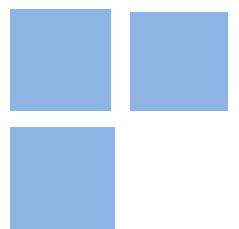


J. S. Mill's Ethology and his Engagement with the 'Women's Cause'

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This paper intends to analyze Mill's stance concerning an important Victorian issue: the role of women in society. Mill assumed the role of protagonist in this debate: in 1866, he presented an important petition in Parliament in favor of women's suffrage and, in 1869, he published *The Subjection of Women* – an important benchmark in nineteenth century feminism. I argue that underlying his position in this debate was a specific view of human nature, which located the origin of the existing differences between men and women in prevailing social institutions and habits. Mill's ethological analysis was central to his engagement in the women's cause on at least three levels: (i) it challenged the scientific authority of the prevailing theories, which considered gender differences innate/natural, and thus, inevitable, and opened ample space for social reform; (ii) it oriented Mill's reform agenda concerning women by pointing out the institutions and habits that produced and sustained the existing gender inequality; (iii) it furnished ammunition for the defense of the reforms, as it anticipated the great social improvement that women's political, social and economic emancipation would produce.

Keywords: J.S. Mill, Ethology, Women's emancipation

JEL Codes: B12, J12, Z10

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This paper intends to analyze Mill's stance concerning an important Victorian issue: the role of women in society. Mill assumed the role of protagonist in this debate: in 1866, he presented an important petition in Parliament in favor of women's suffrage and, in 1869, he published *The Subjection of Women* – an important benchmark in nineteenth century feminism. I argue that underlying his position in this debate was a specific view of human nature, which located the origin of the existing differences between men and women in prevailing social institutions and habits. Mill's ethological analysis was central to his engagement in the women's cause on at least three levels: (i) it challenged the scientific authority of the prevailing theories, which considered gender differences innate/natural, and thus, inevitable, and opened ample space for social reform; (ii) it oriented Mill's reform agenda concerning women by pointing out the institutions and habits that produced and sustained the existing gender inequality; (iii) it furnished ammunition for the defense of the reforms, as it anticipated the great social improvement that women's political, social and economic emancipation would produce.

I. Introduction:

In the 1860's and the beginning of the 1870's, a wide range of topics related to women's role in society was the subject of intense social debates. There were heated discussions over the laws of marriage and the right of married women to hold property, as well as over domestic violence, divorce, women's suffrage, and prostitution. There were also debates about the type of education given to women and the adequacy and consequences of opening to them professional fields such as medicine, law and politics.

J.S. Mill, the most prominent political economist of the mid nineteenth-century and a very influential voice in Victorian society, engaged arduously in these debates. He advanced a highly critical view of the condition of women at the time, and he argued for legal, economic and political equality between the two sexes.¹

Underlying his position concerning women was a specific view of human nature and character formation, a view that emphasized environmental factors and contrasted with the prevailing naturalistic conceptions of the time. By adopting an egalitarian stance concerning the nature of the two sexes, and attributing the existing differences to custom, education and other external factors, Mill interpreted the subordinate condition of women in Victorian society as an artificial social construct – and, as such, open to change. As I see it, this specific view human nature constituted the backbone of his mature advocacy

¹ Collini (1984 & 1993) classifies Mill among the English 'public moralists' – who demanded from their contemporaries that they live up to their moral ideals. In fact, especially in the last decades of his life, Mill performed intensively this role; he was a Member of Parliament and was at the center of several important debates, all of which acquired a high moral tone. As a public man, he consciously used his intellectual and moral reputation to promote the causes he believed important to the (moral) progress of humanity.

of women's emancipation and gave support to his reform agenda concerning women's position in society.

To shed light on Mill's views on human nature, and on how they furnished a fertile soil for his reform agenda regarding women, I have organized the rest of this paper in the following way. In Section II, I analyze Mill's pliable view of human nature and the denaturalization of gender differences of character that it entails. This view made room for altering women's position in society by means of social reform. Thus, in section III, I discuss the reforms in the social institutions that Mill deemed necessary to emancipate women and promote equality between the sexes. In section IV, I examine Mill's anticipation of the (beneficial) ethological impacts that these reforms would produce; and in Section V, some final considerations are advanced.

II. J.S. Mill and his ethological view of gender differences:

To emancipate women and to raise them to a position of social, legal, political and economic equality with men was a cardinal element of J.S. Mill's social philosophy throughout his life.² At the heart of his position concerning women was a pliable view of human nature, which explained the (undeniable) differences extant in the moral and intellectual features of the two sexes, not by differences in their biological natures, but by the action of external factors such as education, economic and social institutions, the legal order, and habits, among others (Mill, [1843] 1974, pg. 859).

J.S. Mill repeatedly criticized these dominant conceptions of his time, which considered the existing gender differences as ultimate facts, impossible of being either explained or altered (Mill, [1843] 1974, pg. 859; Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 277 e 312; Mill [1873] 1981, pg. 270). And, since these alleged natural/biological (thus, unchangeable) differences between the sexes legitimized the subordination of women in society, it is easy to understand why J.S. Mill considered these conceptions "[...] *one of the chief hindrances to the rational treatment of great social questions and one of the greatest stumbling blocks to human improvement*" (MILL, [1873], 1981, pg. 270). Therefore, to

² He was already an advocate for equality before he met Harriet Taylor, his lifelong friend and, afterwards, his wife. His ideas on sexual equality were said to be the reason why Harriet got interested in him in the first place (Mill, [1873] 1981, pg. 252, Peart, 2015, pg. xxxvii and Hayek, 2015, pg. 57). Moreover, the correspondence between Mill and Harriet during their years of friendship and marriage is evidence that this was a very dear issue for both (Hayek, 2015, pg. 57-72; 111/2; 119/20; 133; 137; 163-165; 310). However, Stafford states that Mill began as more conventional and sentimental about women, and that Harriet was "[...] *no doubt a good influence who progressively raised his conscience*" (STAFFORD, 1998, pg 131). Thus, Mill had already embraced the idea of equality between the sexes, long before he published his *System of Logic* (1843). Notwithstanding, I believe his position gained philosophical rigor after he elaborated his mature view on Psychology and Ethology in that book.

understand his position on women's role in society, it is necessary to analyze the view of human nature and of character formation at its foundation.

Mill's most extensive scientific explanation about the process of character formation is found in Book VI of his *System of Logic* (henceforth *Logic*), and his views on this topic are illustrated in numerous other works.

As a follower of the associationist psychology, Mill believed in the existence of universal laws of the association of ideas (the psychological laws or the laws of mind) and that the character of each individual was a result of the interaction of these laws with the specific circumstances experienced by him (Mill, 1974, pg. 863/4 and Mattos, 2005). He even invented a science – Ethology – that determined “[...] *the kind of character produced in conformity to those general laws, by any set of circumstances, physical and moral*” (MILL, [1843] 1974, pg. 869). Since many of these circumstances were common to a nation, J.S. Mill considered it possible to infer the type of national character that tended to be produced by the specific set of circumstances prevailing in a country (Mill, [1843] 1974, pg. 863/4; pg. 870 e pg. 873; Kawana, 2018).

Consistently with this view, Mill considered that the correct scientific procedure in the explanation of features of character that prevailed at a specific time and place was to relate them, as much as possible, to the general circumstances of that society – that is, to the current social and economic institutions, to the legal order, to habits and to education – “[...] *the residuum alone, when there proves to be any, being set down to the account of congenital predispositions*” (MILL, [1843] 1974, pg. 873).

The scientist, if successful in this endeavor, will have found the causes of the current peculiarities of character, and will be in a position to evaluate “[...] *how far they may be expected to be permanent, or by what circumstances they would be modified or destroyed*” (MILL, [1843] 1974, pg. 868).

Mill uses this approach to explain the prevailing gender differences of the time; and as his analysis identified the institutions and social habits that were the root these differences, it indicated the reforms in institutions that were necessary if equality among the sexes was to prevail.

II.1. Decoding the ‘nature’ of both sexes: an ethological analysis of *The Subjection of Women*.

Mill's classic essay *The Subjection of Women* (henceforth *Subjection*) is his most complete work on the issue of women.³ In this text he, again, attacks the tendency of his time to consider all traits perceived in any group of people as being natural “[...] *even when the most elementary, knowledge of the circumstances in which they have been placed, clearly points out the causes that made them what they are*” (MILL, 1869, pg. 277). It was his conviction that this erroneous philosophical attitude would only recede “[...] *before a sound psychology, laying bare the real root of much that is bowed down to as the intention of Nature and the ordinance of God* (MILL, 1869, pg. 263).⁴

I believe Mill's project in this essay was precisely to apply his ‘sound psychology’ to the analysis of the ‘nature’ of both sexes, that is, to provide an ethological analysis of gender conditions at the time, revealing the real causes of the observed differences between the sexes. This objective becomes clear when he defends the use of exactly the same scientific procedure established in his *Logic* in the context of gender discussions:

[...] however great and apparently ineradicable the moral and intellectual differences between men and women might be, the evidence of their being natural differences could only be negative. Those only could be referred to be natural, which could not possibly be artificial – the residuum, after deducting every characteristic of either sex which can admit of being explained from education or external circumstances (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 277)

Mill takes as his starting point the ‘natures’ of women and of men as they manifest themselves at the time, and then analyses the circumstances in order to evaluate if they were such as to engender the observed differences between the sexes (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 313). His aim was to show that circumstances could explain most of these dissimilarities, “[...] *without any difference of natural capacity* (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg.305) – the ‘residuum’, if it existed, would be much smaller than usually thought.

Against the current notion that the characteristics of the English women of the time were inherent to the nature of the feminine sex, Mill states, in a very famous passage

³ Mill already professed several of the ideas presented in his *Subjection* (1869) long before he published the essay. Similar ideas can be found decades earlier scattered throughout several unpublished writings and fragments such as “Marriage” [1832/3?], “Papers on Women’s Rights” [1847-50?], in a more organized (and radical) form in Harriet Taylor’s “Enfranchisement of Women” [1851] – in relation to which Collini states that “[...] *there is no doubt that he [J.S.Mill] whole-heartedly subscribed to its contents [...]*” (COLLINI, 1984, xxxii). Furthermore, J.S. Mill defended the same ideas in several public speeches delivered in defense of women’s suffrage, especially from the beginning of the 1860’s on. I chose to center my analysis in this section on the *Subjection* because this is his most coherent and mature work on the subject – and I believe it is very representative of his thoughts on women.

⁴ In the late 1840’s Mill was already convinced that a ‘sound psychology’ would be the best antidote for the existent conceptions on women. In a letter to Harriet Taylor dated from 1849, he affirms: “*I am convinced however that there are only two things which tend at all to shake this nonsensical prejudice: a better psychology & theory of human nature[...] & greater proofs by example of what women can do*” (HAYEK, 2015, pg. 137) – Mill presents both in his *Subjection*..

of *Subjection*, that “[w]hat is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others [...]” (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 276). Some parts of women’s nature were encouraged and nurtured, and others systematically repressed and curbed. Notwithstanding, Mill argued that many people confused the feminine character that resulted from these (artificial) actions with the very nature of women (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 276/277).⁵

Among the moral traits usually presumed as naturally feminine that Mill explained by means of these external circumstances were abnegation, self-sacrifice, disposition to serve, submissiveness, focus on the family, lack of interest in the general problems of humanity or society, and inconstancy, susceptibility and volubility.

For Mill, it was not surprising that, when compared to men, women were more willing to abnegate themselves and to sacrifice themselves for others. Social pressure and education perfectly explained this fact. All morality preached that the duty of women was to serve, to live for their husband and children, and to completely renounce their own preferences and desires (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 272). Women were “[...] *universally taught that they are born and created for self-sacrifice*” (MILL, [1869]1984, pg. 293).⁶

Furthermore, Mill argued that, in England, there were few worthy alternatives for women other than marriage – which was practically the only way to obtain social admiration. Given this situation, he concludes that “[...] *it would be a miracle if the object of being attractive to men had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character* (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 272). Additionally, in view of the fact that men considered “[...] *meekness, submissiveness, and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man, as an essential part of sexual attractiveness*” (MILL [1869] 1984, pg. 272), women were educated, and socially pressured, to conform to this model. In fact, for Mill, the whole course of women’s education aimed at instilling the notion that the ideal character of women was opposite to that of men: “[...] *not self-will and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others*” (MILL,

⁵ J.S. Mill argues that the qualities which different nations consider feminine by nature differ from country to country (Mill, [1869]1984, pg.312). This reveals that they are empirical generalizations and not principles of human nature.

⁶ John Ruskin, a very important moral voice in Victorian England ‘naturalizes’ some of these moral attributes and presents an idealized image of women as morally superior to men. For him, the two sexes had different natural attributes, which suited them for different spheres of activities (Cordea, 2013, pg. 117) – with important implications for women’s position in society. Men’s domain would be the public sphere of work and politics, whereas women should be protected (by men) from the hostile external reality and from the inevitable hardening of character it produced; and should perform mainly in the private sphere of the home, being a moral guide to men (Ruskin [1865] 1905, pg.121/122). Beyond this private sphere, only philanthropy was considered appropriate for women (Millet, 1970, pg. 78).

[1869] 1984, pg. 271). Thus, the submission of the wife to the husband and the subordinate position women occupied in society came to be seen as natural.⁷

Women's position in society also explained the alleged female bias in favor of their family interests, to the detriment of social interests (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg.321). In Mill's view, women dedicated their whole existence to guaranteeing the wellbeing and the success of the family, and were educated to think that these were the only people to whom they had any duties and the only ones worth their affection and attention. They also learned that they should not play any part in the public sphere, and that the general questions of humanity or society were outside their proper sphere or realm (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 321) – no wonder they felt and acted accordingly.

Mill also aimed at 'denaturalizing' the supposed inferiority of women in the use of abstract thought, in the arts and in science by associating their deficiencies in these areas to the lack of objective conditions to pursue and develop adequately these activities.⁸

He compares the production of the two sexes in philosophy, science and art and concludes that there are no first-rate works in these fields produced by women (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg.314). However, he did not accept this as a proof of their natural inferiority. On the contrary, he asks, "[i]s there any mode of accounting for this, without supposing that women are naturally incapable of producing them?" (MILL, [1869] 1984,

⁷ In this context, women could not be considered free, since, for Mill, "[...]the only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way" (MILL, [1859], 1977, pg. 226) – and this was incompatible with the servile and subordinate position occupied by women in marriage and in society at large. It is not without reason that Mill frequently compares the state of women (especially of wives) in his society to that of slaves (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 271; pg. 284; pg.323). And the fact that most women did not oppose this subjected condition - that they were 'willing slaves'- did not make them more free (Dalaqua, 2018, pg. 19/20; pg. 24). According to J.S. Mill a situation of subjection, of bowing to the will of others, or to social pressure was incompatible with intellectual and moral development, and produced diminished human beings.

⁸ As is carefully documented by Gillin (2005), this was an important point of disagreement between J.S. Mill and Auguste Comte – who believed in the inferiority of women based on the biological explanations provided by phrenology. J.S. Mill did not reject totally the eventual role played by physiology (MILL, [1843], 1974, pg. 850/1, Mill [1869], 311/12), but he preferred to put psychology (not physiology) at the foundation of the sciences of man (Kawana, 2018, pg. 143/4). Furthermore, Mill's environmental view of human nature contrasted sharply with the naturalistic explanations of the inferiority of women that gained momentum in late nineteenth-century with the development of evolutionary biology. In his *Descent of Man* (1871), Charles Darwin states that through time the two sexes differentiated themselves and "[...] man has ultimately become superior to woman" (DARWIN, [1871] 1981, vol I, part II, pg.328). Against Mill's environmental views, Darwin affirms: "[...] education and environment produce only a small effect on the mind of anyone, and that most of our qualities are innate" (DARWIN, *apud* RICHARDS, 1983, pg. 91). As noted by Richards (1983) this theory furnished a 'scientific foundation' for the current subordination of women..

pg.314), and goes on to point out several causes that could easily explain the paucity of feminine intellectual production.⁹

He claims that women started to engage in these activities only recently and had less time to reveal their talents (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 314); he explains their lack of originality by this late start, since it is much easier to be original when nothing has been done (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 315); and argues that, unlike men, women did not have access to the profound and detailed education that is necessary to excel in philosophy and science (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 316). In the field of arts – in which women of the higher class had been engaged for long time – Mill explains the difference of performance by the fact that women always exerted these activities as amateurs, not as professionals (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 317).

On top of all these (adverse) circumstances, Mill emphasizes that women suffered from chronic scarcity of time and of mental peace to pursue these activities because of the domestic and social obligations that fell upon them (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 318). In addition to all these ordinary demands, there was also the social expectation that a woman be always available to help others. Thus, even when she did pursue an intellectual or artistic activity, she did so only in her free time (which was very limited!) (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 319).

In the face of all these difficulties encountered by women (and not by men), the fact that they have not excelled in activities that require continuous training and concentration, such as philosophy, the sciences and the arts, should be expected (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 319).

Mill also identified the causes of other ‘feminine’ attributes such as talent with practical things, and intuition, nervous susceptibility, volubility and incapacity to use continuously their faculties in the activities women performed in their daily life. The routine of solving practical things, of changing continuously the object of their attention,

⁹ Charles Darwin presented a different view on this subject. For him, male superiority was revealed by man “[...] *attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain — whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands.*” (DARWIN, [1871] 1981, vol I, part II, pg.327). The inferior production of women when compared to men “*in poetry, painting, sculpture, music, — comprising composition and performance, history, science, and philosophy*” (DARWIN, [1871] 1981, vol I, part II, pg. 327) was seen as definitive evidence of this natural inferiority. The view that women were intellectually inferior to men was at the time common sense. Even such women as Frances Power Cobbe thought, as did Darwin, that the absence of any great work in poetry, history, music, etc., was an undeniable evidence that women were, by nature, intellectually inferior to men (Cobbe, 1869, 1995, pg. 69).

and of not having sufficient time to think about anything was enough to explain these particular 'feminine' traits of character. (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 305; pp. 307/8; pg.310).

In this way, Mill concludes that social institutions, such as marriage and the legal and economical subordination of the wife to the husband that it implied, the daily occupation of women, the social pressure to conform, the kind of education they received, and their alienation from political life, among other circumstances, provided "[...] *a complete explanation of nearly all the apparent differences between women and men, including the whole of those which imply any inferiority* (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 320).

Thus, this view of character formation clearly opposes conceptions that asserted the natural intellectual inferiority of women and those that affirmed their natural moral superiority:

I do not know a more signal instance of the blindness with which the world, including the herd of studious men, ignore and pass over all the influences of social circumstances, than their silly depreciation of the intellectual, and silly panegyrics on the moral nature of women (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 321).

Mill, however, did not restrict his ethological analysis to the case of women. In fact, he used the existing circumstances, especially the hierarchical relation between the sexes, to explain the occurrence of several morally condemnable aspects of men's character.

The education given to boys – that emphasized their presumed superiority over half of the human species for the mere fact of being of the male sex – and the tyrannical power that, afterwards, was given to them as husbands over their wives, were considered an [...] *Academy or Gymnasium for training them in arrogance and overbearingness*" (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 325), and a school of willfulness, self-indulgence and despotism (Mill, [1869]1984, pg. 293/294; pg.289). Furthermore, they were at the root of all the selfish propensities of men, of their unjustified self-preference and self-idolatry (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 324). Overall, Mill considered this hierarchal relation even more detrimental to men's character than to women's (MILL, [1869], 1984, pg. 321; pg. 325).

The insulation of women from political life and from the collective objectives, restricting their interests to the family, besides limiting their own perspectives and development, also had harmful effects on the character of married men – who had their aspirations diminished by interactions with their wives (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 329 e pg. 331; pg.335/6).¹⁰

¹⁰The idea that living with an inferior in mental endowment would lead to moral degeneration was already present in Taylor ([1851] 1984, pg. 408) and Mill repeats it in a speech in favor of women's suffrage where

Thus, with reference to the existing social circumstances, Mill explains women's alleged intellectual inferiority, exposes the reason for their presumed moral superiority (usually related to abnegation and self-sacrifice and willingness to serve others), and, additionally, clarifies the causes of many of the 'masculine' traits.

This ethological analysis implied that the presumed 'masculine' and 'feminine' features were not inexorable consequences of Nature, but, rather, social constructions, and, as such, could be modified.¹¹ Thus, gender equality was a feasible aim. Mill affirms in this respect:

[...] no one can safely pronounce that if women's nature were left to choose its direction as freely as men's [...] there would be any material difference, or perhaps any difference at all, in the character and capacities which would unfold themselves [...] (MILL, [1869] 1984, p. 305).

The 'denaturalization' entailed by this approach to human nature opened a broad scope for social reform – which Mill was eager to explore.

III. Mill's political engagement with changing women's position in society:

Mill's concerns went far beyond understanding the social causes underlying the prevailing features observed in both sexes. His intention was not only show that the existing relation between the sexes had no natural base, but, above all, to alter the “ *ideas and institutions by which the accident of sex is made the groundwork of an inequality of legal rights, and a forced dissimilarity of social functions [...]*” (MILL, [1871] 1965, pg. 765). This was an important feature of his reform agenda, since Mill considered those ideas and institutions “[...] *the greatest hindrance to moral, social, and even intellectual improvement [...]*” (idem, pg. 765).¹²

As a public man (and a public moralist), he was eager to change this undesirable and extremely unjust aspect of his society and to replace it “[...] *by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other*” (MILL, [1869], pg. 261).

On this, as on other issues, he called on 'science' in support of 'art'. His scientific views on psychology and ethology not only challenged the wisdom of 'naturalistic'

he argues that to exclude women from the large subjects that concern society at large and to confine them to the household would be “[...] *in detriment of man's own character*” (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 155). And adds: “[...] *unless women are raised to the level of men, men will be pulled down to theirs*” (idem).

¹¹ For a similar view see Winch, 2001, pg. 432.

¹² See also MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 261.

conceptions of gender differences.¹³ They also pointed out the main circumstances (marriage, education, social expectations, and economic and political opportunities, among others) that were at their origin and reinforced the existing subordinate condition of women – and that should be modified if gender equality was to be achieved. In doing so, this scientific knowledge about the laws of character formation furnished a solid foundation for his political agenda concerning women.¹⁴

III.1 Enfranchisement of women

J. S. Mill's agenda for changing women's position in society was extensive, and had at its center their enfranchisement. He embraced this cause with enthusiasm and spoke up for a woman's right to vote using the same arguments as existed for men (Mill [1869]1984, pg. 301). As a Member of Parliament, he presented an important petition in favor of women's right to vote (MILL, [1866] 1988, pg. 575), and requested replacing the word *man* for *person* in Clause 4 of the *Reform Bill* – which specified the qualifications for voters of the counties – in order to include women (Mill, [1867] 1988, pg. 161). Additionally, he delivered several public and Parliamentary speeches in favor of women's enfranchisement (Mill [1867] 1988; Mill, [1869]1988; Mill [1870]1988; Mill [1871]1988). Because of this engagement, J.S. Mill was greatly identified with the women's cause; and, since it was an unpopular cause, this attitude put at stake his reputation and prestige.¹⁵

His view of human nature underlay his arguments in favor of women's suffrage. He uses ethological knowledge to refute some very common allegations such as “[p]olitics are not women's business, and would distract them from their proper duties” (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 153) and “[w]omen do not desire the suffrage, but would rather

¹³ In view of his ‘sound psychology’, it would not be admissible anymore to say that the ‘natural vocation’ of women was to take care of their husbands and children. Nor to argue that women could not vote because they were ‘naturally’ incapable of abstract thought or of interesting themselves in collective problems of society; or to justify the closing of some professions to women with the argument that they were ‘naturally’ inapt for practicing them.

¹⁴ In this point I have a slight disagreement with Guillin (2005, pg.34), for he argues that Mill did not develop an ethology capable of furnishing a foundation for his defense of women's equality, being forced to use in his *Subjection* other arguments (basically his liberal philosophy) in support of this cause. In my view, despite the fact that ethology remained to the end an unfinished project, and although it was incipient, Mill's conceptions about character formation, and, thus, the formation of women's character, provided the backbone of his defense of women's emancipation. This does not mean that Mill did not use other arguments in his defense of gender equality – he did – but I think the environmental view of the human character was its crucial element.

¹⁵ J.S. Mill's reputation underwent, indeed, vigorous attack. As Peart affirms: “[...] for his position on women, in particular the role of women in the Reform Act, Mill was vilified” (2009, pg. 12). Several cartoons of the time ridiculed him, the most famous of them being “Miss Mill joins the Ladies” – where he is portrayed as a woman – and “[...] descriptions of Mill from that time hence often carry the hint that he was feminine, weak and unoriginal” (PEART, 2009, pg.12).

do without it [...]” (idem). His ‘sound psychology’ rejected the idea that women’s natural intellectual or moral attributes suited them for some duties and disqualified them for others (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg.304/305). Accordingly, Mill rejected the current conception of “[...] *a hard and fast line of separation between women’s occupations and men’s – of forbidding women to take interest in the things which interest men*” (MILL [1867], 1988, pg. 155). His analysis revealed that the kind of education given to women and the social habits and expectations were at the root of this notion, and of the indifference that many women felt in relation to issues concerning society at large. The very exclusion from the right to vote was, for him, a decisive cause of this lack of interest in politics:

Education and society have exhausted their power in inculcating on women that their proper rule of conduct is what society expects from them; and the denial of the vote is a proclamation intelligible to everyone, that whatever else society may expect, it does not expect that they should concern themselves with public interests (MILL[1867] 1988, pg. 156).

Overall, he interprets the fact that many women did not wish to vote as evidence that they “[...] *are still under this deadening influence [of education and social pressure]; that opiate and benumbs their mind and conscience*” (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 156) and not that they naturally lack an aptitude for politics.¹⁶

Additionally, Mill identified this exclusion from political life as an important factor that reinforced the existing inequality among men and women. He rejected the prevailing view that women did not need to vote, because their husbands or other male relatives sufficiently represented them.¹⁷ On the contrary, his conviction was that until women had a voice in Parliament their needs and demands would be ignored (Mill [1867] 1988, pg. 161; Mill [1869] 1988, pg. 380). For him, “[...] *the line of separation between those who can protect themselves and those who are at the mercy of others, is the political franchise*” (MILL [1869], 1988, pg. 379). A tragic illustration of this was the fact that the laws and their enforcers were far more efficient in protecting property than in guaranteeing to women even their physical integrity:

They [women] have neither equal laws nor an equal administration of them [...] what do we see? For an atrocious assault by a man upon a woman, especially if she has the misfortune to be his wife, he is either let off with an admonition, or he is solemnly told that he has committed a grave offence, for which he must be severely punished,

¹⁶ He argued, nonetheless, that a great number of women did want to vote and expressed that desire, and maybe thousands more desired it, but did not believe it worth asking for a thing they cannot have, or were afraid of the judgment of men or of other women (Mill [1867] 1988, pg. 156).

¹⁷ As pointed out by Collini (1984, p. xxx) , in this point he diverged from his father James Mill who endorsed this view and defended the exclusion of women from the right to vote (see also Mill, 1995, pg. 2).

and then he gets as many weeks or months of imprisonment as a man who has taken five pounds' worth of property gets years (MILL [1870], 1988, pg. 403).

Therefore, for Mill, the one single remedy for the neglect of women's interests was their enfranchisement: "[...] *women can never hope that the laws and customs of society will do them full justice unless they are admitted to participate in political rights [...]*" (Mill [1868] 1988, pg. 283).¹⁸

However, the priority given to women's enfranchisement did not mean that J. S. Mill believed that this was the only necessary change in what concerned women. On the contrary, he thought many other institutional reforms and modifications in habits were necessary before equality between the sexes could prevail. However, the elimination of women's political disabilities seemed to be a crucial step (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 161). In this respect, Mill affirms: "*Let us gain the suffrage, and whatever is desirable for women must ultimately, follow*" (MILL [1869], 1988, pg. 379).

After conquering enfranchisement, other important reforms such as changes in the laws of marriage and of property of married women, the provision of better education for women and the opening of the job market to them would become more feasible.¹⁹ In sum, for Mill "*[t]he suffrage is the turning point of women's cause [...]*" (MILL [1869], 1988, pg. 380).

III.2. Reform in the laws of marriage and property of married women

Mill's views on psychology and ethology – which pointed to a natural equality of the sexes – undermined the very foundation of the hierarchical and patriarchal relations that prevailed in marriage at the time. Accordingly, Mill was very critical of the despotic power that a husband could (if he wished to) exert over his wife. At the root of this power to oppress were the Laws of Marriage and the Laws concerning married women's property.²⁰

¹⁸ He thought that women's admission to public life as voters would have as consequence that the "[...] *wrongs and grievances which specially affect women would no longer be considered too unimportant to be worth any serious attempt to put an end to them [...]*" (MILL [1870], 1988, pg. 388).

¹⁹ As Collini states, Mill "[...] *never doubted that the key to the immediate relief of women's states was her possession of the vote*" (COLLINI, 1984, pg. xxxvi). Thus, he was of the opinion that energy should be centered on the fight for suffrage: "*Let us, then, continue to concentrate our exertions on suffrage; inviting all who wish for better education of women, all who desire justice to them in respect to property and earnings, all who desire their admission to any profession or career now closed to them, to aid our enterprise, as the surest means of accelerating the particular improvement in which they feel a special interest*" (MILL [1869], 1988, pg.380). Mill wanted to focus on franchise and separate this question from the quest for total equality in civil life (marriage, job opportunities, etc.) so as not to lose support of those who would not go all the way as to declare men and women as equals.

²⁰ Married women were subjected to several **disabilities** in mid-nineteenth century England. After marriage, she lost her legal existence, which was incorporated into that of her husband. That meant that: "[...] *the legal and economic exercise of that common personality and property is left to the husband* (BARKER,

In reference to the latter, Mill affirms: “*Like felons they [married women] are incapable of holding property*” (MILL [1868], 1988, pg. 285). The husband had the right to all her property – even if she acquired it by her own work or by inheritance. This law permitted, in the absence of a judicial separation, – which was hard to obtain – the husband to abandon the wife for a period, make her work to support herself and the children, and return after a while to take possession of everything she earned (Perkin, 1989, pg.12-16; Mill [1869] 1984, pg. 284/5; Mill [1867]1988, pg. 160).

In Mill’s view, this piece of legislation only survived for so long because women did not have political rights. The mere demand for the enfranchisement of women led Parliament to consider changes in this law:

[...] Since the suffrage has been claimed, a bill allowing married women to hold property, which had been laid on the shelf for ten years with other uninteresting trifles, has been reintroduced into Parliament with good prospect of success [...] (MILL [1869], 1988, pg. 379).²¹

The several civil disabilities married women had in relation to single women made them easy prey for abuse by their presumed protectors. Mill was very concerned with domestic violence against women and children perpetrated by husbands and fathers that made bad use of the despotic power that the law gave them, especially because punishment for these abuses were mild and rare (Mill, [1867], pg. 158-159; Mill [1850], 1986, pg. 1155).²²

Mill was anxious to alter the marriage laws and to establish equality of legal rights among couples (Mill, [1869], 1984, pg. 293, pg. 297; Mill [1857]1877, pg. 301).²³ For him, the hierarchical and patriarchal relation existent in marriage was unjust, and deleterious for the happiness and moral development of the both the wife and the husband.

He argued that in marriage, as in business partnerships, there was no need to establish beforehand that one person would decide and the other obey (Mill, [1869], 1984,

2015, pg. 8). Furthermore, a married woman had no right over her children, who belonged to the father (Perkin, 1989, p. 18, Mill [1869] 1984, pg. 285).

²¹ Even people who rejected the idea of equality among the sexes admitted that there should be changes the marriage laws (see Dixon [1869, 1995, pg. 46-53).

²² Mill believed that this lack of punishment resulted in an under notification of this crime since poor women believed that tribunals would sympathize with men (Mill [1846], 1986, pg. 919). He demanded severer punishment for this crime, for the lack of real punishment was perceived by men as an ‘authorization’ to be violent: “*The baser part of the populace think that when a legal power is given to them over a living creature – when a person, like a thing, is suffered to be spoken of as their own – as their wife, or their child, or their dog – they are allowed to do what they please with it [...]*” (MILL [1851] 1986, pg. 1186)..

²³ He strongly believed that “[...] *wives should have the same rights, and should receive the same protection of law in the same manner, as all other persons [...]*” (MILL [1857], 1977, pg. 301). In line with these convictions, when he married Harriet Taylor in 1851, Mill wrote a document in which he promised never to use the powers over his wife that the law granted him (Mill [1851], 1984, pg. 50).

pg. 290/291) – and this view greatly offended Victorian values. In Mill’s own evaluation, more than giving women the right to vote, “[...] *what shocks and scandalizes them [men] is that a claim should be made for women to equality of rights in civil life, and especially marriage*” (MILL [1870] 1988, pg. 386).

In addition to advocating equality in this relationship and the possibility for married women to hold property, he advocated the possibility of separation on just terms (Mill, [1869] 1984 298).²⁴ When referring to engagements in perpetuity, of which marriage was the main example, Mill affirms that the law “[...] *should grant them [the parties] a release from it, on a sufficient case being made out before an impartial authority*” (MILL [1871] 1965, pg. 951) – incompatibility and unhappiness of the parties counting as ‘sufficient case’ for legal separation.²⁵

III.3. High level education and the opening of job opportunities to women:

The enfranchisement of women and changes in the marriage laws and the elimination of all the legal disabilities imposed upon married women, although imperative, were not sufficient to alter the subordinate condition of women in society. Mill believed it was crucial that women should have, additionally, equal educational and job opportunities as men – which was far from happening at the time.

Women did not have the same access to quality education as men, and J.S. Mill used this fact to reinforce his argument that the male relatives did not represent or foster women’s interests adequately. He affirms:

Are there many fathers who care as much, or are willing to expend as much, for the education of their daughters as of their sons? Where are the Universities, where are the High Schools, or the schools of any high description for them? (MILL [1867], 1988, pg. 159).

He pointed out that even the endowments that were destined for education generally (with no specification of sex) went almost entirely to educate boys.²⁶

²⁴ Although, in the 1830’s, he defended divorce if the couple was not happy in his private writings and correspondence (Mill, [1832/3?] 1984, pg. 48/49; Collini 1984, pg. xxxi), he repeatedly avoided endorsing divorce in his public writings.

²⁵ Mill is worried about there being a way out of marriage. When discussing marriage (an engagement for life), in his *On Liberty*, J.S. Mill writes that several things have to be considered in what concerns the eventual dissolution of marriage, the expectations created by this bond, moral obligations towards the other part, the obligations towards the children, but he concludes: “[,..] *it does not follow, nor I can admit, that those obligations extend to requiring the fulfilment of the contract at all costs to the happiness of the reluctant party*” (MILL [1857]1977, pg. 300). His position on this subject was most probably influenced by his relationship with Harriet Taylor. For a description of this friendship and latter marriage and for the letters exchanged between the two from the early 1830’s until her death, see Hayek (2015).

²⁶ One example cited by J. S. Mill was that of *Christ Hospital*, whose endowment was for both sexes, but at the time educated 1100 boys and only 26 girls (Mill, [1867], pg. 159).

Additionally, it was a common idea at the time that the education of women should be different from that given to men – not as profound or as detailed.²⁷ Harriet Taylor (Mill's wife) affirms: “[...] *nothing is taught to women thoroughly. Small portions only of what is attempted to teach thoroughly to boys, are the whole of what is intended or desired to teach to women*” (TAYLOR, [1851]1984, pg. 409). She reacts against this ‘decorative’ view of women’s education, which aimed to furnish only a generic knowledge of poetry, art, maybe of science and, perhaps, even politics, so that women could understand their husband’s interests and hold intelligent conversations on these various topics (Taylor [1851] 1984, pg. 409).

Mill agreed with Harriet and thought that girls should be educated in the same terms as boys (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 324; Millet, 1970, pg. 70). The purpose of education should be their own development and the acquisition of knowledge that would enable them to enter the job market – if they choose to – with the same qualification as men. That is, he intended an education that gave equal opportunities to both sexes.

However, high quality education was not enough, since women were blocked from entering most prestigious occupations, even when they happened to be qualified for them: “*Hardly any decent educated occupation save one is open to them. They are either governesses or nothing*” (MILL [1867] 1888, pg. 159). Professions such as medicine, law and politics, among others, downright excluded women. In reference to this situation, Mill affirms: “[n]o sooner do women show themselves capable of competing with men in any career, than that career, if it be lucrative or honourable is closed to them.” (MILL [1867], 1988, pg. 160).²⁸

Since there were scarcely any occupations that paid sufficiently for women to survive on their own, marriage was, most of the time, the only respectable option for young women – a situation which Mill considered “[...] *a flagrant social injustice*” (MILL, [1871] 1965, pg. 765). Hence, they did not have any real alternative when it came

²⁷ An important representative of this view was Ruskin. For him knowledge given to girls and young women should not aim at their own development or at the acquisition of abilities for the job market, but at preparing them to better serve and guide men (Ruskin, [1865] 1905, pg. 123-125). Girls needed not a profound knowledge on the subjects, but an education in order to enable them to sympathize with men’s interests, and to make them company, and, additionally, to be capable of accomplishing with humbleness their proper duties (Ruskin, [1865] 1905, 128).

²⁸ Mill mentions the example of a woman who was able to get access to the medical profession, but soon after, the addition of a requirement of giving public lectures (blocked to women) shut the possibility of further entrances. The same happened in the *Royal Academy* that, at first did not bar women, but as they started to be successful, decided to change their policy (MILL [1867]1988, pg.159). Mill defends the opening of medical education for women also with the argument that there was an important increase the supply of medical practitioners was needed (MILL [1969] 1988, pg. 378).

to marriage. Furthermore, after marrying, they depended entirely upon the husband for survival and had no way out of an unhappy, or even violent, relationship. Even in the (rare) case that they were granted a separation, without access to good jobs they lacked an independent mode of supporting themselves and their children. Additionally, there were the problems of women who could not find a husband²⁹ and widowers, who frequently had a hard time surviving.

Against this economic subordination of women, Mill fought for the opening of well-paid professions such as medicine, law, politics and public offices to the feminine sex (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 299-301 e 324).³⁰

To the current economic allegation that this would overstock the market and drastically lower the wages earned in these occupations, Mill replied that even if this should happen, it could socially be well worth it, because of the emancipation it would mean for women:

[...] even when no more is earned by the labour of a man and a woman than would be earned by the man alone, the advantage to the woman of not depending on a master for subsistence may be more than an equivalent (MILL, [1871]1965, pg. 394).³¹

He also argues that the fact that there were very limited job opportunities for women led to an overstock and very low wages in the professions open to them (although fewer women worked than men) (Mill, [1871] 1965, pg. 395). Thus, the opening of other opportunities would most probably increase the wages in these ‘female’ occupations. This increase of the opportunities in the labor market would additionally have a very important impact on population growth (an issue that was central to Mill’s social concerns). He affirms:

²⁹ In England at the time, there were almost 500.000 more women than there were men – so inevitably many women did not have marriage as an option.

³⁰ Mill’s position went against the ingrained moral prejudices of the time. There was great concern with the moral risk of opening all job opportunities to women. An anonymous review of *Subjection* summarizes this concern when he states that competition guarantees that women will be drawn to trades where they can earn money, but it will not prevent them from entering “[...] *trades which are demoralizing, though not unprofitable.*”(ANONYMOUS [1869] 1995, pg. 45).

³¹ Harriet Taylor uses a similar argument : “[...] *how infinitely preferable is it that part of the income should be of the woman's earning, even if the aggregate sum were but little increased [...] Even under the present laws respecting the property of women, a woman who contributes materially to the support of the family, cannot be treated in the same contemptuously tyrannical manner as one who, however she may toil as a domestic drudge, is a dependent on the man for subsistence.*”(TAYLOR [1851], 1984, pp. 403/4). As a palliative for this overcrowding of the job market and depression of wages, she suggests the abolition of child labor (idem, pg.404). Mill seemed to agree with Harriet on the question of the power work gave to women, notwithstanding the existing property laws. He states: “[w]omen employed in factories are the only women in the labouring rank of life whose position is not that of slaves and drudges [...] For improving the condition of women, it should [...] be an object to give them the readiest access to independent industrial employment [...]”(MILL, [1871] 1965, pg. 953).

I shall only indicate, among the probable consequences of the industrial and social independence of women, a great diminution of the evil of over-population. It is by devoting one-half of the human species to that exclusive function, by making it fill the entire life of one sex and interweave itself with almost all the objects of the other, that the animal instinct in question is nursed into the disproportionate preponderance which it has hitherto exercised in human life (MILL, [1871] 1965, pg. 765/6).

Although Mill was, at first, in favor of protecting women and children, by limiting their work by means of the *Factory Acts*, he changed his mind on this subject and ended up rejecting the idea of including them in this legislation (Blaug, 1958, pg. 214/5; 224). He asserts in this respect:

[...] the classing together, for this and other purposes, of women and children, appears to me both indefensible in principle and mischievous in practice [...] Women are as capable as men of appreciating and managing their own concerns, and the only hindrance to their doing so arises from the injustice of their present social position [...] If women had as absolute power as men have, over their own persons and their own patrimony or acquisitions, there would be no plea for limiting their hours of laboring for themselves, in order that they might have time to labour for the husband, in what is called, by advocates of restriction, his home (MILL [1871], 1965, pg. 953).

However, he maintained that the state had the obligation to protect children: “[...] *Freedom of contract, in the case of children, is but another word for freedom of coercion*” (MILL [1871] 1965, pg. 952).

Although he defended the opening of jobs to women, regardless of the effect on the salary of men, he did not think it was a positive thing as a *permanent tendency* that married women who are mothers of children (and he stresses this does not apply to single women) should have to work for their subsistence.

In a clear concession to Victorian values, Mill held that, in the *context of equality in marriage*, the existing sexual division of labor would be the most desirable (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 297). He regarded that when a woman married, she opted (and an option presupposed the existence of alternatives) for this ‘profession’ in detriment of all others (Mill, [1869] 1984, pg. 298). However, probably having women like Harriet Taylor in mind, he qualifies this general rule, and argues that, even in the case of married women:

[...] there ought to be nothing to prevent faculties exceptionally adapted to any other pursuit, from obeying their vocation notwithstanding marriage: due provision being made for supplying otherwise an falling-short which might become inevitable, in her full performance of the ordinary functions of mistress of a family[...] (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 298).

Hence, be it in marriage, in law, in education or in the labor market, Mill proposed a series of reforms in institutions and modifications of customs and habits, which he believed would change the subordinate condition of women in his society (Barker, 2015,

pg.5). Furthermore, he uses his ethology in support of this ample reform agenda concerning women.

IV. The beneficial ethological consequences of the proposed reforms

Mill not only used ethological knowledge to identify the needed reforms, but also used it as ammunition in the defense of these reforms. He argued that the new institutional setting proposed would emancipate women on several levels – producing extremely positive moral and intellectual effects, both on women and men.

The enfranchisement of women, and the social legitimation of their participation in public affairs that it would signal, would be a powerful means of involving women in politics and in the discussion of the highest problems of society – with favorable impacts on their own moral status and that of men (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 156). Instead of clashing with men's ideals, women would become partners in the effort to solve social problems and improve society. Furthermore, Mill believed their participation in political life would pressure politicians and the Parliament to confront the greatest evils of society (MILL [1870] 1988, pg. 387). Additionally, enfranchisement would give voice to their own specific demands, eliminating, in this way, their political subjection. Mill believed the consequences would be invigorating to the whole sex:

[Women who vote] will receive that stimulus to their faculties, and that widening and liberalizing influence over their feelings and sympathies, which suffrage seldom fails to produce on those who are admitted to it. Meanwhile, an unworthy stigma would be removed from the whole sex [...] They would no longer be classed with children, idiots, and lunatics, as incapable of taking care of either themselves or others, and needing everything should be done for them, without asking consent [...] it would be a boon to all women (MILL [1867] 1988, pg. 157).

The demanded changes in the laws of marriage and of married women's property would mean the establishment of equality of civil rights among the couple. This would have the effect of improving the husband's character greatly, since there would be no territory left for the exercise of absolute and arbitrary power. As consequence, undesirable aspects of human character, such as self-indulgence, egoism, and tyranny – nurtured by absolute power – would have to be repressed, and would, eventually, disappear by disuse (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg.288/289). Women, on their side, instead of having some parts of their nature fostered and stimulated, and others stifled and curbed, would be able to develop more spontaneously all facets of their nature. They would be, thus, free to express their own nature and to form their own character – which Mill considered “[...] *one of*

the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress” (MILL, [1859] 1977, pg. 261).

In this new environment, women would probably and willing to self-sacrifice, but as a compensation, men would display in a greater degree these characteristics (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 293), and it would follow that, “[...] *a good woman would not be more self-sacrificing than the best man* (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 293). Family life would cease to be a school of despotism, willfulness, self-indulgence and overbearingness and would become a “[...] *a school of moral cultivation* (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 293), and “*the real school of the virtue of freedom*” (idem: 295).³²

The positive ethological impacts of the other institutional and cultural changes proposed would also be enormous. Women would be educated to have the same capacities, and the same understanding of science, business and of the questions concerning public life as the men of their social class. They would also have the same possibilities as men of obtaining further training and development of their skills (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 327). The opening of all professions, and the fact that women would be prepared to occupy them, would greatly expand the scope of choices available to them: marriage would cease to be the only worthy alternative on the menu.

However, not only the women who desired to access the job market would benefit from these changes. Mill considered that the mere fact of being able to compete in the labour market altered the status of women, even of those who opted to marry and stay at home. For him, the *power* to work and sustain herself was “[...] *essential to the dignity of a woman, if she has not independent property*” (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 298).

Equal education and equal opportunities in the job market would allow women to choose not to marry; would be a safeguard for those who, for some reason, did not find a husband; would provide an alternative for widowers and for women who already educated their children and had time for other occupations; and would guarantee a way out for women who, unsatisfied in marriage, decide to separate from their husbands (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 298). Accordingly, this new environment would eliminate the economic subjection of women.

The equal opportunities for both sexes in the job market would also have beneficial impacts on men’s character because of the “[...] *stimulus that would be given to the intellect of men by the competition [of women]; or [...] by the necessity that would*

³² He affirms: “the only school of genuine moral sentiment is society between equals” (MILL [1869], 1984, pg. 293).

be imposed on them of deserving precedency before they could expect to obtain it” (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 326).

Together, these political, legal, educational and economic reforms would rescue women for the subordinate condition in which they lived; and the liberty of choice thus acquired would have extremely positive effects on female character. On the impact on the moral capacities and interests of women, J.S. Mill affirms:

[...] the mere consciousness a woman would then have of being a human being like any other, entitled to choose her pursuits, urged or invited by the same inducements as any one else to interest herself in whatever is interesting to human beings, entitled to exert the share of influence on all human concerns which belongs to an individual opinion, whether she attempted actual participation in them or not – this alone would effect an immense expansion of the faculties of women, as well as enlargement of the range of their moral sentiments (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg. 327).

Thus, these changes would stimulate women’s moral and intellectual faculties, would widen their horizons and objectives, and would increase their public spirit and sense of social duty (MILL, [1869]1984, pg. 337).

From being an obstacle to the pretensions of those who wanted to promote the public good, they would become stimulators and co-participants in these noble objectives, “[...] *doubling the mass of mental faculties available for the higher service of humanity*” (MILL,[1869]1984, pg. 326).³³ Additionally, in this emancipated situation, women would be happier and more fulfilled (MILL, [1869]1984, pg.336).³⁴

In this way, both sexes would have their moral and intellectual faculties improved, and the gender differences would diminish enormously. However, it would not lead to the elimination of all the differences between human beings. There would remain, regardless of the sex, the individual diversity of aims, interests and values – which J.S. Mill so profoundly valued and desired to advance.

V. Final Remarks:

This paper argues that J.S. Mill’s environmental view of human nature was central to his stance concerning women’s position in society. His ethological analysis was important on at least three different levels:

³³ J.S. Mill emphasizes that there would be a huge social gain: “[...] *consisting in an increase of the general fund of thinking and acting power, and an improvement in the general conditions of the association of men with women*” (MILL, [1869] 1984, pg.336).

³⁴ It is important to remember that, for Mill, “[...] *human improvement and happiness [...] do not consist in being passively ministered to, but in active self-development.*” (MILL 1869] 1988, pg. 375).

- (i) It showed that both sexes were, in great respects, similar by nature, and that most of the gender differences were results of the social circumstances to which the two sexes were exposed. Thus, it revealed that the current features of each sex had no Natural basis; they were the results of social interaction and, as such, could be modified. This openly challenged the view that the subordinate role occupied by women in society – a view that implied political, civil and economic disabilities – had its foundation on ‘natural’ gender differences.
- (ii) It identified the several social circumstances and institutions - laws of marriage, education, and the political and economic disabilities imposed on women, among others – that were at the root (or reinforced) the existing inequality between men and women. In this way, it indicated the institutional reforms to be promoted if gender equality was to prevail – furnishing a scientific foundation for J.S. Mill’s reform agenda concerning women.
- (iii) Additionally, it revealed the moral improvement, both of men and women, which would derive from the proposed reforms. In this manner, it supplied ammunition for J.S. Mill’s fight for equality and for the elimination of the disabilities imposed upon women.

Having this environmental view of human nature as a reference and foundation, J. S. Mill, as a public man, risked the whole weight of his reputation and moral authority to advance the reforms that he believed would ultimately lead to women’s emancipation and, by this means, to the great improvement of society.

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