In this paper I explore and defend some aspects of John Stuart Mill's liberal feminist political theory and its foundations in his moral philosophy. Feminist ethics and political theory is rich and diverse. One important question in feminist debate is whether historical moral and political theories ought to be rejected entirely by feminists or whether at least some historical thinkers have valuable contributions to make to a feminist revisioning of the traditional canon. I contend that there is much in Mill's philosophy which is in harmony with feminist vision and thought. While Mill's liberal feminism is complex, my focus in this paper is on his conceptions of value, of human nature and of the self, and I leave for another occasion an examination of the politics of his liberal feminism and his views on the sexual division of labor within the family. Liberal feminist theories have been the subject of intense discussion and criticism in current debates among feminist scholars. While this examination has several facets, I concentrate here on some recent critiques which find fault with liberal feminism for its allegedly flawed values of individualism and its flawed conception of human nature and the relation of self to the community. I argue that Mill's conceptions of the self, individualism, and self-development meet many of the concerns raised by these critics whose concerns are more correctly focused on other models of liberalism.

Mill's moral theory and his views of human nature and of the good have important implications for his liberal political philosophy, shaping it into a form of radical egalitarianism. I argue that Mill's conception of value for humans essentially involves a notion of self-development. Let me begin by setting out the core values which shape Mill's liberal feminism. While some critiques of liberalism by both feminist and communitarian thinkers assume that there is one unified liberal theory, there are also several divergent streams of liberal thought. The correct
target of these critiques is a liberalism built on core values of possessive and abstract individualism and a view of moral agents as rational egoists. For example, Alison Jaggar criticizes the alleged liberal commitment to abstract individualism. According to Jaggar, abstract individualism assumes that human beings are ontologically prior to and independent of society. "Logically if not empirically, human individuals could exist outside a social context; their essential characteristics, their needs and interests, their capacities and desires, are given independently of their social context and are not created or even fundamentally altered by that context." She also points to the common liberal assumption of egoism which holds that "people typically seek to maximize their individual self-interest" although she concedes that Mill is not the worst offender in this case. Jaggar claims that these views are fundamentally male and should not be accepted by feminists. But Mill himself decisively rejects these views.

Mill is a utilitarian as well as a liberal and is thus committed to locating value in mental states of happiness or satisfaction. But he is a qualitative hedonist and claims that the quality or kind of happiness is important in assessing its value; moreover, the most valuable kinds of happiness are those that engage humans in developing and exercising certain capacities. Mill's core value of development and self-development is not a fixed unity, but an intricate balance of elements. To be more specific, the most valuable forms of happiness are those of engagement in the use of intellectual, affective and moral or caring capacities. Mill maintains that these are generic human capacities which our society has an obligation to nurture, and which members of our society have a right to have developed.

The development of our intellectual, feeling and moral capacities is crucial to our well-being. Mill does not order these capacities hierarchically, but he holds that these aspects of our nature must balance each other. In addition, since these capacities can manifest and be promoted in diverse ways, this allows room for the different experiences of men and women to have equal play, but does not imply that women will seek to become like men. Mill's arguments for the development of our reasoning capacities are well known. What perhaps needs emphasis in the context of his feminist theory is his stress on the importance of the internal culture of the individual, or on the development of our feelings.