

# John Stuart Mill history and influences sociology essay



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John Stuart Mill has been regarded as an influential philosopher of the nineteenth century, as a result of his contributions to psychology. Though aspects of his early education and family life are noted as less than pleasant, he has been described as one of the great British liberal thinkers (King, Viney, & Woody, 2009). John Stuart Mill is the son of James Mill, a well-known philosopher, who subscribed to the fundamental mechanical method of association, founded by David Hartley (King et al., 2009). James Mill subscribed to the ideals of John Locke, suggesting that at birth, a child's mind is without knowledge, which only experience would fulfill (Schultz & Schultz, 2011). As a result of his beliefs, John Mill ensured that his son was educated and provided with numerous experiences, neglecting other important aspects of his emotional and social growth (Schultz & Schultz, 2011).

John Stuart Mill was born in 1806 and was strictly and systematically educated by his father from an early age, failing to experience pleasures of childhood and emotional sanctity (King et al., 2009). It may be assumed that due to his intensive lifestyle and lack of emotional expression, Mill suffered from severe depression. In the midst of his depressive state, Mill began utilizing arts as a way to explore his feelings, before overcoming his state (King et al., 2009). After establishing a friendship with Harriet Taylor, Mill was able to express his emotions, while furthering his intellectual work (King et al., 2009). Eventually, they married and Mill attributes much of his philosophical work to Taylor (Schultz & Schultz, 2011). Though he felt strongly on aspects of gender equality, it was not until after her death, that he was inspired to write about the disparities experienced by women

(Schultz & Schultz, 2011). The main themes of Mill's philosophical life work, regarding the advancement of psychology, are centered on association and utilitarianism (King et al., 2009).

## **Associationism**

James Mill and John Stuart Mill have been noted as the founders of “associative psychology” by many (Shiraev, 2011, p. 99). John Stuart Mill maintained a similar belief as his father, regarding association as the principal law of human mind, but added an important distinction (Wertheimer, 2012). His father's view of associationism centered on the premise that complex ideas are made up of simple ideas (Hergenhahn, 2009). When those simple ideas repeatedly occur together, they come to be associated as one idea (Hergenhahn, 2009). Hergenhahn (2009) elaborates this view and notes that a complex idea can always be broken down into the simple ideas that comprise it.

John Stuart Mill modified his father's mechanistic view, comparing it to a chemistry of the mind, where chemicals combine and result in a different element (Hergenhahn, 2009). He viewed one's knowledge base, as a result of experience and in terms of calculations, emphasizing one's ability to reason, as a result of making generalizations from experiences (Shiraev, 2011). Mill's reformed view, focused on the notion that basic ideas could occur together, producing an idea that was vastly different from the components that originally were comprised of it (Hergenhahn, 2009). Since ideas occurred together in the past, one idea could induce another and even enable one to have a belief about the connection, creating an association (Shiraev, 2011).

Furthermore, Mill argues that associationism can account for how humans learn. Mill compared causal relationships to the minds ability to expect what will happen in the world, enabling a basis for learning to anticipate events (Wilson, 2007). Additionally, Mill describes anticipation of pleasure as a motivating factor (Wilson, 2007). Through various instances of success at obtaining pleasure, individuals will seek pleasure because an association has already been established (Wilson, 2007). Mill's philosophy that new ideas can result from combined experiences brought about changes in the field of psychology.

## **Utilitarianism**

As a result of the work of Jeremy Bentham, utilitarianism is regarded as a principle of moral basis, which states that actions should provide the greatest good for the largest amount of people (King, et al., 2009). However, Mill differed in his views of utilitarianism, focusing on the consequences of an act and judging its worth based on the happiness it provides (Shiraev, 2011). Furthermore, Shiraev (2011) describes Mill's view of utilitarianism as a basis for determining if an action is correct, and if and only if, it affords pleasure for all who are influenced by the event. Mill regarded only those individuals who were knowledgeable, as having the ability to decide whether an action is in the best interest of all (Shiraev, 2011). Progressivism has been largely impacted by the utilitarian principles, which have contributed to social equality.

The ideals of progressivism were becoming largely influenced by women's role in the industrial realm. Nearing the twentieth century, large numbers of psychologists were recognizing similarities in their roles to social reformers, <https://assignbuster.com/john-stuart-mill-history-and-influences-sociology-essay/>

who were interested in the role of government in society (Shiraev, 2011). Mill was regarded as a scholar, whose role in progressivism was benefiting the greater good. His beliefs regarding feminism were comprised of empirical and utilitarian philosophy (King et al., 2009). Mill supported the equality of all women, declaring that the only differences that existed between men and women were those of social customs (Shiraev, 2011). Mill, alongside social scientists, challenged society's view of women as singularly subservient (Shiraev, 2011). Mill focused on society's view that women were deficient, by arguing that one is unable to have such a basis of knowledge, while women are unable to exert their abilities (King, et al., 2009). Though Mill demanded for changes in the view of women in society, inequalities remained prominent.

## **Epistemology**

Mill's belief regarding human understanding and the means by which information is acquired, is based on a posteriori knowledge (Wilson, 2007). Mill argued that the knowledge we acquire is based on experiences. He viewed human interaction in the environment as inductive, by which humans tend to make connections among features of unrelated experiences (Wilson, 2007). From those specific connections, humans begin to develop generalizations about their experience (Wilson, 2007). Mill uses his belief about induction, while working out the principles of investigative science, in the System of Logic, Book III (Wilson, 2007). Mill argues those generalizations about the world, as we come to understand, are used as a way to satisfy our needs; however some generalizations may be false (Wilson, 2007). Among the many different generalizations we maintain,

patterns begin to develop. Mill declares that we begin to understand that among all the generalizations, are laws that describe various events and we modify our beliefs, in order to detect the actual cause about an event (Wilson, 2007). The process that Mill describes is the foundation of the experimental method of science, which begins with a few hypotheses and a search for data by experimentation, ultimately concluding one true hypothesis (Wilson, 2007).

## **Empiricism**

Mill's view of empiricism, places limits on what he thought humans were capable of thinking (Wilson, 2007). He placed great emphasis on consciousness, asserting that humans can have knowledge of things that they are not conscious of, as a result of not experiencing all parts of the world (Wilson, 2007). More specifically, he explained that there are some things that are too small to be observed, without assistance or deliberately attending to them (Wilson, 2007). Mill concluded that the knowledge we acquire is not always a result of direct experiences, but conclusions we make from direct experience (Wilson, 2007). Furthermore, Mill clarifies his philosophy, by stating that our beliefs about things we have not observed, are processed as similar to what we already are conscious of (Wilson, 2007).

## **Psychological Contributions**

John Stuart Mill has contributed in numerous ways to the progression of psychology, as we know it today. The all-encompassing premise in his view of psychology is “ association and the pleasure principle” (King et al., 2009, p. 139). Mill's view on association can be applied to the principles of classical conditioning, clinical and applied psychology, cognitive-behavioral

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psychology, and experimental psychology. Similarly, his views on utilitarianism are related to the principles of social psychology. Though Mill's considerable influence on philosophy has impacted various aspects of human knowledge, his contributions to psychology have been fundamental in the development of psychology as a science.

## **Associationism and Psychology**

Mill's philosophical ideals can be compared to the model of classical conditioning. More specifically, his belief in the basis of learning is centered on the idea that one stimulus can signal another stimulus or idea, after being paired together. Mill's principle of association was based on the premise that ideas, which have occurred together in the past, have the ability to establish a relationship. As a result of his principle, he secondarily influenced other progressive thinkers, such as Ivan Pavlov, in regard to conditioned responses.

Mill's view of scientific psychology not only included the influence of the mind-body relationship, but ethology as well (King et al., 2009). Mill's new concept of ethology resembles the basis of clinical psychology studied today. Ethology was based on how individual personality traits among humans differ from one individual to another, enabling observation and experimental processes, to be utilized for study (King et al., 2009). As a result of Mill's ethology, he supported the theory of an “ applied psychology and a basic psychology” (King et al., 2009, p. 139). Also, Mill reasoned that science of the mind has the ability to be studied, enabling future changes in the field of psychology (Schultz & Schultz, 2011).

The fundamental aspects of associationism can be paralleled to the current study of cognitive-behavioral psychology. Though Mill provides little insight into his belief regarding the mind-body problem, it has been assumed that he believes the mind affects the body and vice-versa; however no causality is implied (Wilson, 2007). He regards these reciprocal events as practical, with no mystery to their actions (Wilson, 2007). Mill's assumption can be compared to the modern view of cognitive-behavioral psychology, in which thoughts impact our feelings and behaviors. Alternatively, aspects of our bodies can influence the way we feel, as well as our mental processing of events.

Associationism has further contributed to learning, enabling experimental psychologists to apply the principles, while studying human processing. Investigations were conducted on the association of a stimulus and response in learning, thus testing the association of mental thinking (Singh, 1991). The philosophical ideas of earlier associationists, enabled modern thinkers such as Hermann Ebbinghaus to investigate and develop a theory of learning, which is regarded as prominent knowledge in psychology today (Singh, 1991).

## **Utilitarianism and Psychology**

Mill's utilitarian principles on gender equality suggested an early foundation of social psychology. His perspective and writings on feminism enabled a greater understanding of women and how their equal role in society, could provide benefits and new perspectives (King et al., 2009). He discussed society's perception of women and how influences of greater society

maintain the inequality experienced. He ascribed to the principle that  
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improvements in society will augment the general good of many (Wilson, 2007). Furthermore, he asserts that each individual intends to make the most of his or her own happiness, subsequently increasing the happiness for all (Wilson, 2007). Among his many philosophical ideals, Mill supported various social agenda's, including freedom of speech, worldwide education, and a women's right to choice birth control (King et al., 2009). Each of Mill's various ideals focused on the interaction of society and how negative social perceptions impact the morals of social order.

## **Summary**

John Stuart Mill's philosophical work contributed to various aspects in society, but none more than the field of psychology. It is apparent that his strict upbringing and education were crucial in developing his philosophy of human nature and social agendas. Many aspects of his liberal thinking and psychological principles were ahead of his time and became the foundation of other progressive theories. His philosophical work has impacted many more progressive thinkers throughout history. Mill's philosophies remain engrained in the history of psychology, learning, and social thought, which continue to be debated today.