

7-1-2009

Book Review: Mill On God: The Pervasiveness And Elusiveness Of Mill's Religious Thought

Andrew Gustafson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Gustafson, Andrew (2009) "Book Review: Mill On God: The Pervasiveness And Elusiveness Of Mill's Religious Thought," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss3/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

Again, it should be clear why *AUF* and *CSLDI* should be viewed in harmony. Whereas *CSLDI* gives several sorts of reductio arguments and thus a general case for 'explanatory dualism,' *AUF* gives the theistic alternative in more concise philosophical and scientific outlines. Both texts serve as excellent complements to one another.

Conclusion

We have noted numerous strengths to both *CSLDI* and *AUF*. Moreover, we wish to stress that these two books serve as excellent models for what will hopefully be a continued philosophical criticism of naturalism's ability to explain the mind. Despite these strengths, *CSLDI* and *AUF* only begin to scratch the surface of naturalistic accounts of the mind and rationality. In particular, if a case against naturalism is going to be made on the grounds of something like the AFR, theists need to evaluate the merits of many more naturalistic theories such as non-reductive functionalism, a view that receives very little attention in either book, even though it is most likely the predominant naturalistic account of the mind among contemporary analytic philosophers. We mention these shortcomings not because Reppert and Menuge have done inadequate work. Rather, we believe that their work is an invitation for more likeminded theists to explore the failures of naturalism to explain the metaphysics of the mind. Perhaps *CSLDI* and *AUF* will lead a renaissance of Christian scholarship that brings the explanatory force of theism to bear on rationality and the philosophy of mind, while demonstrating the weaknesses of naturalism in the process. Arguably, this renaissance is already underway in the writings of William Hasker, J. P. Moreland, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Charles Taliaferro, and others who argue that theism provides a unique and compelling explanation of the mind with which naturalism cannot contend. If nothing else, *CSLDI* and *AUF* make an initial case for theism, while placing a remarkable burden of proof on naturalists. We recommend both of these books not only for the information they convey, but also because we hope that more Christians will join in the project of reclaiming the philosophy of mind, which is modeled in *CSLDI* and *AUF*.

Mill on God: The Pervasiveness and Elusiveness of Mill's Religious Thought, by Alan P. F. Sell. Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004. Pp. 202, \$29.95

ANDREW GUSTAFSON, Creighton University

I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country,
of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never
had it: I grew up in a negative state with regard to it.

J.S. Mill (cited by Sell, p. 6)

Alan Sell's *Mill on God* fills an important gap in scholarship on Mill's religious views. The fact that Sell brings with him Christian concerns and

interests as he meticulously draws out Mill's view on God from the entirety of his corpus makes the book all the more helpful and fascinating for the Christian scholar.

Christians tend to view utilitarianism as secular, and so not compatible with Christian thought. It is true that some of the best known utilitarians, such as Jeremy Bentham or John Stuart Mill, were not believers, and were in fact critics of using supernatural sanctions like heaven or hell as a motivational basis for moral behavior. Bentham criticizes all forms of religion—whether natural or organized (church). But Mill saw more value for organized religion, due in large part to its perceived ability to nurture in people a concern for others and society.

Sell's book is divided into 5 chapters. Chapter 1 provides a great brief background to Mill, encompassing the strict utilitarian upbringing by his father and Bentham, his mental collapse at 19, and the sustaining influences of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Comte, and his love Harriet Taylor. We see here the origins of his focus on nurturing moral sentiments, and the multiple influences on his thought and character.

Chapter 2 argues that there is a religious interest in many of Mill's works, and that Mill was not averse to seek common ground with those who held metaphysical beliefs other than his own, so long as they could work together in the real world toward the useful end of social conscientiousness. Here Mill's criticisms of dogmatic theology are brought out, as are his deterministic views and agnosticism regarding religious knowledge. Sell brings us a wide collage of contemporary responses to Mill's view in his day, and that historical background is often quite interesting.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of Mill's ideals for secularism and particularly his relation to Comte and the secular humanist project to replace traditional Christian doctrines and supernatural beliefs. There is a thorough historical account of contemporary critical responses at the time to Mill's version of utilitarianism, with the variety of criticisms he generated while trying to modify Bentham's utilitarianism to be more socially concerned, altruistic and willing to sacrifice one's own happiness for the sake of the many. Mill, it seems, was attacked by Christians for creating a religion of secular humanism, while simultaneously being criticized by secular utilitarians for watering down hard-nosed utilitarianism with sentimental sap and socialist incompatibilities. The end of the chapter contains a helpful overview of Mill's view of the importance of art in education and nurturing the higher capacities.

Chapter 4 provides us with a recounting of Mill's various critiques of traditional arguments for God, each with a litany of contemporary responses of the time to his views. In addition to pointing out the weaknesses in Mill's criticisms, Sell particularly criticizes Mill for trying to accept Jesus as a moral ideal while apparently rejecting many of Jesus' central claims about his divinity and plan of salvation for humanity.

The final chapter concludes, "Mill outstrips many others in the elusiveness of his thought on God and religion." Sell also describes Mill's humanistic religion (described in chapter 3) as "a Gnostic pipe-dream religion of an armchair kind." Positively, Sell admits that Mill advanced legitimate criticism of church hypocrisy, that he was not against church

teaching if done in a non-proselytizing way, and that Mill in fact advocated religious diversity. Sell further admits that “Mill certainly claimed to have religious feelings, and he had a genuine admiration for Jesus, and a genuine concern for liberty in matters of belief.” Here, as in other places in the book, Sell points out that Mill’s lack of religious upbringing left his criticism of religion often lacking in a real understanding of religious thought and logic.

Sell is generally fair minded, while also bringing his own concerns to the study. Sell is clearly a theologian examining the theistic views of a philosopher who admitted God was not central to his thought, and Sell’s theological concern and knowledge comes through his work clearly. Of course, Sell’s book also should make any of us cautious about what we write—one never knows when someone will do a thorough investigation of our blind spot, our weak point— and in that sense it is a strange book indeed, a book written on a topic of which Mill regularly admitted he had little background knowledge. Few have examined Mill’s work with an eye to his religious concerns, and that unique perspective is central to the true value of this work. Sell’s book makes up for the glaring deficits in previous overviews of Mill’s thought by Schneewind or Skorupski, who for the most part ignored religious concerns (please see footnote 2 of chapter 1 on the a-theistic slant of previous Mill scholarship).

This book probably provides more historical detail than many would normally want, but these multiple historical quotations are woven together to provide a valuable contextual understanding of where Mill was, who he was, and what he was up to. While Sell claims that “From his teenage years to his late essay on “Theism,” John Stuart Mill was fairly regularly occupied with the question of God’s existence and character,” it seems that this is probably a bit of an overstatement, and may be a reflection of the author’s interests more than of Mill himself.

Sell writes towards the end of his book, “As to the adverse criticisms leveled against Mill’s *Three Essays on Religion*, it must be granted that it takes a particular skill to alienate Christians, agnostics and secularists in roughly equal measure, but this is what Mill did” (p. 178). This is truly the plight of Mill—everyone can find something to dislike. He worked so hard to cull good insights from a variety of sources and synthesize them together, and that charitable open-mindedness is what enabled him to propel utilitarianism beyond the narrow-minded secularism of James Mill and Jeremy Bentham. It is in the thought of Mill that Christian philosophers can find a utilitarianism more likely to be incorporated into a Christian worldview—a utilitarianism which seeks the greater good, the well-being of society, and the development of the higher capacities of noble feelings, moral sentiments, and moral imagination. While Mill never grasped the worth of Christian doctrines, he did see the worth of Christian tendencies towards community, charity and concern for others, and that, it seems, is where a Christian can begin to develop a Christian utilitarian ethic. Sell’s admirable book is a milestone in helping us understand Mill’s view of God, and is essential reading for anyone serious about understanding Mill’s religious views.