

Over-Romanticizing Mill

In the renaissance in Mill scholarship over the last 40 years, much has been made of John Stuart Mill's debts to Romantic poetry and philosophy, most notably in Nicholas Capaldi's recent biography. I argue, however, that an over-emphasis on these sources of Mill's thought leads to interpretations of his views on individuality, higher pleasures and reform that neglect his commitment to empiricist mental and sociological moral science. The chief danger of this neglect is not merely that it ignores an important aspect of the Mill's thought, but that it aestheticizes Mill's moral and political project in a way that makes it less adequate to the political problems of the 21st century by 'depoliticizing' Mill's views to an unhappy extent. I trace the development of the Romantic view from Alan Ryan through Elizabeth Anderson and John Gray to Capaldi, and consider how the Romantic conception of the currency of utilitarian calculation and the nature of the self distracts us from Mill's concern with institutions, material conditions and power. In place of the Romantic conception, I present a socially and economically situated account of Mill that is both philosophically radical and politically potent.

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