Phenomenalism and the Metaphysical Question of the External World. The Strange Case of John St. Mill

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THE STRANGE CASE OF JOHN ST. MILL 

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Abstract

Although John St. Mill seems to be a philosopher easy to be classified in the history of philosophy as an empiricist who has overstated the epistemological role of induction, if we take into account his metaphysical commitments then we’ll find an unexpected approach which has to be explained. I think that in his book about Hamilton, especially in chapter 11, “The Psychological Theory of the Belief in an External World”, Mill tried to find a new way in metaphysics, mediated by his empiricist epistemology, namely, a new solution to the problem of external world and an alternative to metaphysical realism and subjective idealism. Starting from the conviction that the difficulties of metaphysics lie at the root of all sciences, Mill developed an unusual theory of physical object and phenomenon and he claimed that we can infer their existence from the sensations which are understood as permanent possibilities of experience. Historically, by his own version of a “Copernican metaphysics”, Mill tried to find a conceptual path between British empiricists, Locke, Berkeley and Hume on the one hand, and Kant and Reid on the other hand, and to escape from the tension between the two tenets.

Keywords: John St. Mill, the external world, metaphysical realism, phenomenalism, permanent possibilities of experience.

The problem of the external world

The metaphysical problem regarding the external world is outlined by John St. Mill in his book about Hamilton, An Examination of Sir William

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Hamilton’s Philosophy and of the Principal Philosophical Questions Discussed in his Writings, especially in chapter XI, “The Psychological Theory of the Belief in an External World”. Why are we reasonable willing to admit that the objects we perceive are external to us and not a part of our own subjective thoughts? Which is the meaning of our belief in an external world and why is this belief strongly supported not only by the common sense but also by the great majority of the scientists? Most of our inferences are based on the supposition that the external objects perceived by us exist independent of our subjective states of consciousness, namely, our habit is to think based on the metaphysical realist assumption that there is an external world independent from any mind. The meaning of our belief in an external world is explicitly elucidated by Mill:

We mean that there ‘is concerned’ in our perceptions something which exists when we are not thinking of it, which existed before we had ever thought of it, and would exist if we were annihilated; and further that there exist things which we never saw, touched, or otherwise perceived, and things which never have been perceived by man. (Mill 1979, 178)

The metaphysical idea which is involved in this realist approach is that there is a world external to any mind and that the objects which inhabit this world exist independent of our perceptions of them and of our conceptions about them. But Mill adds to the idea of an external world another different one, the idea of something which is the same regardless our different and changing impressions. It is easy to recognize here the old philosophical problem of a universal substance which is unchangeable and common to all the individual things which exist in the world. Mill named “matter” this substance.

But Mill’s framework of analysis is more complicated because he adds an epistemological perspective to the conceptual couple made from the idea of an external world and that of matter. He works with the epistemological distinction between how things really are and how they seem to be, between reality and appearance. A historical reference to Kant makes Mill’s idea clearer in its theoretical aim:

This idea of something which is distinguished from our fleeting impression by what, in Kantian language, is called Perdurability; something which is fixed and
the same, while our impressions vary; something which exists whether we are aware of it or not, and which is always square (or of some other given figure) whether it appears to us square or round – constitutes altogether our idea of external substance. Whoever can assign an origin to this complex conception, has accounted for what we mean by the belief in matter. (Mill, 1979, 179)

This means that a research focused on the perceptual relation between the epistemic subject and the external world will give an answer to these metaphysical questions. But this kind of research belongs to the new scientific domain of psychology. Is psychology able to give answers to these questions? We have to try to appraise the capacity of this science to offer solutions to these metaphysical puzzles. Therefore, Mill puts the problem of the external world in the context of a critical debate about the methods used by the new science of Psychology. In the previous chapters in his book about Hamilton, Mill has investigated the question of the reality of matter with the help of the so called “introspective method” used by Hamilton (and other thinkers from the so called introspective school) and he concluded that there were no results gained. Mill proposed a new way to approach the same subject, the psychological way. He takes into account “the case of those who hold that the belief in an external world is not intuitive, but an acquired product” (Mill 1979, 177).

Let’s summarize Mill’s starting point in his philosophical project, first of all, in his analysis of the problem of external world. The question is if there is an external world which is independent from any mind. If the answer is affirmative, then we are on the side of metaphysical realism. Moreover, we have to give an answer to a supplementary problem, that of matter, namely, the universal substance as a substratum of all existing individual things. But this means that we pass from the metaphysical problem of the external world to an epistemological one, that regarding the possibility to have a knowledge of it as such or only of its appearances. In order to find an answer to this question we have to investigate the perceptual and cognitive relations between the external word and the epistemic subject. And we have to use as explanatory ideas the results of the new science of psychology.
The psychological way of investigation and its epistemic statute

In his book about Hamilton, Mill rejects, as I already have mentioned, the so-called “introspective method”, the idea that we can find the best answers to the psychological questions with the help of inner observation of our own states of consciousness and that our consciousness is the source of our knowledge. Mill mentions that, in Hamilton’s view, consciousness and immediate knowledge are universally convertible and quotes Hamilton’s “Dissertations on Reid”, where he maintains that “consciousness comprehends every cognitive act; in other words, whatever we are not conscious of, that we do not know” (Mill 1979, 113). It is obvious that if we accept Hamilton’s view then we have to eliminate from the domain of knowledge all those items which are not in the field of our consciousness, for example, the knowledge of some past events or of some contents about which we are not conscious at this moment. Therefore, Mill proposes an alternative view regarding the relation between our consciousness and immediate knowledge based on the so-called psychological way.

How can we conceive psychology as an empirical science able to assert something about the external world and our perception of it? In his book about Hamilton and in A System of Logic, Mill lays out the grounds of a psychological research which follow the model of natural sciences based on laws. Which are the postulates, proved by experience, which support the psychological way? In An Examination..., Mill mentions two postulates, one which is the ground for giving up the introspective method, the other which defines psychology as a science based on laws.

The first postulate is that the human mind is capable of expectation:

After having had actual sensations, we are capable of forming the conception of possible sensations; sensations which are not feeling at the present moment, but which we might feel, and should feel if certain conditions were present, the nature of which conditions we have, in many cases, learnt by experience. (Mill 1979, 177)

The main theoretical effect of this postulate is that Mill removes the constraint to reduce perceptual knowledge to immediate knowledge.
The epistemic subject who perceives something is able to move freely along the flow of his own perceptual experience, to compare the impressions given by actual experience with those which were experienced in the past and were stored by the memory.

The second postulate consists in the laws of the association of ideas. Mill uses fully the well known associationist psychology developed by British empiricists, Locke, Berkeley and Hume. These laws are the following:

I. Similar phenomena tend to be thought of together.

II. Phenomena which have either been experienced or conceived in close contiguity to one another, tend to be thought of together. The contiguity is of two kinds: simultaneity and immediate succession.

III. Associations produced by contiguity become more certain and rapid by repetition. When two phenomena have been very often experienced in conjunction, and have not occurred separately either in experience or in thought in any single instance, then there is produced between them what has been called Inseparable Association.

IV. “When an association has acquired this character of inseparability, not only does the idea called up by association become, in our consciousness, inseparable from the idea which suggested it, but the facts or phenomena answering to those ideas come at last to seem inseparable in existence: things which we are unable to conceive apart, appear incapable of existing apart; and the belief we have in their coexistence, though really a product of experience, seems intuitive” (Mill 1979, 178).

All these four laws of association are related each other and assure the steps of an inferential chain from similar or contiguous phenomena given simultaneously or in immediate succession in our perceptual experience to the inseparable character of the things which are outside us. Therefore, the mistake which is made by the supporters of intuitive or introspective method is that they consider as intuitions those ideas which are a product of perceptual experience.

Based on these premises, Mill concludes that “the Psychological theory maintains that there are associations naturally and even necessarily
generated by the order of our sensations and of our reminiscences of sensation, which, supposing no intuition of an external world to have existed in consciousness, would inevitably generate the belief, and would cause it to be regarded as intuition” (178).

As a consequence, the idea of external substance is a result of these laws of association and is based on experience, the experience of contingent sensations, namely, sensations which are present in our consciousness because an external object caused them even if we can conceive them without the immediate perception of that object. The fact that we can conceive something without perceiving it doesn’t mean that the object ceased to exist. As Mill have said, the first postulate makes the difference, because our mind is capable of expectation and our memory is able to store the reminiscences of past sensations. For example, if I am seeing now a piece of white paper in this room and I shall go immediately outside will this mean that the piece of paper ceased to exist? If I will return in the room, I will see the piece of paper again. Moreover, when I am outside I can remember the piece of paper as I have seen it few moments ago.

**The key concept: permanent possibilities of sensation**

Mill asserts that our conception of the world consists only in a very small proportion of present sensations because the laws of association and our disposition of expectation assure us the capacity to comprise a countless diversity of sensations as possibilities in the sense that our past experience tells us that in some circumstances we shall have a certain experience. But we have also the capacity to extend the domain of these possibilities to experiences which were not felt by us. We can make this hypothetical statement: if some circumstances are met then we have to feel a certain experience. Therefore, the form of these possibilities of sensation is that of conditional certainties. This certainty is attached to them on the basis of past experience. Moreover, the real existence of the objects in the external world is derived by the epistemic subject from these permanent possibilities of sensation. We can know something about the external objects only because of these permanent possibilities of sensation.
In support to his conception Mill refers to other philosophers, to Berkeley, Hume and common sense philosophy (Reid, Stewart, Brown) and concludes: “The reliance of mankind on the real existence of visible and tangible objects means reliance on the reality and permanence of Possibilities of visual and tactual sensations, when no such sensations are actually experienced” (Mill 1979, 183).

Which is then the nature of our belief in external objects? Mill gives an answer which is the core of his approach. He claims that we believe that we perceive a something closely related to all our sensations, but different from those which we are feeling at any particular moment because they are permanent possibilities. Mill adds an example which is relevant:

The belief in such permanent possibilities seems to me to include all that is essential or characteristic in the belief in substance. I believe that Calcutta exists, though I do not perceive it, and that it would still exist if every percipient inhabitant were suddenly to leave the place, or be struck dead. But when I analyse the belief, all I find in it is, that were these events to take place, he Permanent Possibility of sensation which I call Calcutta would still remain; that if I were suddenly transported to the banks of the Hoogly, I should still have the sensations which, if now present, would lead me to affirm that Calcutta exists here and now. We may infer, therefore, that both philosophers and the world at large, when they think of matter, conceive it really as a Permanent Possibility of Sensation. (Mill 1979, 185)

It is obvious that Mill’s theory about possibilities of sensation is based on the postulate that human mind is capable of expectation. This means that after we have actual sensations we are able to form the concept of possible sensations, namely, sensations that are not experienced by us at this moment but which we may feel and we should feel if some conditions are present. Of course, past experience learnt us all we need about the nature of these conditions and about the relations between our sensations and their conditions. We experience sequences of sensations and some sensory states are associated with them simultaneously or successively.

An important difference between present sensations and possibilities of sensations is that the first are fugitive and vague but the second, on the contrary, are permanent. This approach is used by Mill in order to make the distinction between primary and secondary qualities:
... The sensations which correspond to what are called Primary Qualities (as soon at least as we come to apprehend them by two senses, the eye as well as the touch) are always present when any part of the group is so. But colours, tastes, smells, and the like, being, in comparison, fugacious, are not, in the same degree, conceived as being always there, even when nobody is present to perceive them. The sensations answering to the Secondary Qualities are only occasional, those of Primary, constant. The Secondary, moreover, vary with different persons, and with the temporary sensibility of our organs; the Primary, when perceived at all, are, as far as we know, the same to all persons and at all times. (Mill 1979, 187)

Are these possibilities of sensation conditional certainties because our mind exclusively works according with the laws of expectation and association? In other words, are these laws an epistemic warrant for the conditional certainties? Mill gives an answer in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions: expectation and association are necessary but they aren’t sufficient. We have to correlate them with the concept of cause:

This natural probability is converted into certainty, when we take into consideration that universal law of our experience which is termed the law of Causation, and which makes us mentally connect with the beginning of everything, some antecedent condition, or Cause. (Mill 1979, 186)

I think that in his theory about permanent possibilities of sensation Mill combines a causal theory of perception with a theory of the form act – object (a quasi-intentional theory of perception). Historically, he uses the British empiricist tradition from Ockham to Locke, the theory about intention proposed by Ockham, especially the distinction between *intentio prima* and *intentio secunda*, and the representational theory of perception proper to Locke and his empiricists followers. His theoretical aim seems to be to find a middle way between naturalism and subjectivism.

Mill refers to Berkeley, Hume and common sense philosophy (Reid, Stewart, Brown) and concludes: “The reliance of mankind on the real existence of visible and tangible objects means reliance on the reality and permanence of Possibilities of visual and tactual sensations, when no such sensations are actually experienced” (Mill 1979, 183).

How do we interpret this theoretical balance proposed by Mill? I think that if we take into account different critical reviews we have sufficient reasons to distinguish between anepistemological interpretation
which is based on the assertion that Mill developed a phenomenalist theory of perception and a metaphysical one, which is related with the idea of a “Copernican revolution” in philosophy. I think that the two interpretations do not attempt to reconcile Mill’s naturalism and subjectivism, but to choose one of them as the core of Mill’s theory. But can we do this if we want to preserve in our interpretation all Mill’s commitments?

The epistemological interpretation: Mill as a phenomenalist

The historical fact that Mill, in contrast to Comte, who had rejected the inner observation and consciousness as such, tried to find a scientific ground for psychology is well known. Mill considers that consciousness provides the data for psychology as a science and that, epistemologically, an analysis of our consciousness will reveals the basis of our reasoning. Mill tried to offer a positive foundation for psychology as a science of human subjectivity and, as a consequence, he was confronted with the theoretical task to reconcile a positive naturalist approach with the need to take into account subjective phenomena which belongs to the domain of psychology. So, if we follow Comte and reject the possibility of inner observation then psychology cannot require the epistemic statute of a science. But how can we explain scientifically the mental phenomena without a psychological research of consciousness? Mill accepted the challenge and he tried to find an answer to this question in a naturalist framework. Here is the source of a dilemma: how can naturalism be consistent if we conceive psychology on a subjectivist basis? Shall we reject subjectivism or shall we follow the subjectivist line of explanation? But if we reject subjectivism then how can be psychology founded? I think that Mill developed his phenomenalist theory about perception as an attempt to solve all these difficulties.

Skorupski, in his book about Mill (Skorupski, 1989), reveals that in An Examination emerges the central tension of Mill’s philosophy, between his three convictions, namely, naturalism, inductivism and subjectivism (the primacy of consciousness). Skorupsky asserts that “if one combines the last two of these tenets (inductivism and the primacy of consciousness) some form of phenomenalism – “matter as the permanent possibility of
sensation – is inevitable” and puts the question “how then can phenomenalism be squared with naturalism?” (Skorupski 1989, 10). The form of phenomenalism developed by Mill with some naturalistic tools assumes from the beginning a doubled statute for sensations: one the one hand, sensations are in the world at the empirical level, on the other hand, at the transcendental level, the world is a construct of sensations. Skorupski remarks this mixture between the levels of analysis: “One of the oddest things about Examination is the thoroughly naturalistic, non-transcendental tone in which it advances its phenomenalism: at one moment it constructs the world out of sensations, at another – without any sense of crossing into a different order of analysis – blandly envisages ‘what physiology is rendering more and more probable’ – that ‘our sensations, have their physical antecedents particular states of the nerves’ (Mill 1979, 282)” (Skorupski 1989, 11).

Let’s enter into the details of Mill’s phenomenalism, using his key concept of permanent possibilities of sensations. Based on his conditional expectations and using the laws of association, the epistemic subject will obtain, in Skorupski’s terms, “a stable network of conditional beliefs, of the form, ‘If such and such sensations were to occur, then such and such other sensations would occur (with a given degree of probability)’. Let us call such beliefs ‘sensation conditionals’” (Skorupski 1989, 230).

Moreover, these permanent, certified and guaranteed possibilities of sensation are joined in groups which are conditionally related with experience in an order of succession. Therefore, we have another conditional applied to groups of possibilities of sensation: “Whenever a given cluster of certified possibilities of sensation obtains, or a given set of sensation conditionals are all true, then a certain other cluster follows – a certain other set of sensation conditionals become true” (Skorupski 1989, 231).

This interpretation is rooted in Mill’s conception about sensations and permanent possibilities of sensation. The constant sequences that occur in nature have an antecedent and a consequence which are obtained between groups of permanent possibilities of sensations, not between individual sensations or between actual sensations. The structure of the flow of our experience is mainly determined by sequences which contain groups of possibilities of sensations. In other terms, the naturalized relation between our mind and experience is based on wholes of
possibilities, not on individual actual sensations. For example, Mill argues, “our ideas of causation, power, activity, do not become connected in thought with our sensations as actual at all, save in the few physiological cases where these figure by themselves as the antecedents in some uniform sequence. Those ideas become connected, not with sensations, but with groups of possibilities of sensations” (Mill 1979, 181).

This analysis of sensory experience with the help of psychological method explains our conception about externality without any appeal to other methods, such as the introspective one. The concept of externality arises from the data of sensory experience and its laws. This means that the concept of an external object is acquired from perceptual experience by association.

But what we mean when we say that there are external objects? Is Mill’s phenomenalism an accepted account of our ontological commitments? Skorupski (1989, 232) suggests that Mill’s position is not so clear because, on the one hand, he holds that “the belief on which all the practical consequences depend, is the belief in Permanent Possibilities of Sensation” (Mill 1979, 183) and, on the other hand, he concedes that philosophically we believe in the existence of a cause of all our sensations which is not a sensation in itself.

Mill describes in details the process through which we obtain this idea:

This familiarity with the idea of something different from each thing we know, makes it natural and easy to form the notion of something different from all things that we know, collectively as well as individually. It is true we can form no conception of what such a thing can be; our notion of it is merely negative; but the idea of a substance, apart from its relation to the impressions which we conceive it as making on our senses, is a merely negative one. There is thus no psychological obstacle to our forming the notion of a something which is neither a sensation nor a possibility of sensation, even if our consciousness does not testify to it; and nothing is more likely than that the Permanent Possibilities of sensation, to which our consciousness does testify, should be confounded in our minds with this imaginary conception. (Mill 1979, 185)

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2 Mill agrees that: “It being evident... that some philosophers believe this, and it being maintainable that the mass of mankind do so, the existence of a perdurable basis of sensations, distinct from sensations themselves, is proved, it might be said, by the possibility of believing it” (Mill 1979, 184).
It is obvious that Mill works simultaneously on two levels, one psychological, that of associationist process which is basic in order to acquire the idea of matter, and another one epistemological, that of an inference from our sensations to the existence of external causes of them, an inference by which we obtain the reflective idea of matter.

But how is this idea involved in our use of language? Skorupski argues that in arguing that matter is nothing else than the permanent possibilities of sensations Mill is not focused on the literal meaning of the propositions used in everyday or in scientific discourse, but that he is concerned with their practical content. Skorupski mentions that in *The System of Logic* (3.2) Mill is concerned with the meaning of such kind of propositions and that he holds “that the names which make them up denote the external causes of our sensations, and connote the attributes of these external causes. What he there says about the phenomenal foundation of those attributes parallels his distinction in the *Examination* between the practical concept of matter, which involves only the permanent possibility of sensation, and the reflective concept, which envisages an external cause of sensation” (Skorupski 1989, 234).

The implication of this is that our language is impregnated with the reflective concept, so that in using it its practical functions and use are surpassed. Mill talks in just this way. Skorupski identified a passage from a letter to Herbert Spencer:

> On the main question between us your chief point seems to be, that the idealist (*i.e.* phenomenalist) argument is reduced to nonsense if we accept the idealist conclusions, since it cannot be expressed without assuming an objective reality producing, and a subjective reality receiving, the impression… but the ultimate elements in the analysis I hold to be themselves states of mind, viz. – sensations, memories of sensations, and expectations of sensation. I do not pretend to account for these, or to recognize anything in them beyond themselves and the order of their occurrence; but I do profess to analyze our other states of consciousness into them. Now I maintain that these are the only substratum I need postulate; and that when anything else seems to be postulated, it is only because of the erroneous theory on which all our language is constructed, and that if the concrete words used are interpreted as meaning our expectations of sensations the nonsense and unmeaningness which you speak of do not arise. (Mill 1972, 1090)
I think that Mill combines here the views of language as theory laden with a rejection of it because he uses a phenomenalistic language and not a physicalistic one. Mill is conscious that a pure phenomenalistic language is impossible and he tries to find a solution to this challenge: how can we speak about external world in terms of our sensations so that our propositions to be true or false? The answer is that we can do this in terms of practical consequences. I think that Mill avoids the possible objection that we cannot translate completely the propositions about physical objects into a phenomenalist language.

Therefore, Mill’s arguments are very strange because he refers altogether to facts about sensations and to facts about physical and although the two types of facts are ontologically independent one another Mill put them into a causal connection, physical objects are external causes of sensations. This interpretation is clearly stated by Skorupski:

The facts about sensations which according to Mill constitute practical truth-conditions for physicalistic propositions can only be stated in a public language which, taken as a whole, is impregnated with the theory of material objects as ‘external causes of sensations’. (Skorupski 1989, 235)

Mill thinks that the idea of an external cause of our sensations is embedded in our thinking about external world and our knowledge of it. Mill agrees this approach:

[...]there is... for every statement which can be made concerning material phenomena in terms of the Realistic theory, an equivalent meaning in terms of Sensations and Possibilities of sensation alone, and a meaning which would justify all the same processes of thought. (Mill 1979, 198)

It seems that Mill tries to develop a phenomenalist theory of perception which is compatible with our commons sense and scientific realism about the world. His key concept of possibilities of sensation assures him the ground for this dilemmatic approach. Mill himself recognizes this difficulty but he thinks that if we define matter as a permanent possibility of sensation then we can develop a phenomenalist theory which is consistent with common sense and science. Mill outlines this dilemma:
If I am asked, whether I believe in matter, I ask whether the questioner accepts this definition of it. If he does, I believe in matter: and so do all Berkelians. In any other sense than this, I do not. But I affirm with confidence, that the conception of Matter includes the whole meaning attached to it by the common world, apart from philosophical, and sometimes from theological, theories. (Mill 1979, 183)

Mill proposed a naturalistic approach based on the idea that there is a causal order of the world and that we can know it starting from subjective perceptions. Mill accepts that the causal relations hold between physical events, or between episodes of consciousness in mind, or between physical events and episodes of consciousness, or between episodes of consciousness in different minds mediated by physical events.

Let’s consider the example of a boy cutting his finger. The cut causes him pain that makes him scream, the scream causes a sensation in me:

The chain of causation is the following: 1. A modification in a set of Permanent Possibilities of Sensation common to the boy and me. 2. A sensation of pain in the boy, not felt by me. 3. The scream, which is a sensation in me. (Mill 1979, 207)

This subjectivist approach is close to that previously proposed by the British empiricists in their representational theory of perception: a representational experience is present in the act of perception with the role to mediate between the perceived object and our judgement about it. In Mill’s view the access to these subjective presentations is not given by introspection, but by a so called psychological basis, following the methods of psychology, thus by a naturalistic-objective manner, which supposes that the causal order contains physical events, at least such events as a scream. But how is compatible this naturalistic way with phenomenalism?

I think that Mill tried to solve this puzzle with the help of his phenomenalism which has an unusual structure. A phenomenalist theory is traditionally eliminative regarding the physical objects, but Mill wanted to save his naturalism and as a consequence he adopted another version of a phenomenalist approach, the so called reductive phenomenalism. His

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3 This naturalist interpretation of Mill's phenomenalism, proposed by Skorupski (1989), was then shared by Andy Hamilton (1998) and Donner and Fumerton (2009).
concept of matter as permanent possibility of experience plays the key role in this unusual theoretical view and offers a basis for his arguments. The set of psychological laws assures to an epistemic subject the capacity to work with conditional certainties regarding the relation between subjective experience and external world. Therefore, Mill’s theory becomes consistent and the tension between naturalism and phenomenalism is surpassed.

The metaphysical interpretation:
Mill as a follower of “Copernican revolution”

A metaphysical interpretation of the way followed by Mill between subjectivism and naturalism with the support of the psychological method was developed recently by Nicholas Capaldi (2017). He makes a distinction between three metaphysical traditions that emerged in the Western philosophical thought: naturalism, idealism, Copernicanism. According to naturalism, metaphysics is the most general view on the world, abstracted from the specialized sciences. The result is a connection between epistemology and ontology, in the sense that epistemology is conceived as a research devoted to the basic categories which describe our experience so that these categories mirror the external physical world. From the idealist standpoint, we have to make a distinction between the world of appearance and the ultimate reality and to bind the scientific research at the domain of appearance. The ultimate reality is conceptual and logical and is apprehended by metaphysics as a non-empirical pre-science. Finally, the third alternative vision is the so called “Copernican metaphysics”, which was introduced by Hume and Kant and should be characterised starting from the idea that “the ultimate source of reality and intelligibility is neither the physical world, nor a super sensible conceptual world, but the everyday pre-theoretical world, constituted by the interaction of human beings with environment and each other” (Capaldi 2017, 223).

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4 See Capaldi 1972.
5 See Beck 1979.
In the reconstruction offered below, I shall let aside the problems regarding the practical understanding of philosophy and I will take systematically into account only the relation between metaphysics and epistemology, even if Mill’s main goal was to reform the practical philosophy, morals, politics and religion.

As an effect of the Copernican revolution, philosophy was understood by Hume as the methodized and corrected common sense. Capaldi asserts that Mill worked in this Copernican framework based on the idea of interaction of human beings with other human beings and objects. For example, his attempt to develop a scientific psychology based on the laws of association was an application of this line of thought. Therefore, Mill was not a follower of Bentham, James Mill and Alexander Bain. Their contemporary idealists, Green and Bradley, have made a mistake when they considered Mill as a naturalist philosopher. Regarding the problem of the external world from a phenomenalist standpoint, Capaldi’s argument is this: the naturalist interpretation, which is based on a relation between epistemology and ontology, collapsed because Mill did not draw metaphysical conclusions from his phenomenalist epistemology (for example, he did not established the independent existence of external physical objects, he did not reified sensations as sense-data and he did not reduced the self to a series of sensations); nevertheless, if a naturalist will try to reveal Mill’s metaphysical commitments, he will be forced to remark Mill’s appreciation for Berkeley and Kant (Capaldi 2017, 226).

In Examination Mill wrote about Kant:

Kant… holds so essential a place in the development of philosophical thought, that until somebody had done what Kant did, metaphysics according to our present conception of it could not have been continued… he has become one of the turning point in the history of philosophy. (Mill 1979, 493n)

On the other hand, according to Mill, the main philosophical controversy of his time was that between the intuitionists and the school of Experience and association:

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The associationist philosophy as taught by Hartley, and the metaphysics of the German school... are the two systems between which, and which only, almost every metaphysician, desiring the name, in all Europe, is now beginning to be convinced that it is necessary to choose: the two most perfect forms of the only two theories of the human mind which are strictly speaking, possible.

Mill adds that reflection is based on the pre-theoretical or prior practice:

If a science of logic exists... it must be useful. If there be rules to which every mind consciously or unconsciously conforms in every instance in which it infers rightly, there seems little necessity for discussing whether a person is more likely to observe those rules, when he knows the rules, than when he is unacquainted with them. (Mill 1974, 11)

Therefore, as Capaldi mentions, “self-understanding precedes our understanding of everything else – something already inherent in the Cartesian starting point culminating in Hume and Kant. There is a metaphysical world view already assumed by Mill in his treatment of logic; but the enumeration of the norms of inference inherent in everyday practice can be carried out without directly addressing metaphysical issues” (Capaldi 2017, 229).

Mill thinks that his analysis of inference is metaphysically neutral. Analysis begins with everyday practical or pre-theoretical world. The question for him is if this pre-theoretical level can be conceptualized. Mill developed this idea in the book about Hamilton starting from the conviction that “the difficulties of Metaphysics lie at the root of all science” (Mill 1979, 2).

Mill resuscitates Locke and Hume, as a reply to Hamilton who used Reid and Kant against them. Capaldi identifies three historical qualifications proposed by Mill.

First, Mill endorses the Kantian doctrine about the relativity of knowledge, that “we mentally invest the objects of our perceptions with attributes” which are “constructed by the mind’s own laws” (Mill 1979, 8), but he rejects the Kantian views that the construction is based on innate forms. This rejection is linked with the idea that there are not eternal truths and institutional structures. Therefore, Mill detests intuition.

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Second, Mill resuscitates Locke and Hume starting from Hartley, James Mill and Bain, and their thesis that the constructions of mind are “put together out of ideas of sensation, by the known laws of association” (Mill 1979, 9).

Thirdly, Mill suggests that the latter position is compatible with Berkeley’s theory (Mill 1979, 8-9).

The result of Mill’s examination of Hamilton is that he tries to make a progress in the understanding of some metaphysical and epistemological problems. Hamilton tried to combine the Kantian idea about the primacy of subject with Reid’s thesis that if we take into account the common sense then we can work with the belief that there are external object in an objective world (and, probably, that we can perceive them directly). Mill understood that it is impossible to be an idealist and a naturalist in the same time and tried to find another solution to the traditional metaphysical problem of external world and that regarding its knowledge.

But Mill remains an idealist. Following Berkeley, Mill identified himself as a kind of “idealist”. After Capaldi, this means for Mill that:

1. the mind is incontrovertibly aware of ‘sensations’,
2. we can never be directly aware of physical objects, and
3. we cannot infer the latter from the former.

Matter is the permanent possibility of sensation. This philosophical idealism, which Mill thinks is consonant with common sense, is a rejection of both naturalism and the kind of idealism one finds in Berkeley, Green, and Bradley. Unlike Berkeley, Mill does not endorse an inference to the mind of God. Given his inductivism, Mill rejects Kant’s and Green’s ‘transcendental idealism’ and Hegel’s ‘absolute idealism’. (Capaldi 2017, 230)

The final cut

Let’s summarize the main arguments used above. Mill proposed in his book about Hamilton a new reductive phenomenalist theory about

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perception, based on the concept of the possibilities of sensation defined as conditional certainties. Sensations are transient, but conditional expectations of sensation are not: I build up a stable network of conditional beliefs, as Mill asserts:

In almost all the constant sequences which occur in Nature, the antecedence and consequence do not obtain between sensations, but between the groups we have been speaking about, of which a very small portion is actual sensation, the greater part being permanent possibilities of sensation, evidenced to us by a small and variable number of sensations actually present. Hence, our ideas of causation, power, activity, do not become connected in thought with our sensations as actual at all, save in the few physiological cases where these figure by themselves as the antecedents in some uniform sequence. Those ideas become connected, not with sensations, but with groups of possibilities of sensations. (Mill 1979, 180-181)

Therefore, we work with groups of possibilities of sensations as conditional certainties and with the psychological laws of association. Then, what can we say about the external world and the external objects? If the concept of an external object is acquired from experience by association, then the question about which are the final entities which are revealed by the psychological method become necessary. Mill suggests that we can admit these categories of entities:

• physical events or external objects as permanent possibilities of sensation;
• presentations as episodes of consciousness in one mind;
• causal relations between physical events (permanent possibilities of sensation) and episodes of consciousness;
• episodes of consciousness in different minds, intermediated by physical events.

Mill seems to think that his view about phenomenalism leaves common sense and science untouched. But at the phenomenalist level, the physical events are replaced by permanent possibilities, so that the causal connections become correlations between sensations and permanent possibilities of sensation. As a consequence, there is a tension in Mill’s philosophy in his Examination. It results from the conflict between his naturalism, his aim to offer a causal explanation, and his subjectivism engaged in the attempt to take into account the subjective perceptions.

Again, Mill claims that matter is the permanent possibility of sensations. Mill thinks that this thesis is consonant with common sense
and science. Is this a philosophical idealism? If the answer is yes, then this means that Mill rejects naturalism. But if we take into account the naturalist arguments used by Mill, then he rejects different kinds of idealism, starting with that developed by Berkeley, followed by the Kantian transcendental idealism and the Hegelian absolute idealism. The conclusion is that Mill tried to reconcile two apparently opposed philosophical positions and to offer a consistent answer.

Finally, I think that these ambiguities in Mill’s works explain why his theory is opened to multiple interpretations. If we consider those proposed by Skorupski and Capaldi, we can conclude that to make a sharp distinction between an epistemological interpretation and a metaphysical one is a good way to understand the reasons of the internal tension between his naturalism and his subjectivism. The phenomenalist framework does not block his own metaphysical agenda:

the existence of matter and of spirit; of the existence of any connexion between cause and effect, other than the constancy of their succession; of the reality of time & space as entities per se, distinguishable from the objects which are said to exist in them... inquiries into the nature of conception, perception, memory and belief... whether our emotions are innate, or the result of association; Whether God and duty are realities... the original premises of all our knowledge... is the object of the higher, or remoter metaphysics. (Mill 1974, 964)

REFERENCES


