful about things being that way, and that's important enough. We, human beings, have a short and limited life, full of misery and privation; that's why we need to let grow our aspirations and the idea of our destiny (Mill, 1985: 483). It is not insane that we let our imagination develop enough to fulfill that wish, taking advantage of all those fields that science cannot harvest, and considering another elements that make life attractive and nice (Mill, 1985: 485). And if reason is necessary for knowledge, imagination can be necessary for life (for religious people and for the sceptical ones); in fact, for all

¹¹ Is much more difficult to hold this idea upon the basis of a divine revelation through miracles, because we have very few and weak evidences (Mill, 1985: 470). We don't have direct experience of those supernatural events, and the witness evidence is even more fragmentary and imperfect (Mill, 1985: 478). What we can affirm, according to science, is that world events are produced by natural causes, and God's government, if it exists, is also produced by the same causes.

those who want to strengthen the religion of humanity (i.e. the religion of moral duties built by utilitarianism) (Mill, 1985: 488)¹².

At this point, it is important to remark, on the one hand, that these conclusions belong to the field of the imagination (in this sense, they have little impact on our lives); and on the other hand, that whatever their influence might be, we cannot found our moral duties on them. We may think that by doing our duties we are helping God and contributing to the fulfillment of his plan, but we cannot conclude from that idea that good depends on God's will. In other words, good depends on the utilitarian principle; and it is this very principle the one that leads us to a moral conclusion about suicide.

3. On Mill's suicide and Mill on suicide

In the autumn of 1826, Mill suffered a breakdown (Mill, 1981: 139). Feeling hopeless and realizing that all his interest in human enhancement had been gone, he became more sad and desperate day by day, and he ended up considering the possibility of suicide¹³. We don't know what would have happened if Marmontel's *Memoirs* hadn't come to his hands¹⁴. In any case, what is important to us is that the idea of suicide was not a weird one. It is true that he doesn't say (in his *Autobiography*) that suicide is the best option at all times, nor that it is acceptable just because one decides to commit it. But it is also true that he doesn't say that taking one's life is in itself morally reprehensible or rejectable¹⁵. So, the fact of killing oneself doesn't seem to deserve any negative judgment in itself, neither religious nor moral (we may suppose that some negative judgment would have

¹² Millar thinks that, in this case, Mill is going too far. To set this hope, as Mill does, where there is no reason to think about supernatural, doesn't fit with the ideas expressed in the essay (Millar, 1998: 198-199).

¹³ "I frequently asked myself –he says-, if I could, or if I was bound to go on living, when life must be passed in this manner. I generally answered to myself, that I did not think I could possibly bear it beyond a year" (Mill, 1981: 145).

¹⁴ The reading of a specific part of those *Memoirs* made him cry and realize that he still had some emotions worth considering. From then on he started his recovery and his deviation from the standard benthamite utilitarianism. For an interesting psychoanalytic interpretation of his mental crisis and his recovery, see Mazlish (1975: 205-230).

¹⁵ We can also reach the same conclusion reading certain parts of his *Diary*. On March 12th., 1854 he wrote about his wife, Harriet: "But when I am nearest to feeling in myself some likeness to the one being who is all the world to me, or when I make the greatest return of love for her most affecting love and kindness to me, then I am ready to kill myself for not being like her and worthy of her" (Mill, 1988: 660).

arisen if he had regretted his former decision of 1826 or if he had thought that it was immoral or sinful in the end).

I think we can link this idea to those ones presented in *On Liberty*¹⁶. In this essay Mill defends the necessity of limiting the power of society upon the individual; the necessity of avoiding the tyranny of the majority, which prevents the individual from developing their original character and leads their conduct according to the point of view of those who ruled society (Mill, 1991: 9-11)¹⁷.

Mill wonders to what extent this interference and this control are acceptable. The answer is well known:

“The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. [...] The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him must be calculated to produce evil to some one else. The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign” (Mill, 1991: 14).

This long paragraph is worth quoting for we can find in it the main idea we want to show, which is that every individual has a space of liberty closed to social compulsion (whatever this is); included in this space are all the behaviours which affect only the individual and are harmless to others.

There are some ideas we need to point out. Firstly, this assertion is meant to be true just for the adult members of civilized societies (Mill, 1991: 14-15) (as Gray puts it, that means that autarchy is a necessary condition for autonomy (Gray, 1991b: 198)). Secondly, we have to consider that what is forbidden is compulsion, coercion and control by means of punishment. We can argue with anybody about anything, advice them or implore them to

¹⁶ The quotes from pages 5 to 128 belong to *On Liberty*; those ones from pages 129 to 201 belong to *Utilitarianism*.

¹⁷ In his words: “All that makes existence valuable to any one, depends on the enforcement of restraints upon the actions of other people” (Mill, 1991: 9).

do something, but we cannot force them to do what they don't want to do. Of course, in practice the limit between orders and petitions is not clear, but theoretically at least, we can draw the line: if we consider that some behaviour is reprehensible and worth punishing, whatever we may do to prevent a person from doing it might be called a means of compulsion; if, on the contrary, we consider that in a given moment a person is free to act as they wish, whatever we may do to prevent them from doing it might be called a means of persuasion (and not a means of control). We must also remember that when Mill refers to morals and to simple convenience (in *Utilitarianism*) (Mill, 1991: 184), he differentiates between the two fields by saying that only in the first one we can speak on duties. For him, there are a large number of things that we would like others to do, but that we know they are not forced to do, so we accept they don't deserve punishment for not doing them (Mill, 1991: 184). And we can see the same in *On Liberty*, when he refers to those behaviours which we cannot control by means of punishment because we owe nothing to society for doing what only affects us¹⁸. Of course, we may think that everything a person does affects society, in one way or another. Nevertheless, it is plainly clear that some behaviours only affect others in an abstract and indirect manner; in particular, all those whose direct and primary effects have a bearing just on the person who acts (Mill, 1991: 16)¹⁹. So, we can say there's a space of liberty around everyone, inside of which the individual decides by him or herself, free from social compulsion (even though, Mill says, that compulsion had made them happier). Since utilitarianism defends that we have to promote the maximum happiness, this is a surprising statement for an utilitarian. If we want to hold a consistent utilitarianism, we can only affirm that increasing the happiness of the individual by means of compulsion is not our moral duty, if we compensate the lost of happiness in some way. I think that's precisely Mill's idea: If we allow society to take control of the free area of the individual, we will generate such a reduction of happiness that it seems reasonable that we

¹⁸ I think Mill is not totally clear in this point. The individual does not deserve punishment for those behaviours, but that doesn't mean –he says– that we cannot consider them mad or inferior, or that we cannot avoid or alienate them (Mill, 1991: 85-86). For Mill, those are natural consequences of the free activity of the individual and their fellow creatures, and we cannot regard them as real punishment (Mill, 1991: 86). If, as Ryan says for example, stating an action as incorrect implies admitting it as harmful (Ryan, 1991: 166), then we would have to say the action of the individual is not incorrect. But that's useless information for them, because the individual could not tell the difference between being punished and being considered a lunatic or a social outcast.

¹⁹ In this sense, we can distinguish, as Rees holds, between behaviours which simply affect others and behaviours which affect other's interests (Rees, 1991: 180).

should reject it in the very name of happiness. The maximum of happiness is reached when we allow people to do their will (so far as they don't hurt others), although, in our opinion, they could be making themselves miserable²⁰.

That liberty allows us to associate with others (whoever they are), feel or think whatever we want and live our lives as we wish. Mill is clear in this point: We have the freedom "of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow; without impediment from our fellow creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong" (Mill, 1991: 17). I think this quote would be enough to conclude that, for Mill, suicide is defensible: If I can think whatever I want about morals and religion, and design my own life plan, then it is obvious that I can decide how to live and when my existence shall come to an end, despite the opinion and the will of others (unless my acts are harmful to them). For those who think that this quote is not enough, there are, as I see it, more evidences in the next pages, in which Mill writes about the freedom of thought (precisely, this is the freedom which is involved in the debate about suicide). In effect, suicide has nothing to do with the right of life. This right protects me against others, but it says nothing about my will to take my own life. Of course, if I couldn't take my life, we would have to admit that I have the duty to live (instead of a right of life). But if what we want to express is not only that I don't have such duty but that my decision of taking my life is also protected against the intrusion of others, then we need to speak in terms of rights and look for the specific right which allows me to do so, i.e. the right to free thought. It is obvious that this right cannot be confined to mental activity (or mental acts), for this activity is, in fact, free, and doesn't need to be protected by any right. On the contrary, the right of free thought only makes sense in so far as it is referred to external behaviours. As I see it, this is what Mill wants to say when he links the freedom of thought to the freedom to design our own life plan (Mill, 1991: 16-17). His proposal is clear: The opinions or acts of a person can be controlled when they are harmful to others, "but –says Mill- if he refrains from molesting others in what concerns them, and merely acts

²⁰ "Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest" (Mill, 1991: 17). For Mill, a great part of our happiness and true development is due to the respect for our own nature (as Gray (1991b: 201), Skorupski (1989: 348, 357) or Donner (1998: 231) remember). In other words, society is happier (that's the gain) because its members are happier. But it is also a big deal for society (and for humanity) because social and economic progress depend, in the end, on that individuality (Wilson, 1998: 233; Clor 1998: 223).

according to his own inclination and judgement in things which concern himself, the same reasons which show that opinion should be free, prove also that he should be allowed, without molestation, to carry his opinions into practice at his own cost” (Mill, 1991: 62-63). Surely, not all behaviours are equally valuable, but that doesn’t matter too much, because what is important is the development and the strengthening of our attributes of judgement and reasoning as a result of what we are (Mill, 1991: 65)²¹. This is what we should protect; even if we might think that in a given case the person is mistaken. As Mill says: “It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it” (Mill, 1991: 66). What humanity loses with people who copy others, it gains with people capable of putting into practice their aptitudes and deciding by themselves. The first ones are the mediocre men referred by Ingenieros (2013: 40), or the mass-men referred by Ortega (1993: 49)²². The second ones express the desirable condition of human nature. They are people capable of having original ideas and feelings²³; and they are valuable and praiseworthy whatever their ideas and feelings are²⁴. As we have said, that doesn’t mean that we cannot control them when they wrong others and because they prevent others from developing their capabilities; but beyond that, any control measure can be seen as arbitrary and despotic, and weakens our human nature, because individuality is one of the elements of human welfare (Mill, 1991: 70-71). So, by letting individuality to develop by itself we promote happy societies and useful, strong and free human beings (in other terms, by putting an end to freedom we put an end to the very source of social improvement and progress (Mill, 1991: 78))²⁵.

Mill affirms 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,

²¹ Skorupski refers to this idea when he says that on the one hand, Mill accepts that people have different ideas according to their different types of life, and on the other hand, he suggests some ideals of life, which –says Skorupski- is not contradictory. “It would be incompatible with [utilitarianism] to prescribe them to those who do not share them –except on grounds of utility” (Skorupski, 1989: 362).

²² By the way, for Skorupski (1989: 354), Mill’s proposal is, of course, against authoritarianism, but it is not at all against elitism. On the contrary, Donner (1998: 233) sees some elements which would lean Mill’s position towards radical egalitarianism.

²³ And therefore ideas which can be attributed to them. As Smith (1991: 247) says, Mill is trying to show how freedom is necessarily linked to responsibility.

²⁴ Which may be, in fact, really despicable. Perhaps, as Clor says (1998: 216), Mill holds human beings in high regard and thinks they can only do good when they act spontaneously.

²⁵ Arneson (1998: 263) is referring to the same idea when he says that “even in extreme cases where individuals voluntarily choose catastrophe for themselves, intervention will weaken the general atmosphere of freedom that we know is as difficult to maintain as it is necessary to human flourishing”.

but because it is his own mode” (Mill, 1991: 75); and later he insists: “Neither one person, nor any number of persons, is warranted in saying to another human creature of ripe years, that he shall not do with his life for his own benefit what he chooses to do with it” (Mill, 1991: 84). Since there is no harm to others (or at least a risk of harm) we can interpret any repercussion of those decisions as a drawback that society has to bear for the sake of liberty (Mill, 1991: 91). It is certainly not the clearest distinction that has ever been drawn and perhaps Gray (1991a: XIX) might be right when he affirms that Mill’s conception of human interest and harm is so vague that we can hardly guess how his principle is to be applied, so, in practice, it turns out to be almost useless)²⁶. Be as it may, the crucial idea is that people have an impregnable domain. We may not accurately know its scope but we do know it exists, that is to say we know there are, without a doubt, cases in which nobody is harmed²⁷.

What we need to find out is whether suicide is one of these cases. As we can see, in these passages Mill is not referring specifically to suicide, but I believe that this radical defence of the liberty of action and freedom of thought allows us to think that suicide is part of them. In other words, I cannot see the reason for removing the way our life should finish from these decisions (even though that decision affects others).

We may wonder whether Mill thought that suicide should not be considered as a free decision and had in the end a perfectionist approach to nature and human life. I think Gray (1991b: 208-210) is right when he denies this interpretation, because I think that the only limits set by Mill are implicit in the very formulation of the principle. We can see this apropos of some remarks about slavery. Mill says that we cannot use our freedom for becoming a slave, because by doing so we would be putting an end to our freedom. In his words: “The principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free. It is not freedom, to be allowed to alienate his freedom” (Mill, 1991: 114). Of course, we may think that if we cannot sell ourselves as slaves, much less could we take our lives, for we would be using our freedom to put an end to our freedom. Nevertheless, as I see it, there is an important difference between both situations. What Mill does in *On Liberty* is to set a rule:

²⁶ We can see similar ideas in, for example, Skorupski (1989: 342), Smith (1991: 240), Clor (1998: 208) or even Rees (1991: 183), although he nevertheless defends the principle.

²⁷ In the same way, Rees (1991: 172) says that it is a misunderstanding to suppose –as critics do– that the validity of Mill’s principle depends on the existence of behaviours which do not affect society at all. Strictly speaking, there may not be such behaviours, but, to Rees, it is obvious that there are behaviours which don’t affect *others’ interests* in any way, and that’s what Mill points out (Rees, 1991: 174).

“We must be free to decide by ourselves in matters which affect only us”. Since it is a rule we have no chance to repeal it and it has to be enforced despite our will. That’s why we cannot sell ourselves as slaves, because being a slave means not being free to decide (we would have repealed the rule). But that doesn’t mean I cannot do at all times what other person wants me to do. In practice, the slave and I could be doing the same, but I could decide to do my own will whenever I wanted to and the slave couldn’t. In other words, the rule (“I’m free to decide”) still exists for me, whereas for the slave it doesn’t exist anymore. In other words, we cannot become slaves (because that means we would have repealed the rule), but we can behave as slaves by using the very freedom the rule gives us.

In the same way, I can observe the rule and nevertheless make it inapplicable, in a given time frame or forever. Let’s take, for example, the right of assembly. I can flee to a desert island (with enough food for the rest of my life) and burn my boat so that I can’t come back. From that day on, I obviously won’t be able to meet anybody; but that doesn’t mean I repealed the rule. The rule still exists for me, but I have set some specific conditions for making it inapplicable, and that’s totally different (I can still meet with people if I want; the thing is there is nobody to meet with). The same happens when it comes to suicide. It is not by taking my life that I am repealing the rule. The rule still exists for me. I’ve just set the conditions for making it inapplicable (forever)²⁸.

As I see it, this is what Mill defends (although without saying it explicitly). And I think we can link this favourable position concerning suicide to his views on human nature, God and immortality. He probably wouldn’t have been in favour of suicide if he had thought that God existed beyond any doubt and was the author of the moral law or that we had an immortal soul. But, on the contrary, he thinks that we can’t say that nature is subject to God’s laws nor that we owe him obedience. We can suppose that God exists, so far this idea is not incompatible with science, but that means it is not true knowledge and it cannot be the basis of utilitarian morals. Beyond this theist approach, Mill says we have an absolute freedom of doing whatever we want, since it only affects us and doesn’t harm others. Whichever it is the concept of harm Mill is referring to, I think the act consisting in taking our own life (if not harmful to others) is an example of this free behaviour. And I

²⁸ I’m not trying to discuss whether Mill is talking about the kind of people who is concerned about personal development and progress (for this see Smith, 1991: 257-258). Anyway, it is possible to consider suicide as the final point of that personal development and progress.

think Mill couldn't have defended this position if he had adopted a religious approach on nature and human beings.

As a conclusion, nature has nothing to do with morals. By thinking in it as the moral criterion for our lives we accept something irrational (because humanity has always been trying to take distance from nature) and immoral (because what we see in nature is what we reject from a moral point of view). So the question we need to ask is not 'What would nature do in this case?' but 'How much happiness does this act produce?'

Bibliography

- Arneson, R.J. (1998): "Mill versus Paternalism". In: Smith GW, ed. *John Stuart Mill's Social and Political Thought, Critical Assessments*. London: Routledge; 1998 II. p. 253-272.
- Berlin, I. (1991): "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life". In: Gray J, Smith GW, eds. *J. S. Mill On Liberty in Focus*. London: Routledge; 1991. p. 131-161.
- Clor, H.M. (1998): "Mill and Millians on Liberty and Moral Character". In: Smith GW, ed. *John Stuart Mill's Social and Political Thought, Critical Assessments*. London: Routledge; 1998 II. p. 207-227.
- Donner, W. (1998): "Mill on Liberty of Self-development". In: Smith GW, ed. *John Stuart Mill's Social and Political Thought, Critical Assessments*. London: Routledge; 1998 II. p. 228-237.
- Gray, J. (1991a): "Introduction". In: Mill JS. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1991. p. VII-XXXV.
- Gray, J. (1991b): "Mill's Conception of Happiness and the Theory of Individuality". In: Gray J, Smith GW, eds. *J. S. Mill On Liberty in Focus*. London: Routledge; 1991. p. 190-211.
- Ingenieros, J. (2013): *El hombre mediocre*. Barcelona: Brontes; 2013.
- Marmontel, J.F. (1999): *Mémoires*. Paris: Mercure de France; 1999.
- Mazlish, B. (1975): *James and John Stuart Mill. Father and Son in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Basic Books; 1975.
- McCloskey, H.J. (1971): *John Stuart Mill: A Critical Study*. London: MacMillan and Co.; 1971.
- Mill, J.S. (1981): Autobiography. In: Robson JM, Stillingner J., eds. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. I, *Autobiography and Literary Essays*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 1981. p. 1-290.
- Mill, J.S. (1985): "Three Essays on Religion". In: Robson J.M., ed. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. X, *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 1985. p. 369-489.

- Mill, J.S. (1988): "Diary 1854". In: Robson J.M. ed. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. XVII, *Journals and Debating Speeches Part II*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 1988. p. 639-671.
- Mill, J.S. (1991): *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1991.
- Millar, A. (1998): "Mill on Religion". In: Skorupski J, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1998. p. 176-202.
- Ortega y Gasset, J. (1993): *La rebelión de las masas*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe; 1993.
- Packe, M.S.J. (1954): *The Life of John Stuart Mill*. New York: The MacMillan Company; 1954.
- Rees, J.C. (1991): "A Re-reading of Mill *On Liberty*". In: Gray J, Smith GW, eds. *J. S. Mill On Liberty in Focus*. London: Routledge; 1991. p. 169-189.
- Ryan, A. (1991): "John Stuart Mill's Art of Living". In: Gray J, Smith GW, eds. *J. S. Mill On Liberty in Focus*. London: Routledge; 1991. p. 162-168.
- Smith, G.W. (1991): "Social Liberty and Free Agency". In: Gray J, Smith GW, eds. *J. S. Mill On Liberty in Focus*. London: Routledge; 1991. p. 239-259.
- Skorupski, J. (1989): *John Stuart Mill*. London: Routledge; 1989.
- Stack, D. (2011): "The Death of John Stuart Mill". *The Historical Journal* 2011; 54(1): 167-190.
- Wilson, F. (1998): "Mill on Psychology and the Moral Sciences". In: Skorupski J, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1998. p. 203-254.