JOHN STUART MILL'S

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

John Stuart Mill's
Philosophy of History

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This dissertation will examine John Stuart Mill's philosophy of history. Though Mill has been the subject of an imposing volume of scholarship, his philosophy of history has received scant attention, despite his numerous reflections on historical method and the role of history in the development of a science of society, and his lifelong concern with the matter of historical progress. My investigation will encompass a broad range of his output, including occasional writings and reviews, as well as his most important works. This inquiry will divide into three parts: the role of history in Mill's break from the Benthamite radicals; his effort to define a methodology for the study of society modelled on the natural sciences; and his speculations about the course of history. I will argue that Mill's efforts to develop a coherent philosophy of history foundered on the problem of reconciling the scientific aspirations inherited from the Enlightenment with his belief in a malleable human nature and the primacy of intellectual development in driving historical progress. This conflict was implicit—but left unresolved—in his paired essays on "Coleridge" and "Bentham," but its source was an irreconcilable vision of the individual as driven by deterministic psychological laws and as also capable of freely choosing a life

of “self-culture.” This dichotomy was reflected in his philosophy of history, as Mill retained the materialistic stadial theory proposed during the Scottish Enlightenment, and an idealistic and Comtean vision of history as a progressive unfolding of human intellectual achievement. Though Mill claimed the preeminence of the intellect in facilitating advances in living conditions, he believed that the culmination of that development in his own Age of Commerce was undermining individual accomplishment—indeed, individuality itself—in an oppressive mass culture with no higher goal than the acquisition of ever-greater wealth. Mindful of the culturally stationary states of Asia, Mill envisioned the end of history as the consequence of intellectual stagnation and social conformity. To prevent that outcome, he advocated for the cessation of economic growth in a supra-subsistence stationary state in which the pursuit of higher moral and intellectual aspirations could be rejuvenated.

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Chapter I: Mill and History

The life and philosophy of John Stuart Mill have not been neglected. Scholars have combed through, to list only the most prominent topics, Mill's political philosophy, moral theory, epistemology and psychology, economic theory, contribution to the foundations of sociology, assessment of scientific method, religious beliefs, feminism, consideration of socialism, and his commentary on English policy in India and Ireland. There are multiple studies of Mill within the context of the intellectual and literary life of Victorian England and mid-century France. His personal life has also received repeated examination, begun by Mill himself in the *Autobiography* published soon after his death and promptly followed by a biography authored by his friend, Alexander Bain. Several other biographies have followed, including at least two written in the present century. Articles have been published on his employment at the East India Company, and there is a book on his term as a Member of Parliament. His marriage to Harriet Taylor and his relationship with his father have been picked over for psychological insights and considerations of the extent to which Mill was enthralled by each. And, of course, one cannot fail to mention the fascination with his education and subsequent depression. That Mill could be considered from so many perspectives speaks implicitly to the remarkable range and depth of his accomplishments. It also suggests that no part of his contribution has been left unexamined.

Yet despite the imposing volume of scholarship that has been devoted to Mill, his philosophy of history and his critiques of historians have received scant attention. This omission has been occasionally noted. Writing in 1965, Clark Bouton expresses his surprise at the "lack of attention given to Mill's historical thought," particularly in light

of the importance Mill himself assigned to it.[1] Similarly, Alan Ryan, who has written extensively on Mill's philosophy, acknowledged that his survey of Mill omits a discussion of his "view of history and its sources," and that the "topic is one which deserves treatment in its own right."[2] Despite the continuing interest in Mill since the publication of his *Collected Works*, the situation has not significantly changed. In four recent collections of essays, each devoted mainly to Mill's political philosophy and perspectives on cultural questions, only two of a total of forty-eight papers give more than passing consideration to Mill's reflections on history.[3] As best as I can determine, there is no book-length analysis, and within books on Mill, there are rarely ever more than a few paragraphs devoted to the topic. The only extended survey of Mill's writings on history is John Cairns' introduction to Volume XX of the *Collected Works*, which is devoted to French history and historians, and Cairns does not stray beyond this narrow body of work.

One might expect that even though Mill's theory of history has been neglected, his theory of progress might have been examined, and, indeed, there are scholars who regard optimism as central to his doctrine. Robert Nisbet, for example, states flatly that "the principle of progress underlies or is implicit in almost everything Mill wrote," and that "he leaves us in no doubt whatever of his commitment to progress." Karl Popper

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[1] Clark Bouton, "John Stuart Mill: On Liberty and History," *Western Political Quarterly* 18, No. 3 (September 1965): 569.
[2] Alan Ryan, *J.S. Mill* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), xi.
[3] One essay is by John Robson, "Civilization and Culture as Moral Concepts," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, ed. John Skorupski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 338-371. The second is by Edward Alexander, "The Principles of Permanence and Progression in the Thought of John Stuart Mill," in *James and John Stuart Mill/Papers of the Centenary Conference*, eds. John Robson and Michael Laine (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 126-42. The third collection is *J.S. Mill's Political Thought*, eds. Nadia Urbanati and Alex Zakaras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). The fourth and most recent collection is *John Stuart Mill and the Art of Life*, eds. Ben Eggleston, Dale E. Miller, and David Weinstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

claims that "Mill...held that progress was an unconditional or absolute trend, which is *reducible to the laws of human nature*." Abram Harris has argued that "Mill shared the romantic assumption of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment that progress… was upward, the movement consisting of improvement in man's character and his external circumstances."[4] Yet these examples notwithstanding, while concern about progress is certainly a persistent presence in Mill's work, it too has not been carefully examined. Nisbet and Popper gloss over the subject as if it is conventional wisdom that Mill was an optimist. And while Harris has taken on Mill's ideas on progress as the subject of a journal article, his essay unfortunately strays repeatedly from the subject that its title promises to explore. While the concept of progress is certainly an important component of Mill's philosophy of history, it too has not received the detailed attention one would presume.

My intention is to fill these improbable gaps in Mill scholarship. My approach to examining Mill's thinking about history will proceed using a somewhat flawed distinction between two types of philosophy of history. W. H. Walsh and William Dray have proposed that philosophical inquiries into history have fallen into two broad categories which they distinguish as "speculative" and "critical."[5] Speculative philosophies seek to discover the meaning of past experience, to expose a pattern or an underlying principle or perhaps a providential purpose which can be claimed to determine

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[4] Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 226; Abram L. Harris, "John Stuart Mill's Theory of Progress," *Ethics* 66, No. 3 (April 1956): 171; Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 152 (italics in original). See also Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), ch. 2. For a contrary view, which I find more convincing, see Alan Ryan, *John Stuart Mill* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 184. Ryan argues that Mill's definition and use of the term "progress" fails to support a view that he had "a cheerful belief in the inevitability of progress."

[5] William Dray, *Philosophy of History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 1-3; W. H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 14-15.

the course of events. Speculative philosophies of history often concern questions of the linearity or circularity of historical process, and, if linear, whether the path of history is progressive. Critical philosophers of history, on the other hand, concern themselves with the methods employed by historians and the characteristics of historical thinking: What is the nature of historical inquiry? Can the methods of the natural sciences be applied to understanding history and explaining events? What are the grounds for judging the validity of historical explanations? What is the relationship between history and the social sciences?

While speculative and critical philosophies of history ask different questions, they are, like the two senses of the term "history"—referring to both the reality of human experience and to the descriptions, narratives and explanations of it—not entirely distinct. Speculative philosophies tend to carry implicit answers to analytical and methodological questions; Marxist historical materialism, for example, is a speculative philosophy that dictates that any historical explanation must contain a consideration of class interest and conflict. Similarly, the way a philosopher addresses critical questions of historical explanation can be indicative of an underlying speculative perspective. As Maurice Mandelbaum has pointed out, "one cannot confine one's self to methodological discussions. Every analysis of a field of knowledge terminates in the acceptance of some view regarding the data with which the field is concerned."[6] The positivist claim, for example, that historical events can be explained using covering laws and the methodologies of science, assumes that human events—indeed, human nature—have the orderly and uniform characteristics of the physical world. The explanation of historical events can thus fall within the deterministic or highly probabilistic models of the natural

[6] Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 305.

sciences. Reference to laws of behavior tends to minimize the role that reasoned decisions or conscious intentions play in the course of history. The effort to import scientific method into historical explanation also tends to suggest the possibility that historical inquiry can be value-free, and thus that the past itself either conveys no meaning or that it is not within our grasp to detect any meaning. Because of the elusive questions about the meaning of history, Dray notes that "the construction of speculative systems of history is somewhat out of fashion," but he also acknowledges that "the expectation that history should be 'meaningful' is so strong [that] we all in fact have an implicit philosophy of history."[7] Even those who would eschew a speculative philosophy cannot escape the assumptions that are buried in attempts at a purely critical approach to historical explanation.

While a strict distinction between critical and speculative breaks down, it remains a useful way to separate the questions encompassed within the philosophy of history, and the following analysis will consider the positions that Mill took in critiquing historians, in constructing a methodology for the social sciences, and in expressing himself directly on the factors that contribute to the movement and meaning of history. The opening chapter will examine the concept of philosophical history that formed the essential background for Mill's thinking. While Mill would later acknowledge the importance of French historians and theorists in the formation of his arguments, the Scottish Enlightenment exercised a profound influence in framing the questions which Mill addressed, as well as on his conclusions about the course of history. Perhaps foremost among these influences was the conviction that history and social practice can be comprehended within a set of methodological practices in common with the natural sciences. Mill shared the Scottish

[7] Dray, *Philosophy of History*, 2.

doctrine that like the processes of physical nature, human history should be considered as a succession of causes and effects, and that the task of the human— or as Mill put it, the moral— sciences was to discern the patterns and regularities of human affairs that could be attributed to natural law. Much as Newton had explained mechanics through gravity, the objective of the social scientist would be to discover the laws of human nature that produced the constant conjunctions of social behavior. The task of philosophical history, for Mill and the Scots, was to provide the empirical groundwork— viewing the past as a repository of human behavior— for the science of mankind.

In addition to this methodological foundation, the Scottish Enlightenment provided Mill with a model for comprehending the passage from primitive society to their own commercial civilization. Termed the "law of the four stages" or the stadial theory of history, the Scots coalesced around the belief that history proceeded through four discernable steps, driven by the successive desires for sustenance, comfort and luxury. Suggesting that historical advances were fundamentally driven by economic and material considerations, the Scots conceived of history as a series of stages in which mankind confronts nature and steadily brings it under control. In the effort to construct a philosophical history, the structural relationship between man and nature thus displaced the primacy of political narratives recounting the contingent genius and folly of kings and clerics.

Against the Enlightenment background as well as Mill's adolescence under the intense tutelage of his father and Bentham, I will proceed in the third chapter to consider his involvement in the debates and intellectual currents that drew him away from the Philosophic Radicals. By Mill's own account, the devastating attack by Macaulay on his

father's *Essay on Government* was pivotal in forcing Mill to reconsider the place of history in political philosophy and discourse. Macaulay's advocacy of an inductive and thus historically based political theory remained a pre-occupation for Mill through the writing of the *Logic*. The expansion of Mill's thinking about history was also driven by his contacts with the Saint-Simonians and the Coleridgeans, culminating in his paired essays on "Bentham" and "Coleridge." These essays represented Mill's new eclecticism and an attempted synthesis of Enlightenment naturalism and Romantic historicism. Despite his claim that Bentham and Coleridge somehow completed one another, Mill emerged as a devastating critic of the Benthamite emphasis on psychology at the expense of any appreciation of the importance of culture and history on political theory and practice.

Mill nonetheless would not abandon the view that psychology was foundational, and continued to struggle with the place of history within his ambitions for a comprehensive science of society. He had absorbed the Coleridgean (and Saint-Simonian) claim that the institutions of the past were not to be condemned as irrational, that they were the products of specific stages in human development. With the adoption of this relativist perspective, Mill came to believe that the past must be comprehended from within the perspective of those living in it, and was compelled by Carlyle's imaginative reconstruction of the past, by his effort to present history through the consciousness of an eyewitness. However, despite the widened perspective he drew from Coleridge and the emotional pull of Carlyle, Mill remained committed to the belief that history must serve a useful purpose in guiding political and social reform, and for this, a

science of history which revealed the laws of society and historic succession was indispensable.

The fourth chapter will concentrate on Mill's critical philosophy of history and the place of history within his effort to define the methodology of the moral sciences as a whole. The theme that will run through this exercise will be the complex relationship between his belief in mankind as a product of culture and history, and his retention of the concept of human nature. I will argue that Mill's effort was unsuccessful for two reasons. First, the attempt to define a deductive model based on Newtonian mechanics required that laws of human nature share the constancy and uniformity of laws in the physical world. Bentham and James Mill seemingly recognized this, having reductively explained political—and, by extension, historical—behavior through reference to a universal trait of self-interest. Mill not only rejected this characterization of human nature, but argued that under the principles of associationism, the laws of human nature do not refer to specific behaviors or motives at all, but rather to their method of formation. Indeed, he claimed that self-interest itself was a cultural product of the commerce-based economy.

For Mill, the laws of human nature were the principles of associationist psychology which provided an account of how individual behavior is constructed by the experience of pleasure and pain as incentives and disincentives to act in particular ways. Bentham had narrowly construed the basic pleasure-pain principle underlying associationism to insist that interest was the basis of behavior. Mill's view was more expansive in recognizing that associationism implied the malleability of human behavior by culturally determined rewards and punishments, such that human nature at any given time represented the influence of "the accumulated influence of past generations over the

present."[8] He was thus able to retain the possibility that associationism could be consistent with the emphasis on cultural particularity and historical differences that he accepted from Coleridge. However, the laws of association, while perhaps providing an adequate explanation for why individuals had certain propensities and characteristics, were not in themselves sufficient for historical explanation. Mill thus proposed a new science of ethology as the study of national characteristics which would provide the *axiomata media* situated between empirical regularities and laws of association. Though this seemed promising, Mill never demonstrated how his proposed laws of ethology could be deduced from psychological laws. Indeed, one might conclude that the problem was intractable, given the failure of his project to follow the *Logic* with a volume on ethology. Mill, in the end, was left unable to bridge the gap between aspirations for a science of society modeled on the natural sciences and his recognition of cultural differences. The unsuccessful attempt to define a new methodology resulted in his falling back on the deductive method which he had attempted to transform: Mill's economic theory, like those of the classical economists before him, explicitly took its starting point from the psychology of *homo economicus*. The methodology for a universal social science remained elusive as the complexity of human behavior and history evaded reduction to the mechanical model he sought.

The malleability of human nature was not the only source of difficulty for Mill's scientific aspirations. The more fundamental problem was his attempt at a compatibilist solution to the problem of free will and determinism. As Mill recognized, any predictive social science would have to rely on a deterministic model of human behavior. He

[8] *Auguste Comte and Positivism,* in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill,* eds. John Robson, et al., 33 vols, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-91), X, 307. Hereafter referred to as *CW.*

nonetheless could not disclaim that free will was necessary to account for human creativity, critical thinking, rational decision-making, and, most important, the ability to change oneself. Mill's insistence on the ideal of self-culture required recognition of purposive behavior directed toward freely chosen objectives. Mill thus held two theories of the self: one deterministic and based on associationism, the other based on the moral imperative that the individual be able to shape his own life. The inconsistency between associationist determinism as a "law of human life,"[9] for both the individual and the collective, and his professed belief that "human nature is *not* a machine,"[10] not only undermined the possibility of a mechanically modeled social science, but also yielded two different versions of historical development.

Chapter Five will consider Mill's speculative philosophy of history and his concept of progress. Reflecting the tensions within his theory of man, Mill offered two parallel theories, one based on Scottish stadial theory, and the other derived from continental idealism and Comte. These theories played distinct roles in Mill's social criticism, and one might suggest that they present an example to support yet another "two Mills" thesis, or if not that, that they support the claim that Mill was simply inconsistent. While I will argue that Mill's two theories are irreconcilable, it is perhaps more interesting to note that Mill apparently made no effort, nor saw any need, to merge them into a coherent whole. They coexist within the body of his work, but rarely intersect in the same volume. While Mill, in 1836, summarized his two perspectives in a single sentence—"There are two things of importance and influence among mankind: the one is,

[9] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 932.
[10] *On Liberty*, *CW*, XVIII, 263.

property; the other, powers and acquirements of the mind"[11]—it never seemed to occur to him that these "two things" implied entirely different approaches to historical explanation and social behavior.

As a fundamentally materialist perspective on history, stadial theory was founded on the importance and influence of property, and it appears in Mill's work as if it were the common wisdom of the age, an accepted and unquestioned narrative that explained how England had achieved its wealth, and why so much of the rest of the world was yet to catch up. If, as I contended earlier, Mill's philosophy of history has been neglected by scholars, his acceptance of stadial theory has scarcely been noticed at all, despite its prominent explication in the "Preliminary Remarks" to the *Principles of Political Economy*, and its appearance in such important critical essays as "Civilization," his reviews of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and in *On Liberty*. Though the Scots had originally proposed stadial theory as an explanation for their own advances in wealth and civil society, Mill accepted it as a model to explain economic development but refused to admit the correlative claim of any cultural progression. Indeed, Mill emphatically denied this claim, suggesting that the age of commerce threatened to be a backward step in moral and intellectual progress. Stadial theory in Mill's doctrine was not put forward as a coherent way of looking at and making sense of history. Rather, it was used as a kind of theoretical crutch for Mill to make his argument about the loss of individuality in mass society, the diminishment of the whole person by the division of labor, and the threat of conformism to middle class values.

[11] "Civilization," *CW*, XVIII, 121.

The "power and acquirements of mind" was the principle of Mill's alternate and more forthrightly developed philosophy of history. Stadial theory notwithstanding, Mill was committed to a philosophy of history centered on intellectual development. Influenced by a series of French theorists from the Saint-Simonians through Guizot and Comte, Mill conceived historical development as based on intellectual progress and systems of belief as the foundation of social stability. In his first extended consideration of history, the series of articles comprising "Spirit of the Age" in 1831, Mill contended that history displays a cyclical pattern of "natural" and "transitional" states. Natural states are characterized by a cultural consensus maintained under the doctrinal authority of the intellectual and political elites. Transitional states occur as dissenting opinion creates fissures among the leadership, developing into ideological clashes between those defending and those challenging the political status quo, and ultimately undermining it. A new natural state forms with a consensus around a new ruling belief system. Mill thus identified the dissenting voice and diversity of opinion, both dependent on freedom of expression, as the wellspring of historical change. In contrast to stadial materialism, this idealistic vision suggested a dialectical confrontation of ideas and the contingent arrival of great political and intellectual leaders, who, by the impact of their insight, advanced history.

In the *Logic* and his 1865 essay on Comte, Mill elaborated on this foundation with the concepts of static and dynamic social states, while retaining his conviction that the prime agent of historical dynamism is "the speculative faculties of mankind," specifically including beliefs "concerning [mankind] and the world by which they are surrounded."[12] Historical progress was thus crucially dependent upon on unfettered intellectual inquiry

[12] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 926.

into all avenues for human improvement. Mill's assertion that freedom is necessary to "man as a progressive being" was claimed for both the individual and the species. The necessity of freedom as the source of progress appears to make it a moral aspiration in its own right, as a good in itself as well as a necessary condition for other goods. Yet, based on such a slender thread, vulnerable to both political and cultural suppression, Mill recognized that the possibility of progress was fragile and by no means assured.

The power of the state was not the only obstacle to freedom. Well before the polemic in *On Liberty* against conformism, Mill had encountered Tocqueville's concept of the tyranny of the majority and had recognized its threat. Mill's 1840 essay on the second volume of *Democracy in America* emphatically endorsed Tocqueville's analysis, and recognized that the potential stifling of diverse opinion was as present in England as Tocqueville had claimed it was in America. Starting with critiques published in the 1830s, Mill issued a series of scathing condemnations of the blinkered limitations of the emergent commercial and professional middle classes and the self-serving backwardness of landed elites. Mill feared that as mass opinion intimidated and overwhelmed individual expression, it would be inhibiting the source of progress and thus opening the prospect of a stationary and despotic national culture similar to India or China. In effect, stadialism's emphasis on economic growth was the tail wagging the dog of intellectual and cultural development. It must be recalled that despite his many professions of belief in progress, Mill also asserted in *On Liberty* that "the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind."[13] The rise of the middle class in England threatened the domination of mediocrity in which the progressiveness of free inquiry and expression is crushed.

[13] *On Liberty*, *CW*, XVIII, 268.

It was within the context of his concern about the growing power of middle class conformism that Mill introduced the stationary state. The subject of my sixth chapter, Mill's concept of the stationary state has mainly been examined in the context of his economic theory, and has received barely any consideration within the context of his philosophy of history. Yet, because the actual content of Mill's discussion offers little that is new in economic theory, it has not been taken seriously by economic historians, occasionally being swept aside with the claim that Mill underestimated the vitality of capitalism.[14] Other Mill scholars also have offered abbreviated discussions of the stationary state, though Alan Ryan recognized its importance by asserting that "the stationary state itself is quintessential Mill."[15] The sense of neglect is compounded by Louis Feuer's observation that the stationary state "was perhaps his most original sociological theorem."[16] Mill's concept of the stationary state is deserving of a more thorough investigation.

Mill's chapter on the stationary state in Book IV of the *Principles of Political Economy* must be considered in any examination of his reflections on progress in history. While framed within the discourse of classical economic theory, Mill's discussion not only departed from the views passed down from Smith through Malthus and Ricardo, but broke the boundaries of past arguments. Mill problematized the traditional distinctions between the progressive state and the stationary state by expanding the question from one of economics and wealth to the moral health of the community's culture. Far from rejecting the stationary state as his predecessors had done, Mill suggested that the

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[14] See, for example, Pedro Schwartz, *The New Political Economy of J.S. Mill* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 231.
[15] Ryan, *J.S. Mill*, 180.
[16] L.S. Feuer, "John Stuart Mill as a Sociologist," in Robson and Laine, *Papers of the Centenary Conference*., 98.

cessation of economic growth could renew the prospects for a progressive culture, while he feared that a progressive—which is to say, growing—economy would lead to a stationary intellectual uniformity. Despite Mill's framing of the stationary state as the ultimate consequence of depleted resources and declining returns on investment, his argument for its inevitability is surprisingly weak and replete with caveats; he fails to make a convincing case that the stationary state would be the imminent outcome of capitalism. Yet Mill seized on it as a way of expressing his alarm at the decline into the cultural mediocrity and conformism which he believed was a consequence of the middle class fixation on commerce and money-chasing. Mill, in short, was willing to accept a stationary economy to avoid a stationary culture.

Though not presented as a utopian vision, the stationary state does provide an expression of Mill's highest ideals. In the absence of the turbulent hubbub of commerce, Mill envisioned a contemplative environment hospitable to self-culture and the Art of Living. It is evident that Mill was profoundly committed to his vision; he included the chapter without alteration through all seven editions of the *Principles of Political Economy*, from 1848 through 1871. Although he attempted to present it as the theoretical outcome of free market evolution, I will suggest its inclusion was less a matter of economic theory than it was a crucial articulation of his values and his sense of urgency about England's direction. The stationary state represented the possibility of continuing historical improvement that seemed otherwise foreclosed.

Mill's chapter on the stationary state is above all an example of advocacy, not of the stationary state as such, but of the values that it represented. By including it within his main text on economic theory, Mill hoped to reach the readers most likely to take heed of

it: the commercial middle class that was, in Mill's view, forfeiting higher values to a vulgar obsession with accumulation and excess, losing sight of what wealth is for. Mill feared for the cessation of the intellectual progress that had made possible the economic advances that had culminated in an age of commerce and industry. While he acknowledged progress in retrospect, Mill cannot be regarded as a sanguine optimist. Indeed, he feared that the only meaningful history, the history of intellectual and moral progress, was coming to an end.

Chapter II: Philosophical History

> What we now are and do, is in a very small degree the result of the universal circumstances of the human race, or even of our own circumstances acting through the original qualities of our species, but mainly of the qualities produced in us by the whole previous history of humanity.[1]

History had an ambiguous status in John Stuart Mill's famous education. With its emphasis on learning Greek and Latin, and thus reading classical texts, his father's curriculum certainly included study of ancient history. Yet, within the program of the Philosophical Radicals, the study of history stood on shaky foundations. Bentham himself was indifferent to history, if not hostile. Elie Halévy has noted that "the idea of a philosophy of history was totally foreign to Bentham's thought."[2] History added nothing to his reductionist psychology of pleasure-seeking and pain-aversion. J.H. Burns, the editor of Bentham's collected works, draws the issue more sharply, stating that "Bentham's theory of society is essentially ahistorical," and that he "developed a dismissive scorn towards history as a subject of study," despite his own substantial reading.[3] These judgments are affirmed by Donald Winch, who notes that "Bentham remained largely indifferent to...the origins and historical development of forms of law and government... History was more often regarded by Bentham not merely as a record of error...but as a record of uninstructive error."[4] In his *Book of Fallacies* (1823), Bentham claimed that reference to history risked exposure to "error and mischievous doctrine" and

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[1] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 915-6.
[2] Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, trans. Mary Morris (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 273.
[3] J. H. Burns, "The Light of Reason: Philosophical History in the Two Mills," in Robson and Laine, *Papers of the Centenary Conference*, 3.
[4] Donald Winch, "The Cause of Good Government: Philosophic Whigs v. Philosophic Radicals," in *That Noble Science of Politics*, co-authors Donald Winch, Stefan Collini and John Burrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 94.

questioned "whether a blank unfilled might not have been less prejudicial than a blank thus filled." Moreover, blithely assuming great progressive strides, Bentham denounced reliance on the "wisdom of our ancestors" as "the Chinese Argument":

> They were as much inferior to us...and the further we look back, the more abuses we shall discover in every department of government. Nothing but the enormity of those abuses has produced that degree of comparative amendment on which at present we value ourselves so highly... [T]ake what period we will in the lapse of preceding ages, there is not one which presents such a state of things as any rational man would wish to see entirely re-established.[5]

For Bentham, historical evidence was irrelevant, providing neither philosophical nor programmatic value. Declaring the past replete with error and evil, Bentham would not even accept that it might provide examples for political or personal emulation; even with the discovery of "splendid instances of probity and self-devotion," there is the risk of being "dupe[d by] an illusion occasioned by the very nature of an extensive retrospect."[6] At the root of Bentham's disregard was the association of historical reference and the conservative reliance on tradition; Robert Denoon Cumming aptly characterizes Bentham's view that there could be "no room for compromise between the conservative, who clings to the *Wisdom of Ancestors*, and their own radical commitment to the *March of Intellect*."[7]

Yet, as Burns points out, James Mill and George Grote, two of Bentham's most devoted followers, were eminent historians. John Mill recounts in the *Autobiography* that Grote was a frequent presence in his childhood household, having been introduced to his father by David Ricardo. Despite the generational difference, Grote and Mill were close

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[5] Jeremy Bentham, *The Book of Fallacies*, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring, 11 vols. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), II, 400.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Robert Denoon Cumming, *Human Nature and History*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), I, 6. Italics in original.

friends. Grote's *History of Greece* became a standard work. As for James Mill, his *History of British India* was ten years in the making and though he did not quite achieve Grote's distinction as a scholar, it was successful enough to lift James out of his work as an itinerant journalist and into a lifelong career at the East India Company.[8] John Mill and James's *History* grew up together. Both got their start, as it were, in 1806 and John recounts that James simultaneously pursued the dual devotions of completing his book and educating his son. Those devotions intersected as James had John read his manuscript aloud to assist him as he reviewed proofs prior to publication in 1818. Though Mill later acknowledged that his father's *History* was "saturated" with the "opinions and modes of judgment of democratic radicalism," he nonetheless credited it with having "contributed largely to my education."[9] Regarding that education, Mill noted that while his father immersed him in Greek and Roman classics, in whatever free time he had for "private reading… history continued to be my strongest predilection." Though his ever-present father "put me on my guard," the young Mill was permitted to read William Robertson, David Hume, Edward Gibbon, Robert Watson, and John Millar, among other historians.[10] Apart from Greek and Roman authors, history was so much on the sideline in Mill's education that he reports that it was only after he returned from his visit to France in 1820-21 that he first read a history of the French Revolution and "learnt with astonishment that the principles of democracy...had borne all before them in France thirty years earlier."[11] Iris Mueller drily notes that James Mill "apparently did not expect the

[8] Macaulay described it as "the greatest historical work which has appeared in our language since that of Gibbon." G.P. Gooch claims that "It took rank among the classics of its time" though he criticizes its lack of sympathy and imagination, and its "censorious tone." G.P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, second edition (London: Longmans, Green, 1952), 287.
[9] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 29, 27.
[10] Ibid., 15. Ref. Appendix B in *CW*, I, 551-81.
[11] Ibid., 65.

inspiration [to improve the world] to flow from a study of the historical movements of mankind."[12]

However much he enjoyed reading history as a diversion from the rigors of his father's curriculum, Mill rarely invoked historical argument in his early career as a "youthful propagandist" for the Radicals. Bentham's *Book of Fallacies* gets multiple references in the *Autobiography* as Mill recounts the period in which he came of age politically, and one can assume that it played a role in influencing his style of argumentation. Indeed, precision of argument was much on the mind of Mill and his compatriots, and he acknowledges that the caricature of Benthamites as "mere reasoning machines" may well have applied to himself. He participated in study groups on "several of the branches of science we wished to be masters of," namely political economy, syllogistic logic and analytic psychology. The study of history is not mentioned as part of "these conversations [which were] my own real inauguration as an original and independent thinker."[13] Mill's predilections showed: his early newspaper articles and speeches at the London Debating Society were typically oriented to pointing out the illogic and absurd premises—"sentimentality...declamation...vague generalities"—of opposition claims.[14] In a debate on "The Use of History" in early 1827, Mill echoed Bentham with the claim that, "on mature consideration [Mill was twenty-one!]...the importance of history as a source of political knowledge has been greatly overrated" and added that the statesman's guide should not be "the book of history but the book of

[12] Iris Wessel Mueller, *John Stuart Mill and French Thought* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 9.
[13] *Autobiography*, *CW,* I, 123-7.
[14] Ibid., 113.

human nature."[15] Arguments by opponents containing historical references were attacked for distortions and tendentiousness, an uncritical acceptance of tradition, complacent chauvinism, and fear-mongering about "Jacobin" threats to the Constitution. In one of his first extended essays, an 1824 critique of the *Edinburgh Review*, Mill scorns an unnamed author's defense of the *ancien regime* which:

> laments bitterly over the decay and discredit into which...the old feudal nobility have fallen... It lauds the *parlemens* for the purity of their administration of justice... And then it goes on imputing all the evils of the revolution to the impatience of the reformers, and none of them to the opposition of the court.[16]

Later in 1824, Mill's suspicion about the misuse of history in political argument boiled up in an extraordinary attack on Hume, whose *History of England*'s sympathetic treatment of the Stuarts had been appropriated by the Tories:

> Romance is always dangerous, but when romance assumes the garb of history, it is doubly pernicious. To say nothing of its other evils...it infallibly allies itself with the sinister interests of the few... But though it be possible to defend Charles I, and be an honest man, it is not possible to be an honest man, and defend him as Hume has done... In all the arts of a rhetorician, Hume was a master: and it would be a vain attempt to describe the systematic suppression of the truth which is exemplified in this portion of his history; and which, within the sphere of our reading, we have scarcely, if ever, seen matched.[17]

While Hume "possessed powers of a very high order, they were used "not to attain truth, but to show that it is unattainable." Hume's *History* was thus mere "literature...without regard for truth or utility, seek[ing] only to excite emotion." As a committed advocate for the Radicals, Mill's attack reflects Bentham's suspicion that history can lend itself to "mischievous doctrine," and its potential for distortion is particularly repugnant when

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[15] "The Use of History," *CW,* XXVI, 392, 393. It should be noted that Mill endorsed the "moral importance" of history for providing exemplars of virtue—Galileo, Bacon and Turgot are cited, but no political leaders—to study and imitate.
[16] "Periodical Literature: *Edinburgh Review*," *CW,* I, 301.
[17] "Brodie's History of the British Empire," *CW,* VI, 3, 5.

narrative crosses the boundary into romance. The idealization of the past "without caring whether good or evil is the consequence" panders to the desire of the audience for heroes and glory and distracts from "the sufferings of the many...who seem born to suffer...their miseries lie hidden." For Mill, it was not just Hume but narrative history itself that was on trial: by valorizing the powerful as epic heroes, such romanticized accounts are "thoroughly incompatible with the pursuit of the only true end of morality, the greatest happiness of the greatest number."[18]

Though Mill had been generally reluctant to offer historical references in his own political advocacy, history remained an intense personal interest, perhaps all the more so after his discovery of the French Revolution.[19] Indeed, Alexander Bain, Mill's friend and first biographer, states that in 1822 Mill was "inflamed with the subject," and Mill somewhat modestly reports in the *Autobiography* that he had had a "half formed intention of writing a History of the French Revolution." In a more recent biography, Michael St. John Packe states that Mill had embarked on "a methodical and thorough study of French history and culture" which would result in his becoming "in the world of English letters

[18] Ibid., 3, 4.

[19] A significant exception is Mill's 1826 essay on "Modern French Historical Studies," in which he employs the histories of Sismondi and Dulaure (which he distinguishes from the narrative history produced by Hume) to debunk the nostalgic fog surrounding the "spirit of chivalry." It should be noted that here too Mill's argument is against the misuse of a sentimentalized and fabricated past: "The conclusion is, that the compound of noble qualities, called the *spirit of chivalry*... was almost unknown in the age of chivalry; that the age so called was equally distinguished by moral depravity and by physical wretchedness; that there is no class of society at this day in any civilized country, which has not a greater share of what are called the knightly virtues, than the knights themselves; that, far from civilizing and refining the rest of the world, it was not till very late, and with great difficulty, that the rest of the world could succeed in civilizing them. If this conclusion be true, it must be obvious that there is not in all history a truth of greater importance. There is scarcely any portion of history the misapprehension of which has done more to rivet the most mischievous errors in the public mind. The age of chivalry was the age of aristocracy, in its most gigantic strength and wide-extending sway; and the illusions of chivalry are to this hour the great stronghold of aristocratic prejudices." With the exception of John Millar, Mill laments that there are no British historians to equal the French in critical skills and readability. See *CW*, XX, 20, 51.

the solitary expert on French affairs."[20] While Mill never followed through on writing a history of the Revolution, or any other history for that matter, he did publish several critical essays on historians, including two extended reviews of books on French history in 1826. These essays provide the first glimpse of Mill's serious engagement with historical thinking, and in the first of them, "Mignet's French Revolution," Mill posits a distinction between "philosophical history and a mere narrative."[21] Perhaps the first time the term appears in his writings, the concept of "philosophical history" remained in Mill's conceptual vocabulary throughout his life, and would subsequently be used to praise the works of the two historians with whom he grew up, Grote's *History of Greece* and his father's *History of British India*.[22]

Apart from distinguishing it from narrative history, what did Mill mean by philosophical history? Pursuing the point in the Mignet essay, Mill defines narrative as the "old mode of writing history," and suggests that it differs from a novel only in that it deals in facts. He praises Livy and Thucydides as classical exemplars of this style, and perhaps damning him with faint praise, points to Hume as "excelling all modern historians in his powers of narrative," though falling short of the profundity with which he has been credited. Hume notwithstanding, Mill states that modern historians make "history subservient to philosophy" to illustrate "the laws of human nature and human

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[20] Alexander Bain, *John Stuart Mill: A Criticism with Personal Recollections* (London: Longman, Green, 1882), 30. *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 135; Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1954), 174. Edward Alexander claims that Mill was unfamiliar with the French Revolution until two years *after* his return from France, after which "for about a decade Mill immersed himself intellectually and emotionally in the revolution" and "devoutly believed" in the new trinity of "Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!"; see "The Principles of Permanence and Progression in the Thought of J.S. Mill," in Robson and Laine, *Papers of the Centenary Conference*, 126.

[21] "Mignet's French Revolution," *CW*, XX, 3.

[22] Mill reviewed Grote's *History* in the *Westminster Review* in 1846, stating that "none of his predecessors have approached to him in the amount of philosophy and general mental accomplishment which he has brought to bear upon the subject." *CW*, XI, 303

society." Yet, having laid down this marker, Mill, without further elaboration, proceeds to offer little more than extended citations from Mignet, and concludes the brief essay with the disappointed observation that Mignet "overdoes the generalization[s]...affirms that to be true in all cases which is only true in some, or enunciates without qualification a proposition which must be qualified to be defensible." Though Mill welcomes Mignet's narrative as a necessary corrective to the "utter ignorance" of the Revolution in England, it fails as philosophical history by "dressing up truisms...with the air of an oracle."[23]

Despite its prominence in the introduction to the essay and the disappointment at the conclusion, the meaning of "philosophical history" remains unexplained. Yet the expectation that history should illustrate laws of man and society was perhaps not as opaque to Mill's readers. While the idea of philosophical history has ancient roots, the concept became prominent during the Enlightenment, and particularly among the philosophers and political theorists in Scotland. Given Mill's apparent animus toward his historical works, it is ironic that it was Hume who also looked to history to provide the foundation of scientific laws to explain social and political behavior:

> Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them.[24]

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[23] "Mignet's French Revolution," *CW,* XX, 2, 3, 13.
[24] David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 83-4.

To understand Mill's concept of a philosophical history, and, more importantly, the background for his more mature thinking on history and progress, it is necessary to examine his inheritance from the remarkable group of theorists who have come to be collectively known as the Scottish Enlightenment. In addition to Hume, the key figures were Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames, Adam Smith, Lord Monboddo, Adam Ferguson, John Millar and Dugald Stewart.

Though it would be a mistake to attribute a single, uniform theory to the participants in the Scottish Enlightenment, their views on history and what Hume called the "science of human nature" did tend to coalesce around a set of objectives and principles, some of which characterize the Enlightenment as a whole. Pre-eminent among the latter was their belief in the empirical and experimental methods of science, first articulated by Bacon and subsequently applied with such epochal success by Newton. The Scottish project was to replicate Newton's discovery of the laws of the physical universe by applying his methods to the human realm: psychology, social interaction, cultural difference, law, economics and history. Their approach to moral philosophy provides the most striking example. Reflected most prominently in works by Hutcheson, Smith and Hume, the Scots stripped moral theory of all religious trappings, *a priori* claims and rationalist speculation which would dictate the rules of behavior. Such conjecture concerning morality was replaced with an investigation of how behavior was morally assessed in actual social interaction; the foundation of morality was to be found not in revelation or reason, but in human nature itself, and was conceived as a response to experience based on an inferred psychological property or "sentiment." While there were important differences in the way the definition of this sentiment was elaborated, Hume

succinctly made their case for the implication of this critical change of focus toward the psychology of moral judgments:

> The hypothesis which we embrace is plain. It maintains that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation;* and vice the contrary. We then proceed to examine a plain matter of fact, to wit, what actions have this influence. We consider all the circumstances in which these actions agree, and thence endeavour to extract some general observations with regard to these sentiments. If you...find anything abstruse here, you need only conclude that your turn of mind is not suited to the moral sciences.[25]

With this shift in methodology, the direction of moral philosophy turned to the empirical study of man and society. Moral philosophy became a 'moral science' which examined social interaction to understand the sources and causes of normative judgment. From that starting point, as Peter Gay observes, the "problems the Scots addressed became the classical problems of sociology."[26] The purpose of this larger inquiry was eminently practical: if the natural laws regulating society could be determined, then political structures and the formation of political policy could be organized in conformity to those laws, reducing the disruptive consequences of "the casual humours and characters of particular men."[27]

To gather the evidence that might untangle those problems and determine the laws governing human behavior, the Scots did not confine themselves to their own time and place, or even the human species itself. Conceiving themselves less as philosophers than as scientists (they may not have recognized the distinction in studying "moral science"),

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[25] David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 289.
[26] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1969), 332. See also Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1945), *passim*.
[27] Hume, "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 13.

their research extended to the comparatively primitive Scottish Highlands, and to native American tribes, Arab clans and Hindu castes; Lord Monboddo even turned to the study of apes to understand language. The recognition of the immense diversity of cultures through time and into their present posed a crucial question: if human nature, as Hume claimed, is "constant and uniform in all its operations," how was one to account for that diversity? The text that proved to be both an inspiration and a foil for their response was Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. Montesquieu was indeed a kindred spirit; as the Scots had turned away from rationalism in moral philosophy, so too did Montesquieu break from the Hobbesian *a priori* approach to political institutions. Montesquieu's objective was to establish politics on an empirical scientific footing—John Millar called him the "Lord Bacon of this branch of philosophy"[28]—claiming that "laws ought to be in relation" to the "temper of the mind and the passions of the heart" that were present in particular cultures. The issue of particularity and diversity thus took center stage, first with a light comic irony in the *Persian Letters* on the matters of love and family life, and then in the systematic investigation of the full field of society and politics in the *Spirit of the Laws*.

Though Montesquieu famously attributed diversity of national character to climate, he was far from a reductionist. He recognized that climate was one among many causes "which formed a general spirit of nations," and in addition to climate he considered religion, morals and customs, and the role of government and law.[29] Yet, while recognizing other possible causes, Montesquieu claimed that "nature and the climate rule almost alone over the savages" from which all civilizations developed, and,

[28] Cited in Gay, *Enlightenment*, 333.
[29] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent, 2 vols. in 1 (New York: Hafner Publishing Co, 1966), I, 292-3.

moreover, citing experiments on a sheep's tongue, he speculated that the root cause of cultural diversity was a necessary consequence of physiological adaptation to climate:

> Cold air constringes the extremities of the external fibers of the body; this increases their elasticity, and favors the return of blood from the extreme parts to the heart. It contracts those very fibres; consequently it increases also their force. On the contrary, warm air relaxes and lengthens the extremes of the fibres; of course it diminishes their force and elasticity.[30]

He posited this explanation for why in cold climates, people are more vigorous, "have less sensibility for pleasure" or for pain; alternatively, in climates where heat is excessive, "there is no curiosity, no enterprise, no generosity of sentiment," and people are passive and indolent. While Montesquieu's analysis was comparative and, for the most part static, he also suggested that climatic determinism could provide insight into great historical events, claiming, for example, that the "gross fibres of those climates enabled the [inhabitants of the north] to make a memorable stand against the power of Rome [and] to subvert the great empire."[31]

While Montesquieu's method was welcomed, the Scots found that his explanation of cultural diversity was unsatisfactory. Writing his essay "Of National Characters" within a year after the *Spirit of the Laws* was published, Hume, followed by Kames and Millar, took the lead in questioning the thesis that physical causes can account for national differences. Their rebuttal relied on empirical assessments of the correlation of climate and character, with examples of similar characteristics in divergent climates, European colonists maintaining their characteristics away from home, and the

[30] Ibid., I, 221.
[31] Ibid., I, 223-5.

like.[32] Hume adduced nine reasons to reject Montesquieu's argument, one of which pierced to the static heart of his claim: cultures change, while climates remain constant: "The manners of a people change very considerably from one age to another; either by great alterations in their government, by the mixtures of new people, or by the inconstancy, to which all human affairs are subject." For an example of the rapidity of such changes, Hume cited England itself, which "a few centuries ago, were sunk into the most abject superstition, last century they were inflamed with the most furious enthusiasm, and are now settled into the most cool indifference with regard to religious matters, that is to be found in any nation of the world." [33]

Hume's reference to changes in manners is a telling indication of his alternative to Montesquieu. Not only is he suggesting a dynamism that is absent in Montesquieu's theory, but he is suggesting that a nation's character—its identity—is a product of its history. For Hume, that history is the confluence of what he termed moral causes, rooted in the universal principle of sympathy, which includes the "propensity...to receive [from others] their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own":

> To this principle [sympathy] we ought to ascribe the great uniformity we may observe in the humours and turn of thinking of those of the same nation; and 'tis much more probable, that this resemblance arises from sympathy, than from any influence of the soil and climate, which, tho' they continue invariably the same, are not able to preserve the character of a nation the same for a century together.[34]

Hume thus embellishes his claim for the uniformity of human nature by claiming that, in addition to the universal passions—"ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship,

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[32] For a discussion of the Scottish response to Montesquieu's climatic determinism, see Christopher Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 78-85.
[33] Hume, "Of National Characters," in *Essays*, 211.
[34] Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 316.

generosity, public spirit"[35]—that motivate individuals, there is also a social instinct of sympathy which over time provides for the development of manners and traditions that enable nations to cohere around a common identity. Moreover, in the first *Inquiry,* Hume suggests another factor motivating social behavior:

> The mutual dependence of men is so great in all societies that scarce any human action is entirely complete in itself or is performed without some reference to the actions of others, which are requisite to make it answer fully the intention of the agent... In proportion as men extend their dealings and render their intercourse with others more complicated, they always comprehend in their schemes of life a greater variety of voluntary actions which they expect, from the proper motives, to co-operate with their own. In all these conclusions they take their measures from past experiences.[36]

Human action (and history) is thus composed of a complex interplay between the "constant and universal principles of human nature," which are themselves indeterminate, and the customs and habits developed from the mutual dependence and interpersonal sympathies arising from social interaction. Action results from a coupling of the psychological—universal passions and desires—with socially determined beliefs.

As Gladys Bryson has pointed out, for Hume and the Scottish Enlightenment as a whole, the purpose of studying history was to discern "those principles of repetition and uniformity, those sequences of behavior, which philosophical, i.e., scientific requirements demanded."[37] Despite his insistence concerning the universality of human nature, Hume's own work as an historian must have made him aware of the complexity of this task. Indeed, he acknowledged that the passions themselves "are often varied [and] do not always play with perfect regularity" because of variations in "custom and practice."[38]

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[35] Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 83.
[36] Ibid., 89.
[37] Bryson, *Man and Society*, 79.
[38] Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 294.

Yet, even if the apparent diversity of activity in the human world does not display the "perfect regularity" of the physical world, Hume nonetheless maintained that laws govern that activity, for without such laws causal explanations would have no foundation. If social activity is motivated by the interplay of passions and the customs of a particular place and time, then the explanatory laws must also be particular to a place and time:

> We must not, however, expect that this uniformity of human actions should be carried to such a length as that all men, in the same circumstances, will always act precisely in the same manner, without making any allowance for the diversity of characters, prejudices, and opinions. Such a uniformity in every particular, is found in no part of nature. On the contrary, from observing the variety of conduct in different men, we are enabled to form a greater variety of maxims, which still suppose a degree of uniformity and regularity.[39]

In short, the task of the philosophical historian is to determine the laws that govern each particular historical context. This may well entail a proliferation of "maxims" to account for distinct contexts. Through reference to such laws, the actions of historical agents can then be explained and understood.

That this conclusion seems to be a retreat from the objective of formulating the universal laws that govern human behavior appears unmistakable. The objective of elucidating the laws of social behavior could not be satisfactorily achieved if one could not distinguish the uniform characteristics of human nature within the particularity of the manners of a given culture. Alternatively, the task of the social theorist—or, might we say, the philosophical historian—would be to classify and categorize the multiplicity of human activities into cognate social forms, and then to determine the regularities governing each form. Having achieved that goal, the next effort would be to determine the relations between the defined social forms, and how one form might transition to

[39] Ibid., 85.

another. Unless such an inductive framework could be defined in which particular contexts could be viewed as representative of a type, the effort to describe laws could devolve into narrative description, and the uniformity of human nature and sentiment would offer little more than a vehicle for empathy, both by the historian and his audience, for historical figures. Put another (perhaps more Humean) way, the historian can make inferences concerning the inner life of historical agents based on the observation of the constant conjunction of specific behavioral patterns within specific social contexts; this is the basis of Hume's claims concerning the uniformity of human behavior and his soft determinism. It is also the context of his questioning "What would become of *history,* had we not a dependence on the veracity of the historian according to the experience which we have had of mankind?"[40] The assumption underlying this question is that the historian brings an insight into human behavior that we all experience in our daily lives, and conjecturally applies that insight toward understanding the past. On this note, Bryson has argued that for all of Hume's speculation about the origins of manners and customs, his "assumption...is that the starting point for all humanistic study, including history, is man's nature, his psychology." She claims that Hume's fixation on the uniformity of individual psychology vitiates and limits his historical method. Friedrich Meinecke makes a similar point, claiming that Hume made the "typical mistake" of Enlightenment historians in his "dissolution of man's intellectual make-up into a bundle of ideas [that] led to the transformation of the whole life and history of the universe into a countless number of psychological complexes."[41] It might be noted that this rather narrow vision

[40] Ibid., 90.
[41] Bryson, *Man and Society*, 109. Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J. E. Anderson (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 161. These observations have also been advanced by Claudia Schmidt, though not as critically, when she notes that "Hume is seeking to account for the actions of historical individuals as effects of their passions and beliefs, characters, and circumstances"

may have contributed to Mill's claim that "Hume's language always imports that he can dive into the hearts of all his characters," and that Hume could not rise above a narrative history of personalities in which Charles was a hero without reference to a wider social and moral (or philosophical) context.[42]

While Hume may have failed to meet Mill's standard for a philosophical history, other theorists of the Scottish Enlightenment approached the problem with a wider perspective. Their questions went well beyond the political events that animated Hume's *History*. Like Hume, they were convinced that the scientific breakthroughs and commercial expansion of the past century had initiated a decisive break and advance from the past; in his memoir of Adam Smith, Dugald Stewart concisely stated the question that drove their historical inquiry:

> When, in such a period of society as that in which we live, we compare our intellectual acquirements, our opinions, manners, and institutions, with those which prevail among rude tribes, it cannot fail to occur to us as an interesting question, by what gradual steps the transition has been made from the first simple efforts of uncultivated nature, to a state of things so wonderfully artificial and complicated.[43]

Yet despite their own advances, the philosophers residing in Glasgow and Edinburgh only had to look to the Highlands to recognize the persistence of a more primitive

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by attempting to enter into their subjectivity; she also suggests that Hume's appendices to the *History* and his *Essays* approached more sociological explanations that were not present in the *History's* narrative. See *David Hume: Reason in History* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 400 and passim. Also S.K. Wertz, "Human, History, and Human Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, no. 3 (July-Sept. 1975): 481-96. Wertz claims that Hume's uniformitarianism has been inaccurately characterized, though he too acknowledges Hume's psychological focus in historical explanation: "Hume's historical thoughts on individuals and periods are reflected by his use of the notion of human nature in his narrative. ...Novelty in history, Hume recognized, arises from individual human actions." (492). Sidney Pollard faults Hume as seeing history as "a battleground [of] tendencies within human psychology, a playground of atomistic forces." *The Idea of Progress* (Hammondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1971), 61.

[42] "Brodie's History of the British Empire," *CW*, VI, 36.

[43] Dugald Stewart, *Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith LL.D*. Accessed March 1, 2016, http://www.adamsmith.org/sites/default/files/resources/dugald-stewart-bio.pdf

society, and European global expansion had revealed other cultures in varying stages of development. The diversity of economic and cultural achievement tended to undermine traditional cyclical theories of history, but it also suggested that a linear path of historical development was not universally progressive and continuous, or at least did not advance at the same pace. While the Scots' interest in contemporary primitive societies—the Scottish Highlands, native Americans, etc.—was based on the expectation that they could provide insight into both their own origins and the historical trajectory of humanity as a whole, their problem in pursuing the scientific method of Bacon and Montesquieu was frustrated by gaps in the available evidence. The assumption of a universal and uniform human nature offered a way out of this dilemma: by taking a comparative approach to the different cultures, one could utilize the characteristics of one society to fill in the evidentiary gaps in another. Stewart thus defined the concept of conjectural history:

> In this want of direct evidence, we are under a necessity of supplying the place of fact by conjecture; and when we are unable to ascertain how men have actually conducted themselves upon particular occasions, of considering in what manner they are likely to have proceeded, from the principles of their nature, and the circumstances of their external situation. In such inquiries, the detached facts which travels and voyages afford us, may frequently serve as land-marks to our speculations; and sometimes our conclusions a priori, may tend to confirm the credibility of facts, which, on a superficial view, appeared to be doubtful or incredible.[44]

Written in 1793, there is a retrospective quality to Stewart's text that suggests that his rationale and description of conjectural history was widely accepted. A few scholars have indicated that Stewart was not representing the consensus that he pretended to, that Hume

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[44] *Ibid*. Lord Kames offered a similar defense of conjectural history in the *Historical-Law Tracts*: "In tracing the history of law through dark ages, unproved with records, or so slenderly provided as not to afford any regular historical chain, we must endeavor to supply the broken links, hints from poets and historians, by collateral facts, and by cautious conjectures drawn from the nature of the government, of the people, and of the times." Cited in Alexander Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenmen*t (Edinburgh: Berlinn, 2007), 68.

and Robertson among others were very meticulous about their sources and evidence and skeptical about filling in historical blanks.[45] Yet, while narrative histories may have had little use for Stewart's endorsement of conjecture, it should be noted that he was specifically suggesting its use in "speculations and...conclusions a priori" based on "principles of [human] nature." Conjectural history, in short, found its place as a methodological component of philosophical history.[46]

Even if there was some controversy about the use of conjecture and inference, the comparative method was widely accepted as a way of establishing the regularities of human response to different environmental conditions in different epochs. Evidence drawn from the classics could be compared with contemporary reports from explorers, missionaries, and travelers to characterize remote, less advanced societies, and comparison could be used to assess and validate evidence. John Millar, in the first preface to his *The Origin and Distinction of Ranks,* framed the purposes of the comparative method concisely:

> The manners and customs of people may be regarded as the most authentic record of their opinions, concerning what is right or wrong, what is praise-worthy or blamable, what is expedient or hurtful. In perusing such records, however, the utmost caution is necessary...in order to ascertain the evidence which they afford, or to discern the conclusions that may be drawn from them. As the regulations of every country may have their peculiar advantages, so they are commonly

[45] See, as examples, Berry, *Social Theory of Scottish Enlightenment*, 61-3; H.M. Hopfl, "From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment," *Journal of British Studies* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 21; Aaron Garrett, "Anthropology: The 'Original' of Human Nature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). 80.

[46] It might be suggested that the advocates of conjectural history flirted with circularity. If the argument that human nature is uniform and invariant is an empirical claim, then it must be confirmed through contemporary and historical evidence. Yet, if historical evidence is lacking in a remote time or place, one cannot conjecture the condition of people's lives using human nature as a reference point if the characteristics of human nature are themselves unconfirmed. Indeed, one might suggest that the charge of circularity can be levelled at all claims in which "human nature" is used as an explanatory principle. Karl Popper makes a strong case for the vacuity of appeals to "human nature" in *The Poverty of Historicism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 153-4.

> tinctured with all the prejudices and erroneous judgments of the inhabitants. *It is therefore by a comparison only of the ideas and the practice of different nations*, that we can arrive at the knowledge of those rules of conduct, which, independent of all positive institutions, are consistent with propriety, and agreeable to the sense of justice.[47]

As important as assessing evidence was to their empirical investigations, the most important product of the comparative method was to classify and categorize the diverse cultures, to delimit their distinctive characteristics and determine their commonalities. Having achieved that objective, the "moral scientist" would be able to discern the constant conjunctions within cultural archetypes that would allow scientific explanation of social behavior and change.

The outcome of this effort was the delineation of a series of paradigmatic developmental phases that would encompass diverse historical and cultural contexts. In what might be claimed to be the first foray toward a theory of modernization, several of the prominent figures of the Scottish Enlightenment—Smith, Kames, Ferguson, Millar and Stewart— coalesced around what has come to be known as the stadial theory of historic development, the claim that cultures change in a sequence of stages.[48] Stadial theory was presented as a conceptual natural history, a schematized explanation of how societies develop through human actions, independent of any plan or design. Though there were variations and differences of emphasis in their definitions, there was a consensus that history proceeded through four stages, determined mainly by how

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[47] John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, Aaron Garrett, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), 285. Accessed March 1, 2016, http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/287#Millar_1342_787. Italics added.

[48] It should be noted that a version of the stadial theory was simultaneously developed by Turgot and presented in his lecture "On the Successive Advances of the Human Mind" and essay "Universal History," both in 1750. It has been claimed that this lecture had a major influence on Smith, with whom Turgot corresponded; see Sidney Pollard, *Idea of Progress*, 84. The early history of the stadial theory and the Turgot-Smith connection is traced by Ronald Meek in "Smith, Turgot, and the 'Four Stages' Theory," in *Smith, Marx, & After* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1977).

societies acquired their food reserves and came to recognize property rights. In this endeavor, one might suggest that the stadial theory was as much an attempt to elucidate the successive stages of controlling nature as it was an historical schema. But in its intent, the stadial theory was a reply to the crucial question of the Scottish Enlightenment, namely how the laws, customs and manners of civilized society develop from tribal primitivism. Ronald Meek cites a passage from John Millar's notes on Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* which summarizes Smith's methodological objectives:

> Upon this subject he followed the plan that seems to be suggested by Montesquieu; endeavouring to trace the gradual progress of jurisprudence, both public and private, from the rudest to the most refined ages, and to point out the effects of those arts which contribute to subsistence, and to the accumulation of property, in producing correspondent improvements or alterations in law and government.[49]

From this plan to show the connection between various subsistence economies and the associated legal and political structures, Smith claimed that "there are four distinct states which mankind pass thro:—1st, the Age of Hunters; 2dly, the Age of Shepherds; 3dly, the Age of Agriculture; and 4thly, the Age of Commerce."[50] Smith explained that transitions between the first three stages are driven by the need to provide for nourishment and self-preservation and, particularly with the Age of Commerce, comfort and happiness: thus, for example, as a population grows or as wildlife is depleted, hunter societies advance by domesticating and breeding animals. However, the transition to the Age of Commerce constituted a break with this pattern of development; its introduction is crucially characterized by the social division of labor. Independent of any vision of business

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[49] Cited in Meek, "Smith, Turgot, and the 'Four Stages' Theory," 21. The original passage was in Dugald Stewart's *Biographical Memoir of Adam Smith*.

[50] Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, eds. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael and P. G. Stein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 14. Book V of the *Wealth of Nations* contains an extended discussion of the stadial theory in the context of national defense and the administration of justice.

efficiency, Smith characterized civilized society as pre-eminently defined by the splitting of social and economic roles based on capabilities and resources. The requirement for more sophisticated tools to improve agricultural productivity created a demand for an artisan class with the skills to design and build the needed devices. The Age of Commerce was ushered in by the need for methods of exchange between farmers and artisans. Though the division of labor constituted an important departure from previous stadial transitions, the central theme that underlies them all was the demand for greater productive efficiencies to satisfy the sustenance and, increasingly, the comfort of a growing population. Though the stadial theory was not given a detailed presentation in the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith reiterated this theme in slightly modified form in the chapter "Of the Natural Progress of Opulence," in which he describes the "natural course of things [in which] every growing society is, first, directed to agriculture, afterwards to manufactures, and last of all to foreign commerce."[51]

While it is tempting to make too much of the stadial theory's anticipation of historical materialism (without the dialectic), its crucial contribution was not only to fully secularize history but also to displace political history and its focus on the interactions of individual agents with a theory suggesting that social and cultural change is the consequence of the structural relationship between man and nature. Human history became a form of natural history. Social and cultural development was determined by fundamental economic forces, not by the political genius or folly of kings and clerics. Stadial theory thus posited the concept that the social stage of development is driven initially by the need to assure subsistence, but that all societies will exhibit the tendency

[51] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, eds. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 380.

toward a higher stage because mankind shares an innate and lifelong "desire of bettering our condition."[52] The desire for betterment was seamlessly extended from the individual to the social context, and could even be powerful enough to overcome political meddling:

> The uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition, the principle from which public and national, as well as private opulence is originally derived, is frequently powerful enough to maintain the natural progress of things toward improvement, in spite both of the extravagance of government, and of the greatest errors of administration. Like the unknown principle of animal life, it frequently restores health and vigour to the constitution, in spite, not only of the disease, but of the absurd prescriptions of the doctor.[53]

Claiming that the Age of Commerce represented the most advanced stage of social and economic development and the fullest expression of the desire for betterment, stadial theory appears as a form of teleological determinism which is grounded in nature itself and unencumbered with a rationalist metaphysics or faith in divine providence.[54] However, while stadial theory suggested the possibility of a universally applicable organic process, Smith clearly understood that the development of any particular society could be thwarted and detained, particularly if political institutions and regulation had not kept pace with the development of the commercial economy. Indeed, a major thrust of Smith's argument was that mercantilist trade protections and sanctioned monopolies were an obsolete and inhibiting artifact of the preceding agriculturally-based economy and had created an "unnatural and retrograde order."[55] The stadial theorists also recognized that inadequate natural conditions and foreign interference could inhibit the natural civilizing

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[52] Ibid., 341.
[53] Ibid., 343.
[54] It has been suggested that because of its "teleology of civility," stadial theory is a predecessor of the Whig theory of history; see Murray G. H. Pittock, "Historiography," in Broadie, *Cambridge Companion*, 258, 260 and *passim*.
[55] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 380. For a detailed account of Smith's belief that "corruption" lay in the interference with the "system of natural liberty" and obstruction to the "natural course of progress," see Lisa Hill, "Adam Smith and the Theme of Corruption," *The Review of Politics*, 68, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 636-662.

process, leaving some cultures in a more primitive state. At any stage there can be an equilibrium between what nature provides and what a society needs, creating a stationary condition. Stadial theory thus sought to explain the direction of development while recognizing the natural and political conditions that might inhibit or hasten economic progress.

The recognition that stadial advance is not inevitable serves to reinforce the crucial point that the theory implied for the Scots' sense of self-definition: that their age, the Age of Commerce, was a break from the past, a cultural advance not only in the forms and rules of economic activity, but in civilization itself, with portents for political, social and moral change. However, while the stadial theory offered an explanation of the development of commercial civilization from the barbarism of the earlier stages, the larger questions of progress were somewhat unsettled.[56] Certainly the Scots believed that economic development was on a progressive, although not uninterrupted, trajectory, providing for a higher quality of life. Smith, Millar and Kames all offered detailed analysis of the evolution of law and jurisprudence, particularly as it applied to property rights, demonstrating that the development of the rule of law was a function of the stage of economic growth. The merchant class was often portrayed in heroic juxtaposition to the defenders of tradition, whether landed elites, clergy or their political representatives. While Hume had little role in developing stadial theory, Smith approvingly (and erroneously) credited him for being "the only writer" to demonstrate how "commerce and manufactures gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the

[56] Hopfl points out that the Scots tended to use "barbarous" interchangeably with "savage," "rude," "uncultivated," "unpolished" and similar terms to describe societies less civilized than their own. These terms were used to suggest an initial condition, but were also applied more generally to pre-commercial societies, or even regions within commercial societies. See Hopfl, "From Savage to Scotsman," 24.

liberty and security of individuals, among the inhabitants of the country, who had before lived almost in a continual state of war with their neighbours, and of servile dependency upon their superiors."[57] Robertson too wrote that the "progress of commerce had considerable influence in polishing the manners of the European nations, and in establishing among them order, equal laws, and humanity."[58] On the other hand, there was an active debate on the question of the moral consequences of luxury. Hume, without Mandeville's mordant irony, defended "innocent luxury" as "advantageous to the public" by virtue of enhanced employment opportunities and its encouragement of "refinement in the arts and conveniences."[59] Adam Ferguson, in his *Principles of Morals and Political Science*, agreed with the positive economic benefits of luxury, but worried that it weakened the sense of honor and civic responsibility. Kames was less equivocal, claiming that luxury had been "the ruin of every state where it prevailed," and "above all, pernicious in a commercial state":

> Successful commerce is not more advantageous by the wealth and power it immediately bestows, than it is hurtful ultimately by introducing luxury and voluptuousness... No cause hitherto mentioned hath such influence in depressing patriotism, as inequality of rank and riches in an opulent monarchy. A continual influx of wealth into the capital, generates show, luxury, avarice, which are all selfish vices; and selfishness, enslaving the mind, eradicates every fibre of patriotism.[60]

Kames and Ferguson are representative of those who recognized the moral polarities represented by commercialism and the tradition of civic republicanism. Broadie asserts

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[57] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 412. Smith was perhaps referring to Hume's essay "On Commerce," where he briefly alludes to a version of the stadial theory in which the savage state of hunting and fishing is succeeded "at first" by agriculture and then by a state divided between "husbandmen and manufacturers."
[58] William Robertson, "Progress of Society in Europe," cited in David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth Century Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 275.
[59] Hume, "Of Refinement in the Arts," in *Essays*, 285.
[60] Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, cited in Broadie, *Scottish Enlightenment*, 98-9. Also see Spadafora, *Idea of Progress*, 277.

that Kames was pessimistic that there could be any solution to the morally self-destructive tendency of commercial success.

Smith had little to say about the moral effects of luxury *per se* as a hindrance to progress, though in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, he did agree with Kames about its corrosive effects on a martial spirit.[61] Smith also observed that "the nobility necessarily fell to ruin as soon as luxury and arts were introduced."[62] It is likely that by "luxury and arts" Smith meant to imply the spread of commerce more generally. Later in the *Lectures*, he attributed to the "commercial spirit" the "disadvantages" that "the minds of men are contracted and rendered incapable of elevation, education is despised or at least neglected, and heroic spirit is almost utterly extinguished."[63] Yet, Smith also attributed commercial success to several virtues, citing "real and solid professional abilities, joined to prudent, just, firm, and temperate conduct," and, he continues:

> The success of such people, too, almost always depends upon the favour and good opinion of their neighbours and equals; and without a tolerably regular conduct these can very seldom be obtained. The good old proverb, therefore, That honesty is the best policy, holds, in such situations, almost always perfectly true. In such situations, therefore, we may generally expect a considerable degree of virtue; and, fortunately for the good morals of society, these are the situations of by far the greater part of mankind.[64]

And as we have seen, Smith also believed that by establishing the regular administration of justice and the rule of law, the Age of Commerce had also created the conditions for liberty as it took down feudalism. Regarding the universal human desire for self-

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[61] Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 236-8, 540.
[62] Ibid., 264.
[63] Ibid., 541. There is in Smith, as well as other Scots, a significant strain of civic republicanism, the virtues of which were threatened by the spread of commerce. For a review of this issue, see James, Alvey, "Adam Smith's view of history: consistent or paradoxical," *History of the Human Sciences* 16, no. 2 (May 2003).
[64] Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 63.

betterment, Smith certainly believed that the spirit of commerce was its purest expression. While there may have been some ambivalence and equivocation regarding the advantages and drawbacks of commerce viewed retrospectively, in regard to the future, Smith's optimism was tempered by two considerations. First, Smith did not believe that economic growth could proceed indefinitely. He argued that land scarcity and resource depletion would, among other causes, ultimately impose a limit on profits, thereby depriving the economy of the ability to accumulate capital for new investment. The economy would thus be inescapably trapped in a stationary state, causing the Age of Commerce to plateau into "dullness" as returns on investment would bottom and the standard of living for the wage-earning worker would remain at a near-subsistence level. We will examine the stationary state in detail in a later chapter.

Second, Smith recognized that the division of labor which had enabled the transition to the Age of Commerce and was the cause of its productivity would also debilitate the moral and physical well-being of workers caught up in tasks of mindless repetition. Smith expresses his concern in a celebrated passage, worthy of being cited at length:

> In the progress of the division of labour, the employment of the far greater part of those who live by labour, that is, of the great body of the people, comes to be confined to a few very simple operations; frequently to one or two. But the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the

> ordinary duties of private life. Of the great and extensive interests of his country he is altogether incapable of judging; and unless very particular pains have been taken to render him otherwise, he is equally incapable of defending his country in war. The uniformity of his stationary life naturally corrupts the courage of his mind, and makes him regard with abhorrence the irregular, uncertain, and adventurous life of a soldier. It corrupts even the activity of his body, and renders him incapable of exerting his strength with vigour and perseverance, in any other employment than that to which he has been bred. His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues. But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it.[65]

It is notable that Smith was not alone in recognizing the potential debilitation of the working class, nor perhaps was he the first. Two years before the publication of the *Wealth of Nations*, Lord Kames observed that "Constant application...to a single operation, confines the mind to a single object, and excludes all thought and invention: in such a train of life, the operator becomes dull and stupid, like a beast of burden."[66] Millar and Ferguson made similar observations, though they did not attribute the worker's enfeeblement directly to the division of labor. All worried not only about the impact on the individual worker's humanity, but on its social, political and military consequences. With abilities so narrowed by the grinding repetition of their daily work, they could not be good family members, citizens or soldiers. Finding a claim that there was an advantage in the submissiveness of such workers to be "revolting," John Millar affirmed that "To render them useful in their several relations, either as men or citizens, it is requisite that they should be in a condition to form a proper estimate of the objects which

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[65] *Wealth of Nations*, 781-2. In a less famous passage, Smith suggested that the indolence of the landowning class "renders them too often, not only ignorant, but incapable of that application of mind which is necessary to foresee and understand the consequences of any publick regulation." *Wealth of Nations*, 265. The Benthamites and Mill would later seize on this observation.

[66] Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, ed. James A. Harris (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007), I, 106. Accessed May 2, 2014, http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2032#Home_1400.01_192. The passage is cited in Spadafora, *Idea of Progress*, 281.

will promote their true happiness, to detect those false appearances which might frequently mislead them, and to guard against the errors in religion, morality, or government, which designing men may endeavour to propagate."[67]

This recognition of the human cost of industrialization undermines the superficial view of Enlightenment self-congratulation. While stadial theory explained the advance from a "savage" state to one of polish and refinement, Smith and his *confrères* recognized that this progress was not experienced by all social classes. Indeed, Smith acknowledged that the pre-civilized working poor had fuller lives; the hunters, shepherds and husbandmen of "barbarous societies" were forced to "exert their capacities" and "invent expedients for removing difficulties," thus preventing them from falling into the "drowsy stupidity, which, in a civilized society, seems to benumb the understanding of the inferior ranks of people."[68] To be sure, it is incontrovertible that Smith believed in the economic advantages of commercial society, including higher wages and living standards for laboring classes.[69] Nonetheless, Smith was emphatic that "no society can be flourishing and happy" in which the "far greater part of the members are poor and miserable," and even claimed that it was a matter of equity that they "should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, cloathed and lodged."[70]

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[67] John Millar, *An Historical View of the English Government*, eds. Mark Salber Philips and Dale R. Smith (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006). Accessed May 1, 2014, http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1886#Millar_1365_1753

[68] *Wealth of Nations*, 783.

[69] "The real recompence of labour, the real quantity of the necessaries and conveniencies of life which it can procure to the labourer, has, during the course of the present century, increased perhaps in a still greater proportion than its money price." *Ibid*., 95.

[70] Ibid., 96.

As much as might be claimed for the economic benefits deriving from the division of labor, including for the workers themselves, Smith recognized that they came at great expense to those whose toil was displaced from farm to factory. Moreover, even for those who did realize some improvement, the looming prospect of a stationary society vitiated the hope that their standard of living would move permanently and significantly above subsistence. Referring to the stationary state and the suffering of workers as the 'paradox of progress,' Robert Heilbroner has argued that Smith's vision was "a deeply pessimistic prognosis" in which "material decline awaited at the terminus of the economic journey, moral decay suffered by society in the course of its journeying."[71] Thus, Heilbroner claims, Smith had come to a theoretical impasse: If the Age of Commerce signaled the emergence of civilization from the earlier stages of barbarism, and if its ultimate outcome is economic stagnation and human suffering, what path is available to assure human happiness? Indeed, does it not signal a tragic social outcome for the impulse to self-betterment? Heilbroner has been criticized with the claim that his assessment is unbalanced by the many benefits Smith cited, not the least of which was a greater degree of liberty as a constituent of happiness.[72] While we cannot resolve the question of Smith's relative optimism or pessimism here, his recognition that the development of commercial society and its many benefits *did* come with significant costs cannot be disputed. Further, by assessing the psychological damage to the working class,

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[71] Robert Heilbroner, "The Paradox of Progress: Decline and Decay in the *Wealth of Nations*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34, no. 2 (April-June 1973): 243. A similar argument is offered by Nathan Rosenberg, "Adam Smith on the Division of Labor: Two Views or One?" *Economica* 32, no. 126 (May 1965): 127-39. While Rosenberg agrees with Heilbroner regarding the prospects of the poor under the division of labor, he is less pessimistic regarding commercial society as a whole, claiming that "society as a whole grows" by virtue of the technological creativity that is also unleashed by the division of labor.

[72] See, for example, Dennis Rasmussen, "Does 'Bettering our Condition' Really Make Us Better Off? Adam Smith on Progress and Happiness," *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 3 (August 2006): 309-18; and Lisa Hill, "Adam Smith and the Theme of Corruption," 642-8.

Smith opened the door to more general inquiries about the social and cultural effects of free trade and industrialization, well before it fully took hold and, in large measure, because of his own advocacy.

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Mill recounts in his *Autobiography* that his early reading included the histories of Hume, Robertson and Millar, and he was familiar with Smith through his father's friendship with Ricardo and his own study of political economy. Reading aside, Mill's awareness of the Scottish concepts of philosophical history and the stadial theory might have come from a source much closer at hand. James Mill was born in Scotland and educated at the University of Edinburgh where he studied directly with Dugald Stewart, and from Stewart "his studies also led him to a number of Scot authors—Hume, Millar, Ferguson, Adam Smith, and Robertson."[73] John Mill acknowledged his father's intellectual inheritance in the *Autobiography*, referring to James as the "last of the eighteenth century," and in a letter to Comte, he more specifically characterized James "as the last member of that great school" of Scottish thinkers.[74] It is notable that the elder Mill began his *History of British India* in 1806, two years before he met Bentham and well before he became his philosophical collaborator (or, as Bentham would have it, his disciple). It is arguable that at least in its initial conception and design, Mill intended his *History* to elaborate and exemplify the principles of philosophical history in which he had been educated. Eric Stokes has stated that Mill's *History* was "principally an attempt to make a philosophical analysis of Indian society and assess its place in the 'scale of

[73] Alexander Bain, *James Mill: A Biography* (London, Longmans, Green, 1882), 426.
[74] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 213. Letter to Comte (28 January 1842), in *The Correspondence of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte*, trans. and ed. Oscar Haac (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 129. A better translation might have been the 'the last survivor' ("le dernier survivant"); see Letter 386 in *CW*, XIII, 566.

civilization,'" and cites a letter to Ricardo in which he states his hope that it might exhibit "the principles and laws of the social order in almost all its most remarkable states, from the most crude to the most perfect with which we are yet acquainted."[75] Indeed, in his essay on the caste system for the 1824 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Mill presented the four stages of Scottish stadial theory as the framework to "ascertain the state and condition of the human mind."[76] While the *History* may have come to be "saturated" with the "modes of judgment" of Benthamite radicalism, John Mill's critique of his father's tendentiousness must be balanced, as J.H. Burns has pointed out, by his reference in the essay on Comte to his father as "the historian who first threw the light of reason on Hindoo society."[77] For better and for worse, Mill recognized the work that established his father's career as "philosophical history."

While the concept of philosophical history had a lineage through his father—and represented one aspect of Mill's ambivalence about him—it was not his father's efforts as an historian that prompted Mill's interest in historical methodology. Rather, it was Macaulay's devastating critique of James Mill's *Essay on Government* that awakened John from his dogmatic slumber. The elder Mill's *Essay* was an unalloyed representation of the Benthamite *a priori* approach to politics, a deductive exercise in condemning and approving political institutions based on a psychology which explained all political behavior as an expression of self-interest. As such, it represented a departure from the empirical methodology of the Scots, a throwback to the Hobbesian approach which they

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[75] Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 53.
[76] James Mill, *The Political Writings of James Mill: Essays and Reviews on Politics and Society, 1815-1836*, ed. David M. Hart (Liberty Fund, 2013). Accessed September 16, 2014. http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2520#Mill_1624_457
[77] *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, *CW*, X, 320. See J.H. Burns, "The Light of Reason: Philosophical History in the Two Mills," in Robson and Laine, *Papers of the Centenary Conference*, 4-5.

had followed Montesquieu's lead in rejecting. Macaulay's argument, advocating the Baconian inductive empiricism of the Enlightenment, deftly (and, at times, hilariously) pointed out that the psychological assumptions underpinning James Mill's argument were either tautological—if *all* political action is an expression of self-interest, then adducing self-interest as an explanation for specific action adds nothing to our understanding—or demonstrably false. Macaulay insisted that a science of politics could be only established by careful empirical research. In his response to the critics (including Bentham himself) of his original review, Macaulay pointed out the circularity of Mill's argument and made the case for induction:

> We blamed Mr. [James] Mill for deducing his theory of government from the principles of human nature... How does he arrive at those principles of human nature from which he proposes to deduce the science of government? We think that we may venture to put an answer into his mouth; for in truth there is but one possible answer. He will say—By experience. But what is the extent of this experience? Is it an experience which includes experience of the conduct of men intrusted with the powers of government; or is it exclusive of that experience? If it includes experience of the manner in which men act when intrusted with the powers of government, then those principles of human nature from which the science of government is to be deduced can only be known after going through that inductive process by which we propose to arrive at the science of government. Our knowledge of human nature, instead of being prior in order to our knowledge of the science of government, will be posterior to it... If, on the other hand, we are to deduce the theory of government from principles of human nature, in arriving at which principles we have not taken into the account the manner in which men act when invested with the powers of government, then those principles must be defective. They have not been formed by a sufficiently copious induction. We are reasoning, from what a man does in one situation, to what he will do in another.[78]

[78] Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay, *The Miscellaneous Writings of Lord Macaulay* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), I, 345-46. Accessed September 19, 2014. http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/99#Macaulay_1228-01_907

It is notable that despite the intensity of their disagreement over method, Macaulay nonetheless implicitly shared Mill's and Bentham's goal: that politics—and, more generally, human nature—should be studied as a science, that it was a suitable subject for *some* scientific method. John Mill also emphatically agreed with the cardinal positivist tenet that scientific methods were applicable to both the human and natural realms, and that universal laws governing the operations of the individual mind and society could be discovered by such means. As such, they extended the Enlightenment's Newtonian enthusiasm to a vision in which all phenomena could be comprehended within a unified rational order. Yet, as we shall see, Mill parted company with Macaulay on the applicability of induction; for Mill, the attainability of the "sufficiently copious induction" that Macaulay called for was beyond reach.

Coming on the heels of his crisis of doubt about life's purpose, John Mill's reservations about the dogmatic narrowness of Benthamite rationalism were reinforced by Macaulay's attack on utilitarian political theory. He was dismayed by his father's dismissal of Macaulay's arguments as simply irrational. Yet the episode was a critical event in Mill's passage toward intellectual independence. While the Macaulay controversy may have highlighted their common adherence to Enlightenment rationalism, Mill thereafter became more receptive to alternative points of view and, having already found solace in romantic poetry, was awakened more generally to the "reaction of the nineteenth century against the eighteenth...now streaming in upon me"[79] Mill was immersing himself in German and French historicism, which emphasized the cultural variability of human nature and the investigation of how institutions express their intellectual, cultural and moral environment. Mill specifically mentions Coleridge and his

[79] *Autobiography*, *CW,* I, 169.

followers, Carlyle, Goethe, and the “French literature of the time,” by which he was certainly referring to the Saint-Simonians and Comte. But the most immediate impact of the Macaulay debate on Mill was to excite his interest in defining the method for a science that could delineate the laws of human behavior and social life.

Chapter III: History in Theory and Practice

> And hence that great series of writers and thinkers...by whom history, which was till then "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," has been made a great science of causes and effects; who, by making the facts and events of the past have a meaning and an intelligible place in the gradual evolution of humanity, have at once given history, even to the imagination, an interest like romance, and afforded the only means of predicting and guiding the future, by unfolding the agencies which have produced and still maintain the Present.[1]

Though Macaulay's essay appeared as Mill was beginning to separate himself from the Radicals, one implication of Macaulay's critique had the effect of drawing Mill closer to his father and Bentham. The role of theory in advocacy and practice was a matter of both methodological and political principle. Mill viewed Macaulay's insistence on Baconian induction as implying a distinction between the theoretical and the experiential, a distinction which justified an *ad hoc* seat-of-the-pants approach to policy-making that "stood up for the empirical mode of treating political phenomena, against the philosophical."[2] The Benthamites regarded this distinction as a profound misunderstanding of the role of theory and the source of the backward-looking reliance on tradition— and on history itself—as the guide for British political leadership. Indeed, Mill recalled that his failure as a child to recognize the relationship between theory and practice was one of the few times he provoked his father's anger; the result was a lesson for a lifetime:

> I remember at some time in my thirteenth year, on my happening to use the word idea, he asked me what an idea was; and expressed some displeasure at my ineffectual efforts to define the word: I recollect also his indignation at my using

[1] "Coleridge," *CW,* X, 139-40.
[2] *Autobiography*, *CW,* I, 165.

> the common expression that something was true in theory but required correction in practice; and how, after making me vainly strive to define the word theory, he explained its meaning, and shewed the fallacy of the vulgar form of speech which I had used; leaving me fully persuaded that in being unable to give a correct definition of Theory, and in speaking of it as something which might be at variance with practice, I had shewn unparalleled ignorance.[3]

For the elder Mill, the conviction that sound theory is an indispensable guide to practice persisted until the end of his life, and was important enough to be the subject of his last published work, aptly named "Theory and Practice." Framed as a dialogue, Mill confronts X who "follows experience" with Y who "affirms that experience and theory are the same" and that "there is no practice without theory." The unity of theory and practice was necessitated by the overarching objective of maximizing the happiness of mankind. Theory as a purely speculative enterprise was of little or no interest if it could not provide the political practitioner with the agenda for realizing utilitarian aims. The suggestion that theory could be dispensed with in favor of "experience" as a guide to political action and leadership was anathema. For James Mill, theory—and the theorist—was thus regarded as an instrument for political change: "The whole business of philosophy...is to furnish men as completely as possible for practice; and the best philosopher is by necessary consequence the best practitioner."[4]

John Mill wholly embraced and never wavered from his father's view of the critical role of theory in political practice. In a debating speech in 1824, in reply to an adversary who claimed "that all I have urged is theory," Mill asserts "every opinion in politics involves a theory: the question is, not whether it is a theory, but whether it is

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[3] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 35.
[4] James Mill, "Theory and Practice," *The Political Writings of James Mill: Essays and Reviews on Politics and Society, 1815-1836*, ed. David M. Hart (Liberty Fund, 2013). Accessed October 3, 2014. http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2520#lf1624_label_393

true." Regarding experience as the alternative to theory, Mill replies that "The quack is guided by experience, as well as the philosopher: examine well the doctrines of this gentleman, and you will find that it is precisely the experience of the quack, which he is unconsciously passing off upon himself."[5] Like his father, Mill elides the putative distinction between theory and experience into the distinction between theory and practice, arguing that both distinctions are false because of their implicit call for the detachment of theory from the reality of life in the actual world.[6] Mill utterly rejected this view, and would even characterize the philosopher as a man of action, tracing a tradition of philosophical engagement to antiquity in which the "union of theory and practice" implied that "wisdom was...something to be done": "Bred to action, and passing their lives in the midst of it, all the speculations of the Greeks were for the sake of action, all their conceptions of excellence had a direct reference to it."[7]

At issue for Mill was more than a personal credo; it was his recognition of the political implications of philosophy and a demand for the engagement of philosophy itself. Philosophy for Mill was inseparable from politics and advocacy. It was a matter of course that apparently abstract philosophical issues had concrete political implications. His autobiography recounts that his opposition to intuitionism was not only a matter of philosophical conviction; he believed that it had practical consequences for the prospect of reform and improvement:

> The difference between these two schools of philosophy, that of Intuition, and that of Experience and Association, is not a mere matter of abstract speculation; it is full of practical consequences, and lies at the foundation of all the greatest

[5] "Parliamentary Reform [2]," *CW*, XXVI, 283.
[6] In at least one instance, Mill explicitly conflates practice and experience as equivalent in their opposition to theory, referring to "the ancient feud between what is called theory and what is called practice or experience." See "On the Definition of Political Economy," *CW*, IV, 324.
[7] "On Genius," *CW*, I, 336.

> differences of practical opinion in an age of progress... I have long felt that the prevailing tendency to regard all the marked distinctions of human character as innate, and in the main indelible, and to ignore the irresistible proofs that by far the greater part of those differences…are such as not only might but naturally would be produced by differences in circumstances, is one of the chief hindrances to the rational treatment of great social questions and one of the greatest stumbling blocks to human improvement.[8]

Similarly, Mill retained a suspicion that an inductive methodology advocating reference to putative historical parallels would inevitably yield a conservatism based on a satisfaction with past progress. Macaulay's association with the Whigs and his *History of England* did nothing to dissuade him from thinking that Macaulay, despite his liberalism, did little to challenge conventional thinking and complacency.[9] Philosophical mistakes could have stifling consequences for the prospect of reform, and Mill, as he became distanced from his former colleagues and was in search of a new mission, recognized that his contribution could be to elucidate the methodology of political discourse. Fatigued by debates in which opponents repeatedly spoke past one another, Mill concluded that the only hope to resolve their differences was to establish a common methodological foundation. Rather than participate in the fruitless debates, he would set their rules. Confident in his decision and ability to see it through, Mill announced his new priority in a letter to his Coleridgean friend John Sterling:

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[8] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 269-70.

[9] "I am reading Macaulay's book: it is in some respects better than I expected, & in none worse... I have no doubt like all his writings it will be & continue popular—it is exactly *au niveau* [at the level] of the ideal of shallow people with a touch of the new ideas... I perceive no very bad tendency in it as yet, except that it in some degree ministers to English conceit." Letter to Harriet Taylor (27 January 1849), *CW*, XIV, 6. In a later letter, he wrote that Macaulay's books were "pleasant reading, but not exactly history." Letter to Arthur Hardy (29 September 1856), *CW*, XV, 511. Alan Ryan argues that Mill detected intuitionist and conservative implications in what he called the 'chemical method' of induction advocated by Macaulay; the failure to produce generalizations through induction would lead to efforts to discover the meaning of historical events intuitively; see Ryan, *John Stuart Mill*, 134. Leslie Stephen claimed that Macaulay's attack on James Mill's method concealed his intent to undermine the Benthamite effort to extend the franchise; see Leslie Stephen, *The English Utilitarians*, 3 Vols. (London: London School of Economics & Political Science, 1950), II, 96-7.

> The only thing that I believe I am really fit for, is the investigation of abstract truth, & the more abstract the better. If there is any science which I am capable of promoting, I think it is the science of science itself, the science of investigation—of method.[10]

Because references to the past were a touchstone for conservative argument, Mill recognized that a new methodology would have to clarify proper historical thinking and define a role for it in the formulation of political theory.

The elucidation of a methodology for the human sciences thus became Mill's priority. As he emerged from his crisis having recognized the limitations of the narrow hedonism at the foundation of the Benthamite program, Mill also reassessed their political and legislative agenda and opened himself to a reconsideration of conservative arguments. He resolved that the improvement of the "ordering of outward circumstances" had to be supplemented by the "cultivation of the feelings" and the "internal culture of the individual." If anything, Mill, in rejecting hedonism, expanded the mission of the philosopher as practitioner; he was not content with legislative victories, however sweeping they might be. Mill wanted to change British culture and values, not merely constitutional processes. Perhaps even that was not enough when he declared his own path to happiness as working toward the "improvement of mankind." [11] The role of historical thought within such capacious ambition remained problematic. If there was to be a methodological accommodation with conservatives, Mill could not be entirely dismissive of the role of "experience" in political theory. Mill's problem was thus to harness a historical perspective to a philosophy that could provide a foundation for a political program of cultural transformation. As Mill approached the problems of

[10] Letter to John Sterling (October 20-22, 1831), *CW*, XII, 78-9.
[11] Ibid., 147, 145.

historical method and of the past itself, his considerations were never separated from his desire to refashion radical political theory and revitalize advocacy for reform.

Despite his personal aversion to Macaulay and his resentment of the attack on his father, Mill recognized Macaulay had revealed that "there was really something... fundamentally erroneous in my father's conception of philosophical method."[12] The doubts that Macaulay raised went well beyond John Mill's desire to support James: John himself had expressed his doubt about the value of history to political theory. Two years before Macaulay's essay, Mill questioned the applicability of an inductive interrogation of history as a way of formulating laws governing politics. As earlier noted, Mill's 1827 debating essay on "The Use of History" not only disparaged historical reference in political debate, but questioned the possibility that history could ever acquire the status of a science and could reach beyond the moral value of providing examples of personal rectitude. He argued that such efforts were bound to fail, as the complexity of human experience precluded sufficient identity of circumstances to draw any reliable analogy between past and present conditions. Moreover, Mill argued that, in principle, Baconian methods of experiment and investigation were not applicable to history and that without experiment any proposed laws based on historical reference lay beyond the possibility of verification and certainty. History was trapped in the position that plagued pre-Galilean science "when without any artificial arrangement of circumstances we took things in the gross as the hand of nature had left them, and drew from the pages of natural history the whole of our natural philosophy...and all mankind floated in the regions of fancy from one airy hypothesis to another." Mill claims that the only natural science that history can possibly be analogous to is geology:

[12] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 167.

> Then men proceeded upon history. There is only one branch of physical science now in which from the impossibility of experiment we have nothing better than history to go upon, I mean geology: and accordingly there is scarcely one fact in it which is precisely ascertained. It would be a great concession were we to allow to any system of politics which has only history for its basis, as much certainty as is now possessed by geology.[13]

Absent the status of an experimental science, history could provide nothing but anecdotal evidence, and by offering nothing more than a rich supply of support for every side of a political debate, history offered nothing that could be dispositive: "It is scarcely necessary to say that in history no one instance can be a rule for another."[14]

Though Mill remained adamantly opposed to the idea of an inductive political theory, he nonetheless expected historians to display more than literary gifts. As he had indicated in his tirade against Hume, Mill was deeply suspicious of the implicit conservatism of any method employing narrative artistry in which history is presented as a heroic pageant of royalty and aristocracy. In his review of Walter Scott's *Life of Napoleon*, he asserts that a "literary composition" with a "lively, rapid and spirited style" does "not suffice to constitute a history." If history is to be more than diverting entertainment, "if it be any part of the duty of an historian to turn the facts of history to any *use*," it is insufficient to approach it independent of a theoretical framework. In perhaps Mill's most concise definition of what he expected from a philosophical history, the historian must not be merely a historian, but a philosopher doing (and using) history:

> If it be any part of the duty of an historian to turn the facts of history to any *use;* and if a fact can be of use only by being made subservient either to the confirmation or illustration of a *principle;* the historian who is fit for his office must be well disciplined in the art of connecting facts into principles, and applying principles to the explanation of facts: he must be a man familiar with

[13] "The Use of History," *CW,* XXVI, 394.
[14] Ibid., 393-4.

> generalization and general views; a man whose knowledge is systematic, whose mind can embrace classes as well as individuals, who can discriminate between the results of narrow and partial observation, and those of enlarged experience; in short, a *philosopher*.[15]

Even with the primacy of theory and abstract principle, the historian must also be "a consummate judge" who is "profoundly skilled in the difficult art of weighing evidence," culling out improbable testimony, linking "a chain of circumstances" into a meaningful account.[16] Yet, having described this impressive array of skills, Mill is ambivalent about the objectives of the historian. While he expects the historian to penetrate the "spirit of the times which he is describing" in order to explain the "true causes" of events and motivations, Mill is not content with mere empathetic understanding of the circumstantial limitations and dilemmas of historical figures. This, it appears, would not be sufficiently "useful." Mill extends the judgmental role of the historian beyond assessment of evidence to the normative consideration of the fidelity of a nation's political institutions and leaders to principles, both *a priori* and imbedded in the nation's foundation:

> To inquire patiently into the suitableness of a system of government to the nature of man in general, or to the circumstances of any nation in particular; to examine how far it did or did not provide for the exigencies of that nation; to take account of the degree in which its framers might expect that causes peculiar to that nation would promote, modify, or impede, its action; and, if it be pronounced bad, to consider what means they had by whom it was adopted, of establishing any thing better... Although, too, no other reasons for condemnation should be discoverable, there is one argument against all systems that are not English, which can never be wanting; they are *untried theories:* no free institutions except ours, according to our author, having ever had the sanction of experience; for it never occurs to him that the *principle* of an institution may have been tried successfully any number of times, although the exact *model* may be to be found nowhere. [17]

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[15] "Scott's Life of Napoleon," *CW,* XX, 55, 56
[16] Ibid., 56.
[17] Ibid., 60.

While Mill rejected the conservative invocation of history to extoll and demand adherence to traditions—or, in the case of Scott, demand adherence to the orthodox standard that "whatever is English is best"—he was no less engaged in measuring history against the standards of utilitarian moral and political theory. On that basis alone, history could find a "use" in political debate. Apart from its subservient role to philosophy, history, it appears, had no independent claim on Mill's attention.

Mill retained these early doubts about the value of historical reference in political theory well after the Macaulay controversy. At his father's urging—and despite his growing reservations about Bentham's utilitarianism (expressed in an anonymously published 1833 essay, "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy")—Mill responded in 1835 to an attack on Bentham by a Cambridge professor named Adam Sedgwick. There is a certain disingenuousness in Mill's defense, for elements of Sedgwick's argument repeated Mill's own criticisms.[18] Nonetheless, Sedgwick provoked a response from Mill by asserting the "questionable commonplace" that history provides equivalent knowledge of man's social behavior as scientific experiments provide for formulating laws of nature. Mill claims that this is a false analogy, that history contains non-reproducible events that are subject to "as many different explanations as there are possible theories of human affairs." He continues:

> Not only is history not the source of political philosophy, but the profoundest political philosophy is requisite to explain history; without it all in history which is worth understanding remains mysterious... Mr. Sedgwick mistakes the functions of history in political speculation. History is not the foundation, but the verification, of the social science; it corroborates, and often suggests, political truths, but cannot prove them. The proof of them is drawn from the laws of

[18] Mill states in the *Autobiography* that he felt placed in an awkward position in replying to Sedgwick: "I could not speak out my whole mind at this time without coming into conflict with my father." Nonetheless, Mill took the opportunity to insert "a number of the opinions which constituted my view of these subjects." *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 209.

> human nature; ascertained through the study of ourselves by reflection, and of mankind by actual intercourse with them. That what we know of former ages, like what we know of foreign nations, is, with all its imperfections, of much use, by correcting the narrowness incident to personal experience, is undeniable; but the usefulness of history depends upon its being kept in the second place.[19]

Mill thus maintained his claim that the past cannot be surveyed to produce inductive laws of society or politics, and continued to insist on deduction from "the laws of human nature" that had been employed by his father and attacked by Macaulay. There is no acknowledgement of the charge of circularity that Macaulay had levelled at his father. How can "laws of human nature" that govern society become known except through our experience of actual human behavior in its social and political environment? How do we know what human nature outside of political society is like? Mill's argument that we can know the laws through "the study of ourselves by reflection" is surely inadequate for it presupposes that we can have knowledge of ourselves independent of our social and historical experience; it also presupposes that personal self-knowledge can be universalized for the species. As if recognizing the shortcomings of this reply, Mill added that laws can be ascertained through "the study...of mankind by actual intercourse with them," but this seems to imply precisely the historical approach to political philosophy that he is objecting to. How does one establish a standard for distinguishing between natural behaviors and motives, and those that are culturally or historically determined? Given the ambiguities and inadequacies of our knowledge of human nature, how can we insist that it be used as a foundation for political theory?

Though he did not explore these questions in the Sedgwick reply, Mill was approaching them in his post-crisis period. Unable to go public without risking a rift with

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[19] "Sedgwick's Discourse," *CW*, X, 44-5.

his father, his dissents from utilitarian method and psychology were expressed privately and anonymously. In a remarkable letter to his Saint-Simonian contact Gustave d'Eichthal in October, 1829—only a few months after Macaulay's essay was published, and while the debate between Macaulay and the Benthamites was still raging[20]—Mill criticized Comte as showing a "characteristic defect" of French writers in being "so well satisfied with the clearness with which their conclusions flow from their premises, that they do not stop to compare the conclusions themselves with the fact though it is only when they will stand this comparison that we can be assured the premises have included all which is essential to the question." Mill continues:

> They deduce politics like mathematics from a set of axioms & definitions, forgetting that in mathematics there is no danger of partial views: a proposition is either true or it is not, & if it is true, we may safely apply it to every case which the proposition comprehends in its terms: but in politics & the social science, this is so far from being the case, that error seldom arises from our assuming premises which are not true, but generally from our overlooking other truths which limit, & modify the effect of the former. It appears to me therefore that most French philosophers are chargeable with the fault...of insisting upon only seeing *one* thing when there are many, or seeing a thing only on one side, only in one point of view when there are many others equally essential to a just estimate of it.[21]

Macaulay himself could scarcely have put the case against a deductive political theory more clearly, though Mill seems oblivious to the application of his argument to his father's *Essay on Government*. (Mill would later repeat and elaborate this criticism of the

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[20] Macaulay himself, in the same month as Mill's letter, continued to attack the Benthamites' "utter want both of comprehensiveness and of precision in their mode of reasoning." For an excellent study of the controversy, including the texts published during the debate, see Jack Lively and John Rees, *Utilitarian Logic and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

[21] Letter to Gustave d'Eichthal (8 October 1829), *CW*, XII, 35-6. J.H. Burns has written that this passage includes Mill's first use of the term "social science," which he probably adopted from Comte's *Système de politique positive* which d'Eichthal had sent him in 1829; see "J.S. Mill and the Term 'Social Science'," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20, no. 3 (June-Sept. 1959): 431-2.

"geometrical or abstract method" in the *Logic*, in which he referred to the "Bentham School" as committing this error, though without directly referring to his father.)

Mill's developing dissension from Benthamite orthodoxy was not confined to method and moral theory. A criticism of the limitations of Bentham's theory of human nature was prominent in the aforementioned anonymous "Remarks on Bentham." Mill not only attacked Bentham's claim that interest drives human motivation, but claimed that Bentham's attempt to classify emotions and drives was inconsistent with the associationist psychology to which both Mills adhered:

> The attempt...to *enumerate* motives, that is, human desires and aversions, seems to me to be in its very conception an error. Motives are innumerable: there is nothing whatever which may not become an object of desire or of dislike by association... In his list of motives, though he includes sympathy, he omits conscience, or the feeling of duty: one would never imagine from reading him that any human being ever did an act merely because it is right, or abstained from it merely because it is wrong... In laying down as a philosophical axiom, that men's actions are always obedient to their interests, Mr. Bentham did no more than dress up the very trivial proposition...in terms which appeared to him more precise, and better suited to the purposes of philosophy.[22]

In his 1836 essay "Civilization," Mill elaborates the associationist principle that innumerable motives arise from "human desires and aversions" to assert "the astonishing pliability of our nature" and "infinite varieties of human nature."[23] In the *Autobiography*, Mill acknowledges the influence of Charles Austin in reaching this conclusion, specifically in opposition to the assumption by political economists that there are "universal principles of human nature." The study of human nature in its varieties must accordingly extend beyond the province of psychology to understand how social and

[22] "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy," *CW*, X, 13-14.
[23] "Civilization," *CW*, XVIII, 145.

cultural conditions shape character. Advocating a radical redesign of English education in "Civilization," Mill thus assigns:

> An important place in the system of education...would be occupied by history... In no other way can he so completely realize in his own mind (howsoever he may be satisfied with the proof of them as abstract propositions) the great principles by which the progress of man and the condition of society are governed. Nowhere else will the infinite varieties of human nature be so vividly brought home to him, and anything cramped or one-sided in his own standard of it so effectually corrected; and nowhere else will he behold so strongly exemplified the astonishing pliability of our nature, and the vast effects which may under good guidance be produced upon it by honest endeavour.[24]

The foundation for a program of progressive reform thus shifted from exclusive reliance on *a priori* principles toward the study of past progress, and with it, a broader recognition of what might be possible toward achieving the "improvement of mankind."

With the death of James Mill in 1836, John was no longer encumbered by a fear of having to confront his father with his doubts and disagreements, and thus was free to offer a reassessment of deductive and historicist (or historically based) political theory. The companion essays "Bentham" and "Coleridge" were the culmination of this reassessment. Suggesting that every Englishman falls into one of their camps, Mill declares that Bentham and Coleridge are "the two great seminal minds of England in their age" who alike became the "great questioner[s] of things established."[25] For Mill, the differences between Bentham and Coleridge also represented the conflicting philosophies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Mill's contrast between the two centuries is starkly drawn:

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[24] "Civilization," *CW,* XVIII, 145. Also, *Autobiography*, *CW,* I, 185-187.

[25] "Bentham," *CW,* X, 77, 78, "Coleridge," *CW,* X, 119. For an excellent account of why Mill selected Bentham and Coleridge (particularly since Coleridge was mainly a literary figure) as representing the poles of contemporary thought, see Frederick Rosen, "The Method of Reform: J.S. Mill's Encounter with Bentham and Coleridge," in *J.S. Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment,* eds. Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 129-132.

> Now the Germano-Coleridgian doctrine is, in our view of the matter, the result of such a reaction. It expresses the revolt of the human mind against the philosophy of the eighteenth century. It is ontological, because that was experimental; conservative, because that was innovative; religious, because so much of that was infidel; concrete and historical, because that was abstract and metaphysical; poetical, because that was matter-of-fact and prosaic.[26]

While it is too much to claim that he was able to construct a theoretical synthesis between the rival philosophies, Mill does suggest that their philosophies complemented one another as "completing counterparts," and he certainly hoped to find a commonality of interests in practical reform that could be supported by the rival philosophies.[27] Despite their differences, Mill claims they were kindred spirits as politically engaged philosophers who recognized "that sound theory is the only foundation for sound practice."[28] Indeed, writing for a radical and liberal audience in the *London and Westminster Review*, his stated goal was to establish a "philosophical tolerance" between "antagonistic modes of thought" which nonetheless shared an opposition to political and religious corruption, thus opening the prospect for some later rapprochement. The essays are representative of Mill's post-crisis eclecticism, his pose of "manysidedness" and his rejection of a "system of political philosophy."[29] The essays also represent Mill's attempt to expand the philosophical foundation for a program of liberal reform.

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[26] "Coleridge," *CW,* X, 125.

[27] Nicholas Capaldi, for one, suggests that "Mill clearly intended...to present himself as the positive synthesis of these two perspectives"; see *John Stuart Mill: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 140. This seems to overstate Mill's purpose. The thrust of Mill's argument seems to be that each side could benefit from understanding the other's perspective and be less dogmatic about its own ("Coleridge," *CW,* X 122). It is further noted that Mill, after stating that the epistemological differences are the "starting point" in the dispute between Benthamite empiricists and the "Germano-Coleridgian" idealists, concludes that they are irreconcilable and proceeds to flatly dismiss the "erroneous" idealist position ("Coleridge," *CW,* X 125, 129). In an 1833 essay, Mill also stated it was "necessary to choose" between the associationist philosophy of Hartley and the intuitionist German school as "the only two theories of the human mind which are, strictly speaking, possible"; see "Blakey's History of the Moral Sciences," *CW,* X, 23.

[28] "Coleridge," *CW,* X, 121.

[29] *Autobiography*, *CW,* I, 168.

While Mill remained committed to radical political goals, his examination of Bentham yields a devastating critique. His pleasure-pain psychology is excoriated for its reductionism, its fallacious claims to universality, for its failure to recognize man "as a being capable of pursuing spiritual perfection as an end; of desiring, for its own sake, the conformity of his own character to his standard of excellence."[30] Bentham's vision of the individual as living in a world of punishments and rewards is reflected in a bleak social materialism that fails to acknowledge any non-transactional bond between individuals. Beyond the atomistic realm of commerce, Bentham offers nothing:

> If Bentham's theory of life can do so little for the individual, what can it do for society? It will enable a society which has attained a certain state of spiritual development, and the maintenance of which in that state is otherwise provided for, to prescribe the rules by which it may protect its material interests. It will do nothing (except sometimes as an instrument in the hands of a higher doctrine) for the spiritual interests of society; nor does it suffice of itself even for the material interests.

Mill's recognition of the insufficiency of Bentham's social theory is not confined to its psychological premises; Mill also traces Bentham's failure to his explicit rejection of history and his denial of national character as a consideration in political theory. This neglect undermines Bentham's reformist activism—which Mill otherwise applauds—for no program of improvement can simply impose its vision without taking into account the attributes of a nation and how they came into being:

> That which alone causes any material interests to exist, which alone enables any body of human beings to exist as a society, is national character: *that* it is, which causes one nation to succeed in what it attempts, another to fail; one nation to understand and aspire to elevated things, another to grovel in mean ones; which makes the greatness of one nation lasting, and dooms another to early and rapid decay. The true teacher of the fitting social arrangements for England, France, or America, is the one who can point out how the English, French, or American

[30] "Bentham," *CW,* X, 95.

> character can be improved, and how it has been made what it is. *A philosophy of laws and institutions, not founded on a philosophy of national character, is an absurdity*.[31]

With the demand for a political theory to be based on national character, Mill signals his rejection not only of Bentham and his father, but of any deductive approach which is predicated on an assessment of human nature. Considering Bentham's inability to comprehend the complexity of individual character, Mill finds it inconceivable that he could "rise to that higher generalization" of defining national character. A political philosophy's adequacy as a foundation for social and political change must account for the diversity of culture and provide a framework for calibrating the types of reforms that existing institutions and rules might yield to. Such institutions represent historical outcomes and are the expression of national character; they cannot be cavalierly dismissed and swept aside as irrational or for failing to pass tests of utility. Having acknowledged that Macaulay had located "something fundamentally erroneous" in his father's essay, Mill's criticism of Bentham defined the failure to recognize national character as the source of the error.

The essay on Coleridge followed in 1840, and continued the exploration of national character and the role of historical thinking in political theory. Coleridge is identified as the representative of stability posed against Bentham as the representative of rationalist Enlightenment reform, and as Mill introduces the differences between the two, the role of history in forming their political perspectives is decisive:

> The brilliant light which has been thrown upon history during the last half century, has proceeded almost wholly from this [the Germano-Coleridgian] school. The disrespect in which history was held by the *philosophes* is notorious...

[31] Ibid., 99. Italics added.

> And indeed the ordinary mode of writing history, and the ordinary mode of drawing lessons from it, were almost sufficient to excuse this contempt.[32]

Mill's appraisal of the *philosophe* hostility to history verges on caricature, but his claim that they regarded history as a "sheer hindrance to man's attaining a well-being which would otherwise be of easy attainment" would not be far off the mark in describing Bentham's view nor, for that matter, his own. As already noted, by the time of the Bentham and Coleridge essays in 1838-40, Mill had reconsidered his doubts about the certainty and value of historical knowledge. Though his earlier position had been that there were inherent limitations to the value of history as a source for political theory, he argues in "Coleridge" that because of the neglect of the "philosophers of the eighteenth century [to do] anything like justice to the Past," they had heedlessly undermined the *ancien regime,* which, however archaic and corrupt, still provided some institutional stability:

> Their mistake was, that they did not acknowledge the historical value of much which had ceased to be useful, nor saw that institutions and creeds, now effete, had rendered essential services to civilization, and still filled a place in the human mind, and in the arrangements of society, which could not without great peril, be left vacant.[33]

In Mill's analysis, the *philosophe's* orientation toward a "new-model society" without the obstacle of corrupt and backward institutions had led them to be "content...with a very superficial study of history."[34] Against this neglect and superficiality, it was a "natural" corrective for the Coleridgean "reactionary school" to claim the priority of the "concrete and historical" over the "abstract and metaphysical."

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[32] "Coleridge," *CW,* X, 139.
[33] Ibid., 138.
[34] Ibid., 139.

One cannot help but note the irony that Mill, in his turn toward history, adopted precisely the conservative perspective which he had earlier claimed was a near inevitability when the past is privileged over principle. Perhaps in recognition of this, Mill insists that the Coleridgeans proceeded at a more profound level than had hitherto been offered. Rather than merely romanticize the past, they sought to establish a theory defining the "requisites of the permanent existence of the body politic." From this foundation, they could proceed to determine "what were the conditions which had rendered the preservation of these permanent requisites compatible with perpetual and progressive improvement.[35] Mill's discussion of the components of social stability thus constitutes a break with the concepts of interest, consent and contract that had formed the basis of theories of political authority since Hobbes. Indeed, his new perspective reflects the historicist critique of the rationalist view of human nature. Mill argues that the abstractions of past political theory are a reflection of a static view of human nature, a view that reflected "the state of things with which they [past philosophers] had always been familiar" and which they had universalized into the "natural condition of mankind."[36] Mill claims that had the unnamed philosophers "known human nature under any other type than that of their own age," their perspective would have been widened to include "certain requisites and conditions" which enable "habitual submission to law and government." Mill thus abandoned deductive methodologies based on a universal human nature to endorse a more cultural view of how civil authority maintains its hold and generates a "permanent political society."[37]

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[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 132.
[37] Ibid., 133.

While a detailed discussion of Mill's "essential requisites of civil society" is not our focus, a brief review is in order. Mill identifies three conditions: First, there must be a socialization process—a "system of education"—which inculcates a "restraining discipline" on self-interested behavior and "trains the human being in the habit...of subordinating his personal impulses and aims, to what were considered the ends of society."[38] Moreover, education is the "chief source of progressiveness" to the extent that it reaches beyond inculcating personal restraint toward "invigorating the active faculties" and the "culture of the inward man."[39] The second condition of stability is a "feeling of allegiance, or loyalty" to a foundational principle. Mill states that such allegiance is independent of forms of government, but that there must be in "the constitution of the State *something* which is settled, something permanent, and not to be called in question; something which, by general agreement, has a right to be where it is, and to be secure against disturbance, whatever else may change."[40] Acknowledging that any society will contain dissension due to conflicting interests, Mill argues that despite such conflicts, the social bond will endure provided there remains an adherence to "the fundamental principles of social union." Implicit in this condition is not merely that there be adherence

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 140.
[40] Ibid., 133-4. Mill's assertion that civil society requires a cohesive belief that is "not to be called in question" has been cited as inconsistent with Mill's later argument in *On Liberty*. Hilail Goldin attacks Mill for setting aside his earlier concerns about stability and ignoring the subversive potential of unchecked free expression; see "Mill on Liberty," in *Ancients and Moderns*, ed. Joseph Cropsey (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 293-4. Clark Bouton acknowledges the inconsistency and attempts to explain it by claiming that Mill believed that the political environment of 1859 was considerably less fragile than in the 1830-40s, and that Mill's concerns about stability had shifted as the "age of transition" came to a close; see "John Stuart Mill: On Liberty and History," *The Western Political Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (Sept. 1965): 573. C.L. Ten offers a more persuasive argument in disputing the claimed inconsistency by suggesting that "the principle of liberty can become an object of common loyalty, and thereby secure social stability"; see C.L. Ten, "Mill's Stable Society," in *The Mill News Letter* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1971): 5. Mill himself states that the unquestioning loyalty "may attach itself to the principles of individual freedom and political and social equality, as realized in institutions which as yet exist nowhere, or exist only in a rudimentary state"; "Coleridge," *CW*, X, 134.

to a constitutional principle, but that such a principle must exist as a condition for social existence itself. Mill distinguishes the loyalty to a foundational principle from what he terms the "principle of cohesion,"[41] which forms the third condition of stability. While nationality is the context of the definition of this principle, Mill rules out such factors as "nationality in the vulgar sense" or "an unjust preference for the interests of our own country"; cohesion is not based on a chauvinistic identity. Rather, this principle appears to represent an implicit repudiation of Bentham's (and contract theory's) reliance on self-interest as the basis of national bonding in favor of a positive recognition of common interest, a spirit in which each individual recognize his own good is attached to the success of the whole. Indeed, Mill proposes that the role of government is not merely to assure public security and the orderly operations of civil society, but to actively promote of public welfare: "A State ought to be considered as a great benefit society, or mutual insurance company, for helping (under the necessary regulations for preventing abuse) that large proportion of its members who cannot help themselves."[42]

The idealism in Mill's formulation is clear enough. The discussion of stability reaches beyond the problem of maintaining a social and political equilibrium. The forces are organic and internal, "the binding factors which hold society together."[43] Civil society is based on beliefs in common purposes and values, and those societies endure which ensure that succeeding generations carry on that heritage. Rather than castigating the irrationality of inherited institutions, Mill acknowledges that they have served a purpose, even if they are now an outdated obstacle to progress. Mill's analysis is revealing as much for what it does not include as for what it does. It is pre-eminently a rejection of

[41] "Coleridge," *CW*, X, 134, 135.
[42] Ibid., 156.
[43] Ibid., 138.

Benthamite materialism. Mill does not suggest that social cohesion is based on mutual economic dependency, or forceful government authority, or even ethnic identity (which his third principle explicitly steers clear of). Nor is social stability the result of any particular form of government, e.g., a representative democracy; rather, the form of government is determined by the character and continuity of a society's foundational principles. For Mill, societies endure because of common beliefs, a communal caring among citizens, and institutions which embody those beliefs and ensure their persistence. Bentham's failure, and that of the French Enlightenment, was to devalue or misunderstand cultural forces, and thus to misunderstand the moral architecture of society. Societies could not be remade on more rational premises—or representative political institutions imposed—without respect for the historic processes that produce the values that hold people together. While Mill maintained his unwavering commitment to social and political progress, he recognized that there is no single path or prescription that will contribute to progress, nor can any program succeed that it did not take account of history. In the *Autobiography*, Mill summarized the theoretical consequence of this rejection of rationalist dogma:

> That all questions of political institutions are relative, not absolute, and that different stages of human progress not only *will* have, but *ought* to have, different institutions: That government is always either in the hands, or passing into the hands, of whatever is the strongest power in society, and that what this power is, does not depend on institutions, but institutions on it: That any general theory or philosophy of politics supposes a previous theory of human progress, and that this is the same thing with a philosophy of history.[44]

A reform movement would thus have to understand and assimilate the meaning and principles of an institution as it has evolved—what Coleridge called "the Idea of it"—

[44] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 169.

and, through political and intellectual leadership, educate and prepare the public in order to effect transformation and improvement.[45]

Mill's intellectual journey through Coleridge thus brought him toward the Baconian methodological destination that had been advocated by Macaulay. Not only did Mill accept that a political philosophy must have a foundation in historical inquiry, but he argued more broadly for a historically-based methodology for a "philosophy of human culture." In an extraordinary passage, Mill commends the "Germano-Coleridgian school" as:

> the first (except for a solitary thinker here and there) who inquired with any comprehensiveness or depth into *the inductive laws of the existence and growth of human society*... They were the first who pursued, philosophically and in the spirit of Baconian investigation, not only this inquiry, but others ulterior and collateral to it. They thus produced...a philosophy of society, in the only form in which it is yet possible, that of a philosophy of history; not a defence of particular ethical or religious doctrines, but a contribution, the largest yet made by any class of thinkers, towards the philosophy of human culture.[46]

Among the several striking implications of this passage is its partial reversal of the epistemological and political interconnections that Mill had previously established. R. P. Anschutz is perhaps the only Mill scholar who has taken note of this passage and has summarized Mill's apparent inconsistency: "The conservative school, we have all along been assured, is intuitive or *a priori*; the progressive is inductive or experimental. But the conservative school we are now told is 'concrete and historical,' while the progressive is 'abstract and metaphysical.'"[47] The abstractions of the progressive school

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[45] "Coleridge," *CW,* X, 147.
[46] Ibid., 138-9. Italics added.
[47] Apart from Anschutz's essay, I could find no other effort to unravel this paragraph; see "The Logic of J.S. Mill," *Mind* 58, no. 231 (July 1949): 282. Raymond Williams cites the paragraph, but his point is to emphasize Mill's conclusion about a philosophy of human culture rather than Mill's apparent endorsement

are characterized as socially destabilizing, while the conservative school has now originated a comprehensive philosophy of society and human culture which can serve the progressive purpose by providing for the "growth of human society." Like several of Mill's associates, one is tempted to question the intelligibility of this mixing and matching which seem to come off a menu of philosophical categories and political orientations.[48]

The confusion of terms leads us to the most questionable proposition in Mill's summary: the claim that the Coleridgeans and their continental counterparts were inductivists who brought "prominently forward the three requisites...as essential principles of all permanent forms of social existence."[49] It is far from obvious that the Coleridgeans had done anything of the kind. Mill presents the three requisites without any direct reference to Coleridge or his followers, who are nonetheless—perhaps in a show of modesty—credited with these insights. The attribution to the Germano-Coleridgian school only breeds confusion since Mill had already characterized them as intuitionists, and had, as Ryan puts it, "firmly slapped down...Coleridge's hostility to social science."[50] Second, the claim that the three requisites are examples of "the inductive laws of the existence and growth of human society" suggests a reversal of Mill's previous claims against induction. Given Mill's oft-repeated doubts about inductive inference in history, it is difficult to see how these examples meet the standard

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of inductive method or the scrambling of philosophical and political associations; see *Culture & Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 59.

[48] Bain records a conversation with John Grote: "He would say to me, 'Much as I admire John Mill, my admiration is always mixed with fear'; meaning that he never knew what unexpected turn Mill might take. This I regarded as an exaggeration due, in the first instance, to Grote's gloomy temperament; next to the shock of the 'Bentham' and 'Coleridge' articles." Bain, *John Stuart Mill,* 83-4. Francis Place responded to the essays by stating: "I think John Mill has made great progress in becoming a German metaphysician. Eccentricity and obscurity must necessarily be the result." Cited in Anschutz, *Philosophy of Mill,* 285.

[49] "Coleridge," *CW,* X, 139.

[50] Ryan, J.*S. Mill*, 56. See "Coleridge," *CW,* X, 128-9.

for "inductive laws." Mill offers little more than broad generalizations from Greek and Roman history, suggesting only that the "laws" are representative of the "deeper principles" underlying the reaction of Tory and Royalist writers against the Enlightenment and Revolution. In the absence of more thorough confirmation, it seems that Mill is committing the most egregious type of inductive mistake, generalizing scant evidence into a law. The failure to offer a deeper explanation supports Karl Popper's claim that Mill occasionally failed to clearly distinguish "between universal laws and specific initial conditions," and that he lacked "clarity in his use of the term 'cause' by which he means sometimes singular events, and sometimes universal laws."[51] At most, Mill's "three requisites" seem to be just that: necessary conditions for social stability, but not the only ones, and certainly not sufficient. As such, their absence could contribute to an explanation of social breakdown or perhaps the failure of a society to thrive (as could crop failures, contagious disease, official corruption, the stress of foreign conflicts, etc.), but fall short of providing a complete explanation of breakdown, let alone the conditions required for growth. Mill's language may have been uncharacteristically sloppy as he attempted, perhaps too enthusiastically, to endorse his erstwhile political adversaries.[52]

Finally, one is struck by Mill's parenthetical claim that apart from the German idealists who influenced Coleridge, there had been only a "solitary thinker here and there" who had been in search of a philosophy of human culture. This seems an injustice

[51] Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 125. It is notable that in a letter to Gustave d'Eichthal, Mill criticized Comte with the observation that "it is a great mistake, a very common one too, which this sect seem to be in great danger of falling into to suppose that a few striking and original observations, are sufficient to form the foundation of a *science positive*." See Letter 27 (8 October 1829). *CW*, XII, 35.

[52] It is also worth noting that the entire section on the three sources of political stability was cited nearly verbatim in the *Logic* (Book VI, Ch. X, Sec. 5) as an illustration of Comte's concept of social statics and without any attribution to Coleridge (Mill introduces the passage stating that he is quoting himself). There is no claim that the three requisites are inductive laws, and the passage is used in Mill's introduction of what he termed the "inverse deductive, or historical method."

to several theorists who had significant influence on Mill in the early 1830s. In addition to the Coleridgeans, Mill was conversant (and in actual conversation) with several figures and schools of thought who contributed to theories of social stability. Mill was aware of the efforts of the Saint-Simonians (who included Comte) in France, and his 1831 series of essays, "The Spirit of the Age," were not only influenced by them, but also presented an early formulation of the theory of social statics, his first foray into the explanation of social stability. Mill had also started a correspondence with Tocqueville when he read the first volume of *Democracy in America*, which he reviewed in 1835. And as the previous chapter has detailed, in Scotland it was hardly a "solitary thinker here and there" who had been developing historically based social theory. Through his father and his own reading, Mill was well aware of the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, and compared them favorably to French social theorists.[53] One can only surmise that a reference to a wider circle of influences did not serve Mill's rhetorical purposes in trying both to separate himself from his previous colleagues (and his father) and to broaden the scope of their thinking beyond the strict confines of utilitarianism. Mill may also have been reluctant to acknowledge the Scottish contribution because of his contempt for Hume's *History*. We have already noted his belief that Hume's narrative history served the

[53] There can be no doubt about Mill's respect for the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. In letters to Comte (who also acknowledged his debt to them), he asserted that the Scots were more advanced than the English because the education system is "more French than English in character, a fact that explains the eminent merit of Scottish thinkers since Kames and Ferguson to my father." In a later letter, he elaborated on the same theme, stating that "I find a true analogy between the orientations of the Scottish and the French minds. You surely cannot have missed how closely Hume, Ferguson, Adam Smith, Millar, Brown, Reid and even Chalmers resemble the French intellectually." From Mill, an ardent Francophile, this was high praise. See Letters 23 (28 January 1843) and 57 (5 October 1844) in *The Correspondence of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte*, 129, 259.

ideological interests of conservatives, but it appears that Mill may have also regarded the Scottish efforts at philosophical history as superficial.[54]

As much as Mill may have admired a wide circle of social theorists while extolling the contributions of the Coleridgeans, he also expressed a general dissatisfaction with the work of earlier historians. In 1836, only a few years before the Bentham and Coleridge essays, Mill wrote that history was still in its "infancy," and "till near the present time [was] almost entirely useless... Neither historians nor travellers in any former age, and few even in the present, have had a glimmering of what it is to study a people."[55] Mill's criticism of past historians reflected his argument with Bentham's psychology, that their vision was not only too narrow, but universalized the characteristics "of human nature and of human life with which they are familiar [and] continually presupposes, as an immutable law, something which, perhaps, belongs only to the age and state of society through which they are rapidly passing.[56] Though the Scots certainly looked at the past and less advanced cultures from the perspective of the "age of commerce," this might unfairly ignore their effort to grapple with the tension between cultural variability and the concept of universal human nature. But it certainly reflects the development of Mill's historicism and underscores his conviction that "the correction of narrowness is the main benefit derived from the study of various ages and nations: of

[54] Stefan Collini also notes Mill's neglect of the Scottish contribution, but attributes his preference for continental thinkers to their "intellectualist theory of social change." See Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 144.
[55] "State of Society in America," *CW*, XVIII, 93. Similarly, in "On the Definition of Political Economy," Mill claimed that "the uses of history, and the spirit in which it ought to be studied, are subjects which have never yet had justice done them." *CW*, IV, 333n.
[56] "State of Society in America," *CW*, XVIII, 93.

narrowness, not only in our conceptions of what is, but in our standard of what ought to be."[57]

Mill identified the inability of historians to reach beyond the consciousness of their own age as signifying a failure of imagination, and the presence or absence of imagination thus became a significant concept in Mill's critiques of historians. A prominent reference to his concept of the imagination occurs in the "Bentham" essay, in which Mill rather cruelly states that Bentham did not have one. Distinguishing its meaning from the "popular sense" of having "command of imagery and metaphor" (which he allows that Bentham did possess "to a certain degree"), Mill continues:

> The Imagination which [Bentham] had not, was that to which the name is generally appropriated by the best writers of the present day; that which enables us, by a voluntary effort, to conceive the absent as if it were present, the imaginary as if it were real, and to clothe it in the feelings which, if it were indeed real, it would bring along with it. This is the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another. This power constitutes the poet, in so far as he does anything but melodiously utter his own actual feelings. It constitutes the dramatist entirely. *It is one of the constituents of the historian; by it we understand other times*... Without it nobody knows even his own nature, further than circumstances have actually tried it and called it out; nor the nature of his fellow-creatures, beyond such generalizations as he may have been enabled to make from his observation of their outward conduct.[58]

Mill's use of the term "imagination" was, as John Robson asserts, "as loose as most people's," but Mill seems here to be suggesting a precise meaning.[59] In the 1831 essay, 'On Genius,' Mill offered a definition of imagination as a "capacity of extracting the knowledge of general truth from our own consciousness...by that kind of self-observation

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[57] Ibid.
[58] "Bentham," *CW,* X, 92. Italics added.
[59] John Robson, "J.S. Mill's Theory of Poetry," in *Mill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. B. Schneewind (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 270.

which is called *imagination*."[60] Mill suggests that the imagination is a faculty which provides access and expression to an interior, emotional truth that is evoked by self-conscious experience. Unsurprisingly, the modes of imaginative expression are the creative arts, and Mill expressly includes poetry and drama. Particularly in light of Mill's usual reference to history in a scientific context, one might not expect him to include historical writing as a product of the imagination. Yet Mill regarded the imaginative work of an historian as not far removed from the effort of a great actor to inhabit his character: "A great actor must possess imagination, in the higher and more extensive meaning of the word: that is, he must be able to conceive correctly, and paint vividly within himself, states of external circumstances, and of the human mind, into which it has not happened to himself to be thrown."[61] As an actor imaginatively enters the emotional life and circumstances of his character, so an historian must imaginatively remove himself from his own environment and convey what it was like to live in a different place and time. The historian, like the actor in his role, must penetrate the subjectivity of the historical agent.

Mill's concept of imagination has an uncertain position within the context of his insistence that experience is the sole source of knowledge and truth. Mill's epistemology and associationist psychology seems to offer little space for any "general truth from our own consciousness" that the imagination can reveal. He certainly would have rejected any claim that imagination is a source of absolute or timeless truths or that it plays any role in ordering human experience. The chapter on "Imagination" in James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, which John Mill edited and regarded as a

[60] "On Genius," *CW*, I, 332. Italics in original.
[61] Quoted by Robson, "Mill's Theory of Poetry," 271; Mill, "Mlle Leontine Fay," *Examiner* (22 May 1831), *CW*, XXII, 310.

definitive text for associationism, suggests no role at all for the imagination in determining truth. Imagination is described as a "constructive faculty" that "alters, re-arranges, puts together the materials of perception and memory to satisfy certain demands of the mind," is "swayed by some present emotion," and is "an end in itself."[62] Imagination is composed of a "train of ideas" and the ability to compose such trains is a universal human trait; the imaginations of poets and artists differ from others only in the subjects of their imagination, and in the aesthetic appeal of what they produce. James Mill does assert that the operations of the imagination can produce truth, but only when exerted by a metaphysician or mathematician "whose trains [of thought] are directed toward that object [truth]."[63]

John Mill's concept of imagination seems to have strayed from the strict empiricism of his father, and thus seems to have a kind of orphan status within his own theory of mind. While Mill and his father do not assign to imagination any formal epistemological function with respect to knowledge of the natural world, Mill's concept of self-observation suggests that it provides us with knowledge of the inner world of consciousness. By offering reflective expressions of (often) emotional responses to the external world, imagination is the avenue for the creative revelation of one's subjective being. However, apart from the vague reference to "self-observation," its status as a source of subjective knowledge is not explained, nor does Mill attempt, as his father had, to account for its place within associationist psychology.[64] While he never divorces

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[62] James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, ed. J. S. Mill (London: Longmans, Green, 1878), I, 245.
[63] Ibid., 243.
[64] In the notes he added to his edition of the *Analysis*, Mill actually acknowledged the problem of accounting for and distinguishing the faculties of memory and imagination: "The only difficulty about Memory, when once the laws of Association are understood, is the difference between it and Imagination; but this is a difference which will probably long continue to perplex philosophers." See ibid., I, 339 n.94.

imagination from experience, he does not explain its relationship to experience. Yet it clearly relies on a special kind of experience. Specifically in the examples of acting and understanding historical agents, imagination extends beyond an expression of the subjective consciousness of the poet toward an intuition into other minds. Were the term "intuition" not so heavily freighted with reference to the epistemology that he rejected, Mill may well have suggested that imagination contained an intuitive faculty, albeit a faculty limited to offering insights (if not truths) of an evanescent nature rooted in specific contexts.

Mill developed his concept of imagination during the period of his friendship with Carlyle, and may well have been influenced by Carlyle's advocacy of a holistic approach to history and his rejection of "cause-and-effect speculators" who parse history into specialties.[65] Rosemary Jann, in her study of Victorian historians, says of Carlyle that he sought to "create a narrative that destroyed the intervening lapse of time, immersed the reader in the event, and allowed him to enter directly into the spiritual dimension of historical reality."[66] Compelled by Carlyle's audacity to set aside his bias for a philosophical history, Mill greeted Carlyle's *French Revolution* with great enthusiasm, recognizing the author as preeminent in his ability to reconstruct the past and reveal the emotional truth of what it was like to live during a political and social cataclysm. The introduction to his review of Carlyle's masterpiece acclaimed it as "not so much a history, as an epic poem; and notwithstanding, or even in consequence of this, the truest

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Included in *CW*, XXXI, 154. Mill adds that the fundamental difference between memory and imagination resides "in the belief that what [memory] represents did really take place." This distinction clearly undermines the notion that imagination can provide access to truth, unless one allows for mental events as among those that "really take place." See *Analysis*, I, 342, n.95.

[65] Thomas Carlyle, "On History," *A Carlyle Reader*, ed. G. B. Tennyson (Acton, MA: Copley Publishing Group, 1999), 31.

[66] Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1985), 49.

of histories...and on the whole no work of greater genius, either historical or poetical, has been produced in this country for many years.[67] Carlyle is praised for his "creative imagination, which, from a chaos of scattered hints and confused testimonies, can summon up the Thing to appear before it as a completed whole."[68] Repeating his claim that great drama and great history are equally due to the author's imagination, Mill compares Carlyle to Shakespeare in his ability to bring life to the *dramatis personae* of the Revolution, to portray their fully rounded humanity rather than treat them as "logical abstractions...not enough to form even the merest outline of what the men were, or possibly could have been."[69]

In pursuing the importance of imagination in historical understanding, Mill once again offers the negative example of Hume. Not only are Hume's narrative strengths put at the service of conservatives; as a historian he fails as "a man of mere science and analysis" with "pretentions to philosophy":

> Did any one ever gain from Hume's history anything like a picture of what may actually have been passing, in the minds, say, of Cavaliers or of Roundheads during the civil wars? Does any one feel that Hume has made him figure to himself with any precision what manner of men these were; how far they were like ourselves, how far different; what things they loved and hated, and what sort of conception they had formed of the things they loved and hated? And what kind of a notion can be framed of a period of history, unless we begin with that as a preliminary?[70]

One might suggest that Mill is taking the Scottish Enlightenment concept of conjectural history—a concept which Hume resisted and did not employ—to a level the Scots never envisioned: rather than trying to fill in gaps in the evidentiary record, Mill suggests that

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[67] "Carlyle's French Revolution," *CW*, XX, 133.
[68] Ibid., 137.
[69] Ibid., 134-135.
[70] Ibid., 135-6

historians should make an explicitly imaginative leap into the subjective world of historical agents, to attempt to see their world through their eyes. In making this demand, Mill verges close to R. G. Collingwood's attempt to distinguish historical explanation from the positivist model of covering laws and causal analysis. Collingwood had argued forcefully against history as "the study of successive events lying in a dead past," and that by treating historical events as if they were natural events, historians "neglect their proper task of penetrating to the thought of the agents whose acts they are studying."[71] Indeed, Collingwood in his chapter called "The Historical Imagination" proposes an analogy between the historian and the novelist that parallels Mill's analogy with the dramatist:

> Each of them makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of characters. Each aims at making his picture a coherent whole, where every character and every situation is so bound up with the rest that this character in this situation cannot but act in this way, and we cannot imagine him as acting otherwise. The novel and the history must both of them make sense; nothing is admissible in either except what is necessary, and the judge of this necessity is in both cases the imagination...in both cases this activity is the *a priori* imagination.[72]

For Collingwood, the historian's task was 'historical re-enactment,' or, more precisely, the exercise of rethinking the historical event. To investigate an event required recognizing its external and internal nature: the external is everything that can be witnessed physically as "bodies and their movements"; the internal was that "which can only be described in terms of thought."[73] To explain and understand an event, according

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[71] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 228.
[72] Ibid., 245-6.
[73] Ibid., 213. It is worth noting that Collingwood was also a critic of Hume's historical method, claiming, much as Mill had accused the Enlightenment as a whole, that Hume's concept of human nature was ahistorical, that "Hume never shows the slightest suspicion that the human nature he is analyzing...is the nature of a western European in the early eighteenth century... He always assumes that *our* reasoning faculty, *our* tastes and sentiments...are something perfectly uniform and invariable, underlying and conditioning all historical changes." Ibid., 83.

to Collingwood, was to discover the thought that was inside it, a process which distinguished history from the natural sciences and required entirely different methods.

Though Mill's emphasis on the role of imagination seems to approach an idealist theory of historical explanation, Ryan is lamentably correct in suggesting that to follow Mill's doctrine of imagination into Collingwood's notion of rethinking the past and historical re-enactment would be both "fascinating and fruitless."[74] Ryan argues that it probably never even occurred to Mill that his concept of historical imagination could be explanatory because he made no distinction between an event as something lived and inhabited as opposed to an event as an externally witnessed occurrence. While I would argue that Mill's concept of imagination suggests that he might have recognized such a distinction, Mill's core belief in a unified scientific methodology trumped any possibility that different methods of explanation could be applied to physical and human subjects. As he would make explicit in the *Logic*, any method that referred to rational volition would fatally undermine the possibility of a science of history. Mill's insistence on imagination seems to have applied only to his desire to enrich and deepen a historical narrative and to humanize historical agents. Imagination lent immediacy to the experience of reading history; Carlyle's genius was to bring the Revolution "before us in the *concrete*...clothed in as many of [its properties and circumstances] as can be authentically ascertained and imaginatively realized... Carlyle brings us *acquainted* with persons, things, and events." He writes with a "fervor and exaltation of feeling" which the reader cannot help but find emotionally compelling.[75]

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[74] Ryan, *J. S. Mill*, 165.
[75] "Carlyle's French Revolution," *CW,* XX, 158, 165.

Yet for Mill, the result of Carlyle's effort fell short of explanation. In his 1833 review of "Alison's History of the French Revolution," Mill had suggested that "history is interesting under a two-fold aspect: it has a *scientific* interest, and a *moral* or *biographic* interest." His description of the scientific potential of history is indistinguishable from the objectives of natural science "inasmuch as it exhibits the general laws of the moral universe acting in circumstances of complexity, and enables us to trace the connexion between great effects and their causes." Alternatively, a moral or biographic interest presents history as "the characters and lives of human beings, and calls upon us...for our sympathy, our admiration, or our censure."[76] As artistically compelling as Carlyle's account was, his imaginative leap into late eighteenth century France was for Mill no more than an advance in historical narrative: therein was the decisive difference between Carlyle's essentially moral and biographic approach to history, and the scientific method that Mill sought:

> Thus far we and Mr. Carlyle travel harmoniously together; but here we apparently diverge. For, having admitted that general principles...are helps to observation, not substitutes for it, we must add, that they are *necessary* helps, and that without general principles no one ever observed a particular case to any purpose. For, except by general principles, how do we bring the light of past experience to bear upon the new case? The essence of past experience lies embodied in those logical, abstract propositions, which our author makes so light of:—there, and no where else.[77]

The suggestion that history must be offered to serve a purpose is telling, and reminds us of Mill's criticism of Scott in which he maintained that history must be useful, that it

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[76] "Alison's History of the French Revolution," *CW,* XX, 117-8. While they fundamentally disagreed over the sufficiency of Carlyle's approach to historical explanation, Carlyle would likely have accepted Mill's characterization; in "On History," he asserted, for example, that "Social life is the aggregate of all the individual men's Lives who constitute society; History is the essence of innumerable Biographies." O*p.cit*., 27.

[77] "Carlyle's French Revolution," *CW,* XX, 161-2.

advance an objective in the practice of politics. It is also reminiscent of his reply to Sedgwick in which he had argued that history must remain in "second place" as a means of corroborating *a priori* "general principles" of human nature in the formation of political philosophy. By rejecting the use of "general principles," the value of Carlyle's history in bearing "upon the new case"—our present political options—was vitiated. As much as it enters into the *mentalité* of the revolution, it fails to meet the demands of science in which effects can be traced to causes and laws of change can be inferred.

Mill's explicit rejection of the sufficiency of historical imagination to provide an approach to explanation is provided in his 1844 essay reviewing Michelet's *History of France*. The introduction of the essay defines "three distinct stages of historical writing," culminating in the "great historical minds of France," Michelet, Thierry and Guizot. Mill's description of the first two stages parallels the trajectory of his thoughts on history from dissatisfaction of his earliest writings in the 1820s through the essays on Coleridge and Carlyle. The first stage is defined as essentially ahistorical, the kind of historical writing that culminated in the Enlightenment's error of "transport[ing] present feelings and notions back into the past, and refer[ring] all ages and forms of human life to the standard of that in which the writer himself lives."[78] It was history distorted by the ideological archetypes of the present, usually served up either to condemn or valorize institutions and actors according to the "canons of some modern party or creed."[79] Human nature, often simplistically invoked in this type of history as an explanatory principle, was regarded as universal and eternal. Mill rejected this type of history as propaganda when deployed by conservatives, but its static view of human nature was

[78] "Michelet's History of France," *CW*, XX, 223.
[79] Ibid., 224.

equally characteristic of the Benthamites as the inheritors of Enlightenment rationalism. As Mill became close to Carlyle and the Coleridgeans, he recognized the possibility of a new approach to history which would replace the distorting filter of partisan debate with a respect for context and the effort to evoke what it was like to have lived in the past. Mill thus defined the second stage historian as describing events as if witnessing them "in the colours of life," portraying the landscape of the past with evocative details, and connecting them into a coherent whole. This imaginative reconstruction of the past offered expansiveness and vision. It dispelled parochialism and challenged complacency. Provided the historian controlled the "gifts of imagination" to what could be "deduced by legitimate inference," second stage history illuminated the past and offered deeper understanding of the present.

Yet, as compelling as second stage history could be in providing a past tableau, it failed to explain its connection to those that came before and after. To achieve that, Mill called for a third stage which would constitute the "highest stage of historical investigation...a science of history":

> In this view, the whole of the events which have befallen the human race, and the states through which it has passed, are regarded as a series of phenomena, produced by causes, and susceptible of explanation. All history is conceived as a progressive chain of causes and effects; or...as a gradually unfolding web, in which every fresh part that comes to view is a prolongation of the part previously unrolled... The facts of each generation are looked upon as one complex phenomenon, caused by those of the generation preceding, and causing, in its turn, those of the next in order.[80]

The third stage would both supersede and retain the second "for before we can trace the filiation of states of society...we must rightly understand and conceive them." Ideally, the explanatory science of third stage history would retain the poetics of the second stage.

[80] Ibid., 225.

But the paramount ideal was that the succession of periods of history from one to another could be explained through reference to "some law," and that "how to read that law is deemed the fundamental problem of the science of history." The task of the scientific historian is:

> To find on what principles, derived from the nature of man and the laws of the outward world, each state of society and of the human mind produced that which came after it; and whether there can be traced any order of production sufficiently definite, to show what future states of society may be expected to emanate from the circumstances which exist at present—is the aim of historical philosophy in its third stage.[81]

Having argued that historical study could not be modelled on the natural sciences, Mill now suggested the prospect of history being part of a social science capable of predicting "future states of society."

Mill's excited vision of a science of history was clearly a significant revision of his early claim that geology was the only natural science whose methods might apply to history. His new position seems inconsistent with the past. Mill had disparaged the idea that there could be a law-giving science of history, either through deduction or through the experimental methods that physical science used to test proposed laws. He had rejected the call for a common-sense mode of induction which would merely reach back into the past to try to uncover comparisons with present conditions. Mill's project was to find a way of combining the logical certainty of deduction with a non-experimental inductive method that could be applied to the problem of historical explanation. The solution to this problem could impart of a level of confidence in the human sciences that could approximate what had been established in the physical sciences. That confidence

[81] Ibid.

would not only enable a predictive science of history and society, but would fulfill Mill's instrumentalist demand for a way to bridge theory and practice. The new social science would provide realizable objectives for political reform and a strategy to effect change. The essay on Coleridge had laid down the conditions for social stability; the task of the science of history would extend that analysis to uncover the mechanisms of social and political change. History, in short, could then be useful.

With the proposition that history could be used to predict "future states of society," history lost its independent identity. Superseding its use as grist for polemics (the first stage) or its service in expanding the reader's vision beyond insularity and parochialism (the second stage), history became subsumed within a comprehensive science of society as, to borrow a term from Peter Winch, a "repository of data" which the historian presents to his more theoretically minded colleagues.[82] Notwithstanding its elevation in the Coleridge essay as the form a philosophy of society must assume (and later, in the *Autobiography*, as prerequisite to political theory) history would remain in the "second place" position Mill had assigned to it in his 1835 reply to Sedgwick. History, as John Cairnes has claimed about Mill, "existed to be made use of. It was the present that concerned him, or the present *in history*... Mill was concerned with the present in historical context."[83] The past, as such, seems to have had little intrinsic interest for Mill. As a matter of temperament, he had little patience with the ephemera and contingency of events. For history to be useful required its specificity and concreteness to be conceptually swallowed and typified, organized into abstract

[82] Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 133.
[83] John Cairnes, "Introduction to Essays on French History and Historians," *CW*, XX, xxviii. Collini makes a similar observation: "In itself, the past held few charms for the mature Mill, certainly few by comparison with the future, and his interest in the richness of its detail was correspondingly limited and schematic." See Collini, et al., *Noble Science of Politics*, 144-5.

categories and periods. Its usefulness required that it be framed as the data of social science.

While history assumed second place in a science of society, it nonetheless raised inescapable issues for the formulation of that science. How can the claim that historical change is to be explained by reference to laws be made compatible with free will? What is the relationship between human nature and culturally acquired characteristics? If human characteristics are culturally determined, what is meant by "laws of human nature"? What exactly are these laws, which are so often (and so loosely) referred to? Do the laws of human nature contain a normative import for a theory of progress? If the form of political and legal institutions is determined by the stage of cultural development, how does one avoid relativism? These and related questions were systematically addressed by Mill in *A System of Logic* and other later writings. To fully understand Mill's theory of historical explanation, we must consider its positon in the context of his attempt to codify the methodology for the social sciences as a whole, and it is to this topic that we will turn next.

Chapter IV: Human Nature and History

> If we open any book, even mathematics or natural philosophy, it is impossible not to be struck with the mistiness of what we find represented as preliminary and fundamental notions, and the very insufficient manner in which the propositions which are palmed upon us as first principles seem to be made out, contrasted with the lucidity of the explanations and the conclusiveness of the proofs as soon as the writer enters upon the details of his subject. Whence comes this anomaly? Why is the admitted certainty of the results of those sciences in no way prejudiced by the want of solidity in their premises? How happens it that a firm superstructure has been erected upon an unstable foundation? The solution of the paradox is, that what are called first principles, are, in truth, *last* principles.[1]

In 1865, when *A System of Logic* and *The Principles of Political Economy* were in their sixth editions and established as the standard texts on their subjects, Mill returned to his early theme of the role of history in political theory and practice, and declared victory for the science of history:

> Much has been said and written for centuries past, by the practical or empirical school of politicians, in condemnation of theories founded on principles of human nature, without an historical basis; and the theorists, in their turn, have successfully retaliated on the practicalists... From this time any political thinker who fancies himself able to dispense with a connected view of the great facts of history, as a chain of causes and effects, must be regarded as below the level of the age; while the vulgar mode of using history, by looking in it for parallel cases, as if any cases were parallel, or as if a single instance, or even many instances not compared and analyzed, could reveal a law, will be more than ever, and irrevocably, discredited.[2]

As part of Mill's overarching goal to harness a theory of society into a program of practical reform, history would be subordinated within an overall methodology of the social sciences. Without this subordination, historical examples could be plucked from context to lend legitimacy to conservative arguments, typically suggesting the dangers of

[1] "On the Definition of Political Economy," *CW,* IV, 311.
[2] *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, *CW,* X, 308.

social and political upheaval that could result from tampering with traditional institutions. Mill's objective was to unify theory and practice by incorporating history into a social science which could guide social and political practice and answer conservative fear-mongering with claims of scientific precision and predictability. This priority is the context of Mill's excursion in "Coleridge" to frame the ideological and cultural foundations of stability as an inductive law; it represents a warning about the limits which reformers could not safely transgress, but also suggests the boundaries within which reform could be safely implemented.

Though the Coleridge essay castigates the rationalist ahistoricism of the Enlightenment as heedlessly destructive, Mill nonetheless retained two crucial strains of Enlightenment thinking: first, the belief in the possibilities of scientific mastery, the confidence that through the systematic employment of scientific method the physical universe and human nature could be known, controlled, and improved; and second, the belief that knowledge of human nature had an implicit normative import that suggested a secular ethic of human dignity and improvement, if not perfectibility. These two potentially conflicting tendencies were particularly present in associationism, which not only purported to be the science of human behavior, but also suggested the potential of education as a means to actualize human progress. Hartley and his followers, who prominently included Bentham and both Mills, argued that human nature is malleable and individual behavior can be fashioned by controlling the environment of the developing child with pleasurable incentives (and painful disincentives) to encourage desired qualities.

Though Mill never wavered as an advocate of associationism, he balked at the suggestion that he himself had been moulded by his father through the application of its principles. He viewed this claim as robbing him of autonomy and personhood, and he recounts in the *Autobiography* how his doubts on this score contributed to his depression:

> During the later returns of my dejection, the doctrine of what is called Philosophical Necessity weighed on my existence like an incubus. I felt as if I was scientifically proved to be the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances; as if my character and that of all others had been formed for us by agencies beyond our control, and was wholly out of our power. I often said to myself, what a relief it would be if I could disbelieve the doctrine of the formation of character by circumstances.[3]

While his objection to a strict determinism is unmistakably personal, Mill also recognized that it was a challenge to his most important philosophical commitments. In addition to raising broad questions of moral responsibility, Mill recognized hard determinism as undermining any possibility for individual moral improvement. Moral behavior depended on "self-education; the training, by the human being himself, of his affections and will." Perhaps his strongest objection to Bentham was that he "overlook[ed] the existence of about half of the whole number of mental feelings which human beings are capable of" and his resultant failure to account for the "great duty" of the individual to improve his own character through "self-culture." The capacity for self-culture was what made "man as a progressive being" possible.[4]

The question of free will and determinism also had crucial implications for Mill's objective to build the foundation for a science of society. Mill accepted as axiomatic that this project necessarily assumed some form of causal determinism, without which the

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[3] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 175.
[4] "Bentham," *CW*, X, 98; *On Liberty*, *CW*, XVIII, 224.

prospect of being able to assign laws to human behavior would be hopeless. The assertion of free will would undermine the assumption of uniformity and regularity that make a law-giving science possible:

> Among the impediments to the general acknowledgment, by thoughtful minds, of the subjection of historical facts to scientific laws, the most fundamental continues to be that which is grounded on the doctrine of Free Will, or in other words, on the denial that the law of invariable Causation holds true of human volitions: for if it does not, the course of history, being the result of human volitions, cannot be a subject of scientific laws, since the volitions on which it depends can neither be foreseen, nor reduced to any canon of regularity even after they have occurred.[5]

The purpose of a science of society was to enable the scientist and political leader to forecast the outcome of a confluence of conditions, and, moreover, with the tools of a social science in hand, to manage conditions to bring about desirable outcomes, or avoid undesirable ones. Just as associationism held out the possibility of improving the individual by controlling his environment, Mill's objective was that a social science could improve society, if not mankind as a whole, through political management.

Yet, the objective of developing a science of society that could enable progress also assumed the ability of political leaders to make free choices. A science of society contained no normative prescription for the purposes of politics. The ends of governance were external to social science, and Mill claimed a critical distinction between political science and art:

> The relation in which rules of art stand to doctrines of science may be thus characterized. The art proposes to itself an end to be attained, defines the end, and hands it over to the science. The science receives it, considers it as a phenomenon or effect to be studied, and having investigated its causes and conditions, sends it back to art with a theorem of the combinations of circumstances by which it could

[5] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 931-2.

> be produced. Art then examines these combinations of circumstances, and according as any of them are or are not in human power, pronounces the end attainable or not... Science then lends to Art the proposition (obtained by a series of inductions or of deductions) that the performance of certain actions will attain the end. From these premises Art concludes that the performance of these actions is desirable, and finding it also practicable, converts the theorem into a rule or precept.[6]

Mill's concept of political art assumes the free choice of the governing leaders to establish goals and decide how and whether the means to achieve them should be implemented. As an advocate of reform, Mill naturally assumed his and other's ability to make choices and to act upon them. Yet, without the reality of free choice in a deterministic world, how could the ability to decide in favor of progressive goals not be illusory? If one assumes the determinism that makes a social science possible, then how can that be reconciled with the freedom of the legislator to choose policies that would control outcomes? The effectiveness of reform also assumed that those who were governed could choose to follow their political leaders in effecting changes in political direction sufficient to overcome the determined forces and tendencies already present in social conditions. Without allowing for the power of the concerted exertion of free will, the efforts of the reformer could be dismissed as merely epiphenomenal efforts to confront historic destiny.[7]

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[6] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 944-5. Mill first introduced the distinction between value-neutral science and normative art in "On the Definition of Political Economy": "Science is a collection of *truths;* art, a body of *rules,* or directions for conduct. The language of science is, This is, or, This is not; This does, or does not, happen. The language of art is, Do this; Avoid that. Science takes cognizance of a *phenomenon,* and endeavours to discover its *law;* art proposes to itself an *end,* and looks out for *means* to effect it." (*CW*, IV, 312). The complementary nature of Mill's definition of science and art closely parallels his arguments for the unifying of theory and practice. The distinction also became important as Mill, following Coleridge and Comte, grappled with the role of a clerisy or group of experts in a representative government.

[7] As a committed reformer, Mill felt compelled to address this "extremely important" matter in a chapter that was added in the 1862 edition of the *Logic*, noting that "the theory of the subjection of social progress to invariable laws, is often held in conjunction with the doctrine, that social progress cannot be materially influenced by the exertions of individual persons , or by the acts of governments." *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 936.

Mill was thus compelled to delineate a form of determinism and free will to assure a stable foundation for a science of society which could also provide a framework for what he termed the "art" of politics. There could be no union of theory and practice without a compatibilist solution. The matter was accordingly the first to be taken up in the final book of the *System of Logic*, "On the Logic of the Moral Sciences," which culminated Mill's systematic consideration of methodology and was perhaps the purpose of the entire volume.[8] As a point of clarity, it is worth noting that by "moral sciences," Mill explicitly denied any normative implication; the "moral" element of the moral sciences was only meant to imply the inclusion of the study of man and society under the umbrella of the methods of the natural sciences which Mill regarded as extensible beyond physical nature. Mill thus addressed the free will problem with the reminder of Hume's argument that causation in the physical world does not imply any necessary connection between cause and effect but is rather an inference from a recognized regularity, a "uniformity of order" upon which outcomes can be anticipated. Mill claims that a person's actions are similarly predictable from what is known about his character, but that this predictability does not entail an irresistible necessity or coercion over individual volitions. Causation is not a form of compulsion; actions can be simultaneously chosen and causally determined. Just as an outcome in the physical world can be altered by an

[8] In the introduction to the *Logic*, Mill states that the concluding book is intended to address the divisions created in the post-Enlightenment period and provide the groundwork for a unified theory of the natural and human sciences: "The concluding Book is an attempt to contribute towards the solution of a question, which the decay of old opinions, and the agitation that disturbs European society to its inmost depths [make of the utmost importance]... Whether moral and social phenomena are really exceptions to the general certainty and uniformity of the course of nature; and how far the methods, by which so many of the laws of the physical world have been numbered among truths irrevocably acquired and universally assented to, can be made instrumental to the formation of a similar body of received doctrine in moral and political science." *Logic*, *CW*, VII, cxiii.

intervening event, Mill suggests that the normal and generally predictable pattern of an individual's behavior can be subject to an intervening volition.

> Men's actions are the joint result of the general laws and circumstances of human nature, and of their own particular characters; those characters again being the consequence of the natural and artificial circumstances that constituted their education, among which circumstances must be reckoned *their own conscious efforts*.[9]

Mill thus preserves the possibility of individual freedom and moral accountability by asserting that the exercise of the will can counter an instinctual or reflexive response and be among those forces that shape and control behavior. In a conclusion suggestive of Kant, Mill claims that the ability to overcome habitual response and temptation constitutes self-mastery and "moral freedom," and that "none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free."[10]

Mill's assertion of free will within a deterministic context reached beyond establishing moral responsibility and political choice. Mill extends the claim for "the power of the mind to co-operate in the formation of its own character" to suggest that the "habit of willing," once established, is independent of the associationist responses that initially form character. The habit of willing, Mill claims, constitutes purposive behavior, and he quotes Novalis who defines character as "a completely fashioned will" that both incorporates and supersedes the immediate incentives of pleasure and pain to include the habit of responsible behavior. Notably, Mill maintains that the purposive behavior of such a fully developed character can be regarded as "steady and constant," and thus

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[9] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 932. Italics added. See also Mill's discussion of the "Law of Universal Causation" in Book III of the *Logic*, *CW*, VII, 347n in which he argues that his determinism is distinguished from "Asiatic fatalism" by simply emphasizing that an individual "invariably *does* act in conformity to his character."

[10] Ibid., 841.

predictable.[11] Alan Ryan concludes that "Mill's position ultimately seems to be that causal regularity is implied by our ordinary notions of responsibility; that necessity is not only far removed from constraint but is part of freedom."[12]

A thorough assessment of whether Mill was successful in this formulation is not our purpose here; Ryan and others have taken up this question in detail. Nonetheless, an objection to Mill's position might be noted. By treating volition as a cause of predictable behavior, Mill believed that he had preserved the possibility of a human science without sacrificing moral responsibility. The necessitarian Owenite who is the foil in Mill's argument could claim that it is an illusion to think that volitions are freely chosen, that they are themselves necessary consequences that emerge from unexamined causes. Mill's claim that an individual can change his character just by wishing to do so is easily countered by the claim that the wish itself must be determined, however unconsciously. It is not clear that Mill has an answer to this objection or would even regard it as requiring a response. By salvaging a role for free will within a determined universe, he was satisfied that he had preserved the concept of moral responsibility as well as the prospect that an individual could choose to improve his character. He also preserved the possibility that scientific method could be applied toward developing laws of human behavior. As such, the Owenite insistence on looking deeper into possible causes was not inconsistent with Mill's methodological objective. It only raised the question of whether explanations of behavior satisfied criteria of adequacy.

Though one could question whether Mill was successful in dismissing the Owenite positon on behalf of a compatible understanding of free will, his own position

[11] Ibid., 841-3.
[12] Ryan, *John Stuart Mill*, 109.

remained sufficiently determinist to enable an inquiry into scientific method to advance. Having dispensed with the "doctrine of Necessity," Mill was confident in proclaiming a "doctrine of Causation":

> [M]en's actions are the joint result of the general laws and circumstances of human nature, and of their own particular characters; those characters again being the consequence of the natural and artificial circumstances that constituted their education, among which circumstances must be reckoned their own conscious efforts.[13]

Mill thus endorsed the Enlightenment objective of encompassing the moral and social phenomena of the human world within a comprehensive science, and he affirmed the objective of achieving the same level of certainty in the study of man that had been attained in nature. The "Logic of the Moral Sciences" stands as Mill's response to the problem of method that he had identified in his 1831 letter to Sterling, and fulfills the promise to devote himself to "the science of science itself" as the topic on which he could make his mark.[14] With his success, the moral sciences would no longer be the "blot on the face of science."[15] To remove that stain, the role of history in a new social science, despite the secondary status to which Mill had consigned it, would have to be formally reconsidered, and like many theorists in the nineteenth century, Mill would subsume a proposed science of history within a comprehensive science of society.[16] A review and analysis of his comprehensive theory is therefore necessary, and our purpose here will be to follow the themes that emerge from his account of the methodology of the social sciences, particularly as they pertain to his philosophy of human nature and history.

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[13] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 932.
[14] Letter to John Sterling (October 20-22, 1831), *CW,* XII, 78-9. Previously cited in chapter III.
[15] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 834.
[16] J. W. Burrow notes that "it was often difficult in the nineteenth century to distinguish between sociology and the philosophy of history and, if the central preoccupation of sociology is with discovering laws of social development, this is not surprising." Mill is certainly characteristic of nineteenth century theorists in this respect; see *Evolution and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 83.

Before analyzing Mill's consideration of methodological alternatives, it would be useful to review the groundwork of assumptions and terms that Mill employs. Considering whether there can be a "Science of Human Nature," Mill announces that "any facts are fitted, in themselves, to be a subject of science, which follow one another according to constant laws; although those laws may not have been discovered, nor even be discoverable by our existing resources."[17] That such laws must exist, whether already discovered or waiting to be, was axiomatic:

> Now among all those uniformities in the succession of phenomena...we recognise a law which is universal [and] coextensive with the entire field of successive phenomena, all instances whatever of succession being examples of it. This law is the Law of Causation. The truth that every fact which has a beginning has a cause, is coextensive with human experience. This generalization may appear to some minds not to amount to much, since after all it asserts only this: "it is a law, that every event depends on some law:" "it is a law, that there is a law for everything." We must not, however, conclude that the generality of the principle is merely verbal; it will be found on inspection to be no vague or unmeaning assertion, but a most important and really fundamental truth.[18]

The purpose of science was thus to discover the presence of uniformities in its subjects and to formulate laws of causation to explain them. While believing that there is no alternative to applying the methods of the natural sciences, Mill recognized that the moral sciences require different treatment for two major reasons. First, the use of induction is severely limited by the inability to conduct experiments and methods of verification; without the ability to control the presence or absence of causal variables, conclusions reached purely by induction cannot provide the certainty that the scientist requires. Mill also recognized a difference in degree between the natural and moral sciences due to the complexity of the subject matter and the degree of explanatory and predictive precision

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[17] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 844.
[18] Ibid., VII, 325.

that is possible. To surmount this difficulty, Mill argues that the diversity and variability that differentiate individuals can be partially overcome by aggregating its individual subjects and subsuming their particularities under statistical generalizations: "An approximate generalization is in social inquiries, for most practical purposes equivalent to an exact one: that which is only probable when asserted of individual human beings indiscriminately selected, being certain when affirmed of the character and collective conduct of masses."[19] The science of society, however, requires not merely the recognition of these aggregate characteristics but their explanation, and this can be achieved only through the application of causal laws; they must "be connected deductively with the laws of nature from which they result."[20]

Mill begins his discussion of the social sciences with the individual, and in this respect he continues the approach of seventeenth and eighteenth century British political theory. He presents a hierarchy of laws which are roughly equivalent to a hierarchy of cause and effect, though with what often seems to be a lack of precision and clarity (which will be discussed at length later in this chapter). Mill's claim is that there are fundamental psychological laws which have been experimentally proven and can provide the foundation from which additional intermediate laws can be deduced. At the head of the causal hierarchy are the laws of mind and the laws of character development, the subjects of, respectively, psychology and ethology. The laws of the mind are ascertained by direct induction and introspection, and are said to encompass "Thoughts, Emotions, Volitions, and Sensations."[21] Mill asserts as "incontestable" the claim that states of mind are associated with one another, that there "exist uniformities of succession" among

[19] Ibid., VIII, 848.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 849.

them, and that the study of this uniformity enables a "distinct and separate Science of Mind."[22] Yet Mill's presentation of basic associationist principles in the *Logic* is remarkably uninformative. The chapter reads more like a primer on empiricist epistemology and philosophy of mind, and vaguely suggests that beyond the elementary laws of association, "it is a fair subject of scientific inquiry how far these laws can be made to go in explaining the actual phenomena."[23] There is no discussion of volitions and emotions, for which any governing laws would be important to social science. Mill affirms that associationism is opposed to any form of nativism—as Maurice Mandelbaum has characterized the belief in a constant and uniform human nature—both with respect to the claims of intuitionism and those who would argue that for indelible instinctual drives. Yet he is remarkably silent on the hedonistic assumptions—as well as the materialism and strict determinism—of Hartley, Bain and his father in their explanations of emotions, motivation and behavior.[24] One senses that his cursory discussion of associationism and the laws of the mind is mainly intended to set the stage for his proposed science of ethology.

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[22] Ibid., 850-1.

[23] Ibid., 853. The genesis of associationist psychology within British empiricism, as well as its connection to Newtonian physics, is discussed by Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1969), 174-87; and by Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), ch. 9.

[24] Mill perhaps glossed over these subjects because he was critical of the efforts to explain them adequately. Mill included many critical annotations to his father's *Analysis of the Human Mind*, and in his 1859 review of Bain's two treatises on psychology singled out the inadequacy of Bain's hedonistic theory of the emotions, and suggested that Bain's failure was a problem with associationism itself: "Mr. Bain's exposition of the Emotions is not of so analytical a character as that of the intellectual phenomena. He considers it necessary...to allow a much greater range to the instinctive portion of our nature; and has exhibited what may be termed the natural history of the emotions, rather than attempted to construct their philosophy. It is certain that the attempts of the Association psychologists to resolve the emotions by association, have been on the whole the least successful part of their efforts. One fatal imperfection is obvious at first sight: the only part of the phenomenon which their theory explains, is the suggestion of an idea or ideas, either pleasurable or painful—that is, the merely intellectual part of the emotion; while there is evidently in all our emotions an animal part, over and above any which naturally attends on the ideas considered separately, and which these philosophers have passed without any attempt at explanation." "Bain's Psychology," *CW,* XI, 361.

The purpose of the science of ethology is to define the process of character formation, which, Mill claims, occurs through the interaction of environment and the laws of mind. In defining this science, Mill acknowledges that the laws of the mind described by psychology are "too general and include too few circumstances to give sufficient indication of what happens in individual cases." To have explanatory value, the laws of the mind must be supplemented by *axiomata media,* or the "middle principles" that are situated between these general laws and the patterns of individual and social behavior that we wish to understand. Ethological laws cannot be formulated by induction because even those empirical generalizations that could be established would beg the question of what accounts for the uniformity, what caused them to be what they are; the answer could only be provided by deduction from the laws of the mind:

> If we could even obtain by way of experiment a much more satisfactory assurance of these generalizations than is really possible, they would still be only empirical laws. They would show, indeed, that there was some connexion between the type of character formed, and the circumstances existing in the case; but not what the precise connexion was, nor to which of the peculiarities of those circumstances the effect was really owing. They could only, therefore, be received as results of causation, requiring to be resolved into the general laws of the causes: until the determination of which, we could not judge within what limits the derivative laws might serve as presumptions in cases yet unknown, or even be depended on as permanent in the very cases from which they were collected.[25]

Ethology, Mill tells us, is thus a "science of causes" that "stands to Psychology in a relation very similar to that which the various branches of natural philosophy stand to mechanics."[26] It is nonetheless a science "still to be created, " as it has not hitherto been possible in the absence of the definitive laws of mind that experimental psychology has revealed, as well as in the absence of the empirical research that would reveal patterns of

[25] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 867.
[26] Ibid., 872, 870.

behavior. Yet Mill is optimistic that "the materials are continually accumulating" and that the problem is mainly the theoretical issue of deducing the "requisite middle principles from the general laws of Psychology." The ultimate purpose for deducing these principles could not be higher; they will, Mill asserts, enable practitioners of political art "to determine...what actual or possible combinations of circumstances are capable of promoting or of preventing the production of those qualities"[27] which will enable the improvement of mankind.

Finally, at the bottom of the causal hierarchy are lower-level empirical laws that are said to represent the patterns of day-to-day occurrences or cultural characteristics, and which do not seem to be "laws" in any usual sense of the term:

> An Empirical Law...is an uniformity, whether of succession or of coexistence, which holds true in all instances within our limits of observation, but is not of a nature to afford any assurance that it would hold beyond those limits... In other words, an empirical law is a generalization, of which...we are obliged to ask, why is it true? knowing that its truth is not absolute, but dependent on some more general conditions, and that it can only be relied on in so far as there is ground of assurance that those conditions are realized. Now, the observations concerning human affairs collected from common experience, are precisely of this nature. Even if they were universally and exactly true within the bounds of experience, which they never are, still they are not the ultimate laws of human action; they are not the principles of human nature, but results of those principles under the circumstances in which mankind have happened to be placed.[28]

Mill provides as examples of "empirical laws" such commonplace characterizations or adages as "all men are liars," or "young men are impetuous, old men are cautious," but he also argues that generalizations about national character come under this category. While empirical laws can be said to contain some truth, they have no scientific merit independent of the causal laws which might explain them. The causal laws are based on

[27] Ibid., 873, 874.
[28] Ibid., 861-2.

the higher level principles of psychology or ethology, which together comprise the laws of human nature.

Mill's references to human nature, frequently vague and many times seemingly offhanded, require more detailed attention. As we have just noted, Mill distinguishes between two elements of human psychology: "The laws of the mind...compose the universal or abstract portion of the philosophy of human nature; and all the truths of common experience, constituting a practical knowledge of mankind, [which] must...be results or consequences of these."[29] Understanding human nature thus constitutes more than an examination of "practical" behaviors and motivations but also the process by which they are developed. The crucial distinction is between the "abstract" mental processes and the "practical knowledge," for it appears that Mill is suggesting that only the associationist principles which constitute the "laws of the mind" are universal and uniform, as opposed to the "practical" truths of motivation and behavior which are the subject of ethology. Mill's associationism, apart from its foundational drives to seek pleasure and avoid pain, did not posit uniform traits of human nature but was rather offered as the foundation for explaining how individual and national character is formed. Human nature in Mill's usage thus encompasses considerably more than the commonly inferred reference to a pre-social, natural behavior; it also, and perhaps primarily, refers to the developmental psychology that through interaction with the natural and social environment generates personal and national character.

We thus might start by suggesting that the problem of defining a uniform human nature from which deductive laws could be obtained resided in Mill's commitment to

[29] Ibid., 861.

associationism and his rejection of the intuitionist alternative. Mill's opposition to the intuitionist claims of an essential human nature had profound moral and political implications; the previously cited passage from Mill's *Autobiography* in which he opposed intuitionism and the belief in an innate and immutable human nature bears an expanded reiteration:

> There is a natural hostility between [the practical reformer] and a philosophy which discourages the explanation of feelings and moral facts by circumstances and association, and prefers to treat them as ultimate elements of human nature... I have long felt that the prevailing tendency to regard all the marked distinctions of human character as innate, and in the main indelible, and to ignore the irresistible proofs that by far the greater part of those differences...are such as not only might but naturally would be produced by differences in circumstances, is one of the chief hindrances to the rational treatment of great social questions and one of the greatest stumbling blocks to human improvement.[30]

Mill's hostility to a fixed concept of human nature was not only directed against the intuitionists (and their conservative counterparts), but also became part of his critique of Benthamism. Indeed, in an 1833 anonymous review of his father's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, he argues that a uniform, undifferentiated view of human nature is inconsistent with associationism, and moreover, that the main feature of associationism is the way it accounts for variability:

> Those powers of analysis...are applied by Mr. [James] Mill almost solely to our *common universal nature*, to the general structure which is the same in all human beings; not to the differences between one human being and another, though the former is little worthy of being studied except as a means to the better understanding of the latter. We seldom learn from Mr. Mill to understand any of the varieties of human nature... No one ever made fewer allowances for original differences of nature, although the existence of such is not only compatible with, but a necessary consequence of, his view of the human mind, when combined with the extraordinary differences which are known to exist between one individual and another. I cannot but think that the very laws of association, laid

[30] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 269-70.

> down by Mr. Mill, will hereafter...be found (while they explain the diversities of human nature) to show, in the most striking manner, how much of those diversities is inherent and inevitable.[31]

While the principles of association may have been uniform and universal, the characteristics of the human beings formed by them were not, and Mill proceeded to argue that it is the diversity of human characteristics that is the proper subject of social theory:

> I believe the natural and necessary differences among mankind to be so great, that any practical view of human life, which does not take them into the account, must...contain at least as much error as truth; and that any system of mental culture, recommended by such imperfect theory in proportion as it is fitted to natures of one class, will be entirely unfitted for all others.[32]

In a contemporaneous critique of Bentham, Mill made a similar argument. Pointing out that "motives are innumerable: there is nothing whatever which may not become an object of desire or of dislike by association," Mill proceeds specifically to attack the "vulgar" claim that the pursuit of self-interest defines "the very constitution of human nature [with] a far more exclusive and paramount control over human actions than it really does exercise."[33] With the argument that interest cannot serve as a universal and uniform explanation, Mill not only endorsed Macaulay's critique of his father, but also, as we shall see, removed the underpinnings of Benthamite deductive social science.

The implications of Mill's argument for the malleability of human nature and his apparently contradictory references to laws of human nature have been the subject of interpretative controversy. At one extreme, Karl Popper accuses Mill of a type of psychologism in which all "social laws must ultimately be reducible to psychological

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[31] "Observations on Mr. Mill," *CW,* I, 591.
[32] Ibid.
[33] *Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy*, *CW,* X, 13, 14.

laws, since the events of social life...must be the outcome of motives springing from the minds of individual men." According to Popper, Mill claimed that the rules and conventions of social life could be explained "by an appeal to 'human nature', for instance to some sort of instinctive aversion." Popper claims that not only do such appeals to human nature represent a vacuous begging of the question, but that even the universality of a human behavior is "not a decisive argument in favor of its instructive character, or of its being rooted in 'human nature'."[34]

While Popper may be correct that reference to an amorphously defined human nature is an insufficient explanation for anything, Mill's references to the laws of human nature scarcely ever refer to instinctive behavior or universal motives. As we have just noted, Mill's concept of human nature mainly refers to matters of cognitive and character development. Indeed, claiming that "differences in education and in outward circumstances are capable of affording an adequate explanation of by far the greatest portion of character," Mill denies that instincts play a significant role in human behavior. Even while suggesting that they may have a "a connexion with physical conditions of the brain and nerves, as any of our mere sensations have," Mill asserts that "instincts may be modified to any extent, or entirely conquered, in human beings...by other mental

[34] Karl Popper, "The Autonomy of Sociology," in Schneewind, *Critical Essays*, 427-8. See also *Poverty of Historicism*, 152-54. Popper's claim that Mill is psychologistic has been vigorously contested by Nicholas Capaldi, who points out that Popper quotes Mill out of context and completely ignores Mill's proposed science of ethology ("Mill's Forgotten Science of Ethology," *Social Theory and Practice* II (1973-2): 409-20. Ryan claims, I believe correctly, that Mill's and Popper's positions are actually quite close, and that "it is hard to see why Popper should seize on Mill as an opponent rather than an ally...that he does not make the mistakes which Popper wants to correct, and the general position is one which Popper adheres to himself" (*John Stuart Mill*, 162). The important distinction between Mill's methodological individualism and psychologism (at least as Popper defines it), is that Mill, while believing that social laws must be consistent with laws of human nature, allowed that social laws can be based on historical and cultural experience and need not be derived from or reducible to laws of individual psychology; as such, social phenomena can be explained not solely in terms of individual psychology but in terms of individuals in their social contexts. This also seems to be Popper's position. For a discussion of Popper's non-psychologistic methodological individualism, see R.F. Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation in History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 170-3.

influences and by education."[35] The associationist belief in education and environment as a means of individual change and improvement trumps any claim that human behavior is indelibly instinctual.

Popper's interpretation also fails to account for Mill's criticism of what he considered to be the Enlightenment's ahistorical propensity to universalize contemporary characteristics as defining human nature for all times and places. Perhaps borrowing the idea from Bentham's *Book of Fallacies*, Mill devoted the entirety of Book V of the *Logic* to logical mistakes, within which he formalized "the fallacy of generalization":

> What we have said of empirical generalizations from times past to times still to come, holds equally true of similar generalizations from present times to times past; when persons whose acquaintance with moral and social facts is confined to their own age, take the men and the things of that age for the type of men and things in general, and apply without scruple to the interpretation of the events of history, the empirical laws which represent sufficiently for daily guidance the common phenomena of human nature at that time and in that particular state of society... The same may be said of those who generalize empirically from the people of their own country to the people of other countries, as if human beings felt, judged, and acted everywhere in the same manner.[36]

Far from reducing character and behavior to universal psychological traits, Mill particularizes human nature as the ethological product of specific "states of society," as a product of education, cultural and environmental causes. Indeed, Mill seems to have migrated from placing individual psychology at the foundation of his social and political theory toward a more holistic view, even suggesting—in a definitive rejection of his father's political theory—that "there can be no separate Science of Government" that fails to recognize "the qualities of the particular people or of the particular age."[37] Politics

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[35] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 859.
[36] Ibid., 791.
[37] Ibid., 906.

can only be comprehended within a historical and cultural context, not solely as an extension of individual psychology.

With Popper residing at one end of the interpretative spectrum, R. J. Halliday and Richard Wollheim make the case for a diametrically opposed view. Halliday argues that "Mill himself felt emancipated from simple psychological beliefs. Psychological hedonism, in particular, implied too neat and too narrow an account of motivation; there was no permanent human nature, to be explained by universal and invariant laws... Mankind was not alike in all times and places... In fact, the very attempt to list and to catalogue motives was, to his mind, misconceived; nothing about man was so fixed or final."[38] Wollheim too states flatly that "Mill denied the uniformity of human nature," and thus marked a radical departure from a "central thought of the European Enlightenment," in both moral and social philosophy.[39] While the Halliday-Wollheim thesis has substantial supporting evidence, particularly in light of Mill's dismissal of instinctive behavior and claims of malleability, the fact remains that Mill frequently refers to laws and principles of human nature, and his objective for an explanatory and predictive social science surely presupposes some kind of behavioral uniformity that is sufficient to come under law-like statements. There is, in short, ample cause for confusion about what Mill meant by laws or principles of human nature. I think much of the problem may reside in Mill's position during a period when the boundary between the innate and the culturally determined became a major subject of philosophical inquiry.[40]

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[38] R.J. Halliday, *John Stuart Mill* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1976), 55-6.
[39] Richard Wollheim, "Introduction" to *Three Essays: On Liberty, Representative Government and the Subjection of Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), xi.
[40] Mandelbaum offers an excellent survey of this transition in *History, Man, & Reason*, ch. 8. Also see Clifford Geertz's essay, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man" for a brilliant overview of this topic; in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 33-54.

"Human Nature" had been, after all, one of the most important tropes of seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy, and was endowed with many meanings among which the predominant referred to behavior and motivation. As our review of the Scottish Enlightenment suggested, the definition of human nature began to come into question in the second half of the eighteenth century, though many theorists, Hume and Smith among them, expressed a traditional view that human nature was "so much the same, in all times and places."[41] Mill used the term freely—and perhaps too loosely—in a variety of contexts, but he was aware of the possibility that even the seemingly universal agreement on certain human traits was likely to be upended by further research in cultural determinants. Indeed, his demand for a science of ethology implies his recognition of the weakness of reference to human nature as an explanatory principle, despite the fact that he continued to fall back on it. This ambiguity will be taken up again as we attempt to understand Mill's deductive methodology.

Against this background, we can now turn to Mill's consideration and critique of explanatory models. The two alternatives which had preoccupied him in various essays throughout the 1830s—the deductivism of Bentham and his father, and Macaulay's advocacy of induction—are the first to be considered in the *Logic*. Utilitarian deduction is dubbed the "geometrical or abstract" method, and is dismissed as a science of "coexistent facts" which cannot account for the interaction of multiple—and possibly conflicting—causal factors. Mill claims that it fails to give any account of causality at all because its abstract procedure fails to consider the "succession of phenomena." The method forces its practitioner to assume that all social phenomena can be reductively explained through

[41] Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 83.

reference to "only one force, a single property of human nature,"[42] whether it be Hobbesian fear or Benthamite interest. The geometric method accordingly dismisses and distorts the multiple and diverse forces that contribute to social interaction. Society is a "conjunction of very many causes" and a science must be able to take account of all of them:

> It is unphilosophical to construct a science out of a few of the agencies by which the phenomena are determined, and leave the rest to the routine of practice or the sagacity of conjecture. We either ought not to pretend to scientific forms, or we ought to study all the determining agencies equally, and endeavour, so far as it can be done, to include all of them within the pale of the science... The phenomena of society do not depend...on some one agency or law of human nature, with only inconsiderable modifications from others. The whole of the qualities of human nature influence those phenomena, and there is not one which influences them in a small degree. There is not one, the removal or any great alteration of which would not materially affect the whole aspect of society, and change more or less the sequences of social phenomena generally.[43]

Mill's objection to the deductive method does not displace human nature as the starting point for social science. Human nature remains the reference point for explanation, but it must be recognized in its full complexity, and society must be regarded as reflecting that complexity.

Mill's arguments against the "chemical or experimental method" were formulated as early as 1827: One cannot conduct controlled experiments to test social theories; historical conditions are too complex and have too many variables to be amenable to inductive inference; the raw material of history does not provide guiding analogs to present-day experience. These claims are strengthened by the application of the canons of induction—the methods of agreement, difference and residues—that he spells out in

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[42] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 887, 888.
[43] Ibid., 893-4.

Book III of the *Logic*. To the arguments showing the inapplicability of inductive method, Mill adds the claim that advocates of induction—and here he certainly meant Macaulay—had made a fundamental error by disputing the possibility of discovering the principles of human nature underlying the empirical study of humans in their social contexts. Macaulay, it will be recalled, argued that the only source of our knowledge of man is from experience of him in the variety of his social settings, and that any claim of knowledge about human nature except through the study of history was a conjectural abstraction and thus an unsuitable premise on which to build a political philosophy. Mill interprets Macaulay's account to imply that the complexity and diversity of social life has a transformative effect on the nature of the individual, much as the combination of chemical elements into a compound masks the attributes of the individual components. Hence, Macaulay is cast as the spokesman for what Mill calls the chemical method.

Having thus characterized Macaulay, Mill proceeds to reject the implied distinction between a putatively abstract human nature and man as a social being by contending that both society and the individual are governed by the same laws. In a classic statement of methodological individualism (which we will return to), Mill asserts that:

> The laws of the phenomena of society are, and can be, nothing but the laws of the actions and passions of human beings united together in the social state. Men, however, in a state of society, are still men; their actions and passions are obedient to the laws of individual human nature. Men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance, with different properties; as hydrogen and oxygen are different from water, or as hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and azote, are different from nerves, muscles, and tendons. Human beings in society have no properties but those which are derived from, and may be resolved

> into, the laws of the nature of individual man. In social phenomena the Composition of Causes is the universal law [44]

Though Mill appears intent on reclaiming the ability to argue from human nature—as his father had done—it is not clear that the "chemical method" that he attributes to Macaulay is actually representative of the latter's position. Macaulay had not claimed a distinction between social and individual human nature; his more limited claim was that there was no certain ground for knowing the attributes of human nature apart from what is empirically revealed by the observation of his social experience. His argument was epistemological, not ontological. Macaulay's contention was that political theory must be built on the foundation of historical experience as the only reliable source for knowledge of human behavior. Mill's counterargument is that there is no distinction between the laws governing individual human nature and his social being. Asserting the identity of man's individual and social nature permits Mill to claim that the principles of human nature are expressed in social interaction, thus making an *a priori* social theory possible.[45]

Even though Mill may have misrepresented (or misunderstood) Macaulay's argument, he makes no effort to show why it is wrong. Nor does he answer Macaulay's objection to the abstract construction of a concept of human nature. Mill merely asserts his own position against it as if the claimed assumption of the "chemical method" is prima facie incorrect. Yet the question of "natural" and "social" man aside, Mill's critique of induction is nonetheless strong, and it enables him to explore a modified

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[44] Ibid., 879.

[45] Mill's attribution of the chemical method to Macaulay is not the only way in which Mill misrepresented Macaulay's position. Macaulay would have fully agreed with Mill about the fallacy of generalizing from a single historical instance, or drawing analogies between historical events and present conditions. Ryan claims that Macaulay's advocacy of induction was far more sophisticated than Mill's caricature suggests. See Ryan, *John Stuart Mill*, 136-7.

version of deduction, which, as Anschutz suggests, may have reflected Mill's lingering predisposition in its favor. Indeed, even in natural science Mill believed that Newtonian mechanics had superseded the experimental induction of Bacon. In a section entitled "Tendency of all sciences to become deductive," Mill argues for the greater clarity and certainty that deduction offers:

> The copiousness with which the discovery and explanation of special laws of phenomena by deduction from simpler and more general ones has here been exemplified, was prompted by a desire to characterize clearly, and place in its due position of importance, the Deductive Method; which, in the present state of knowledge, is destined henceforth irrevocably to predominate in the course of scientific investigation. A revolution is peaceably and progressively effecting itself in philosophy, the reverse of that to which Bacon has attached his name. That great man changed the method of the sciences from deductive to experimental, and it is now rapidly reverting from experimental to deductive.[46]

Bacon's objection was to a deductive process that was flawed by "premises hastily snatched up" that produced conclusions that were not subject to verification, but a "rational Deductive Method" that avoids such pitfalls remains a viable method of inquiry. Having detailed the shortcomings of his father's abstractions and reductionism, Mill's task was thus to define a deductive method that could account for the "Composition of Causes" that characterize social phenomena.

Mill's proposed deductive method takes two forms—what he terms the concrete and the inverse—and each proceeds through three steps: the discovery through direct observation of a recurring pattern of social activity that can be expressed as an empirical law; the explanation of this pattern of activity though reference to an *a priori* natural law that provides a causal explanation for the perceived empirical law; and a process of verification through observation and experimentation. The decisive advantage of concrete

[46] *Logic*., *CW*, VII, 481-2.

over abstract deduction is its ability to accommodate complex interactions involving multiple causal agents. Mill's model for this process was Newtonian mechanics, which applied the explanatory natural law of gravity to the empirical law demonstrated by Kepler's depiction of elliptical planetary motion. Mill proposes the analogy in an early essay on method in economic theory:

> When an effect depends upon a concurrence of causes, those causes must be studied one at a time, and their laws separately investigated, if we wish, through the causes, to obtain the power of either predicting or controlling the effect; since the law of the effect is compounded of the laws of all the causes which determine it. The law of the centripetal and that of the tangential force must have been known before the motions of the earth and planets could be explained, or many of them predicted. The same is the case with the conduct of man in society. In order to judge how he will act under the variety of desires and aversions which are concurrently operating upon him, we must know how he would act under the exclusive influence of each one in particular.[47]

In the *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill would later analogize the laws of production to "physical truths," about which "there is nothing optional or arbitrary [and] whatever mankind produces must be produced in the modes, and under the conditions, imposed by the constitution of external things, and by the inherent properties of their own bodily and mental structure."[48] Mill's central vision of society as composed of "the laws of the actions and passions of human beings united together in the social state" suggested that the source of explanation could be found in psychology, the laws of human nature, and that they would provide an explanatory power analogous to Newton's laws of motion. If Macaulay's reference in the natural sciences was chemistry, then Mill's was physics and mechanics.

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[47] "On the Definition of Political Economy," *CW*, IV, 322.
[48] *Principles*, *CW*, II, 199.

Mill introduces his proposal for a deductive social science with an assertion of its self-evidence after his dismissal of the alternatives. There is no argument in favor of his own claim; he simply declares that the science of society can—and indeed, must—be based on the nature of the individuals who compose it:

> After what has been said to illustrate the nature of the inquiry into social phenomena, the general character of the method proper to that inquiry is sufficiently evident, and needs only to be recapitulated, not proved. However complex the phenomena, all their sequences and coexistences result from the laws of the separate elements. The effect produced, in social phenomena, by any complex set of circumstances, amounts precisely to the sum of the effects of the circumstances taken singly: and the complexity does not arise from the number of the laws themselves, which is not remarkably great; but from the extraordinary number and variety of the data or elements—of the agents which, in obedience to that small number of laws, co-operate towards the effect.[49]

Mill's proposed method would thus disassemble social institutions into their individual human components, and reference the laws governing those components—the laws of human nature—to explain the behavior of the social institutions themselves. In effect, the institutions disappear as concrete entities that have an existence independent of their human constituents. The doctrine—the aforementioned methodological individualism—claims that social institutions are deemed mere abstractions without agency in themselves; there is no state, social class, army or church apart from the individuals that occupy positions within them. While Mill adhered to this position, he did allow that social and political institutions can and do have unique rules and traditions which can form the social bonds among the individuals who compose them. In the Coleridge essay, for example, Mill had reviewed the sources of the common beliefs that provides stability and longevity to social institutions. Yet Mill insists that those factors do not exist over

[49] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 895.

and above individual persons, nor are individuals in some fashion transformed by their social allegiances or status. Social factors do not exist over and above individual persons, and social relations can only be explained through reference to the laws of individual human nature lest they violate Mill's injunction against any "chemical" transformation of the individual in assuming a social role. Whether an individual is a soldier in an army, a cleric in a religious order, or a laborer in the working class, Mill argues that the behavior of the individual remains subject to the psychological and ethological laws that govern all individual behavior, and the behavior of a social entity can be explained only by reference to the individuals composing it.[50]

The atomism implied by this position is reflected in Mill's analogy between social behavior and the mechanics of physical systems. Physical systems and social systems are both to be explained in terms of the laws governing their components, their behavior being the consequence of the "Composition of Causes" governing the individual entities within. The behavior of planets is not changed by virtue of their presence in the solar system; their behavior continues to be governed by the physical laws that apply to all masses, and the explanation of their behavior within the solar system must refer to those laws and cannot appeal to anything beyond them. Events in society, accordingly, are explained through reference to the interaction of forces contributing to a result; put another way, social life is composed of—and explained by—the mechanical interaction

[50] Mill's methodological individualism has been the subject of interpretative controversy; some examples include Karl Popper, "The Autonomy of Sociology," in Schneewind, *Critical Essays*; Fred Wilson, "Psychology and the Moral Sciences," in Skorupski, *Cambridge Companion to Mill*; Alan Ryan, *John Stuart Mill*, 158-162, 244-5. More broadly, this thesis has generated a significant argument among philosophers of the social sciences; the issues raised by methodological individualism versus holism are taken up by Maurice Mandelbaum, Ernest Gellner and J. W. N Watkins in essays collected in *Theories of History*, ed. Patrick Gardiner (New York: Free Press, 1959). For an excellent critical analysis (and demolition) of methodological individualism, see Steven Lukes, "Methodological Individualism Reconsidered," in *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis*, eds. Alasdair Macintyre and Dorothy Emmet (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 76-88.

of individuals, each of whose behavior is determined by the laws governing individual psychology; any explanation of social behavior must be in conformity with the laws of individual human nature. As Ryan puts it, "people's actions, if not the persons themselves, can be reduced to the play of psychological atoms [and] we must in theory be able to construct the interplay of these atoms up to a point where the atoms compose...a whole society."[51] A scientific explanation of social behavior thus consists of deciphering the components of the interplay, recognizing the patterns of individual behavior and the way they express the laws of human nature:

> The effect produced, in social phenomena, by any complex set of circumstances, amounts precisely to the sum of the effects of the circumstances taken singly: and the complexity does not arise from the number of the laws themselves, which is not remarkably great; but from the extraordinary number and variety of the data or elements—of the agents which, in obedience to that small number of laws, co-operate towards the effect. The Social Science, therefore (which, by a convenient barbarism has been termed Sociology) infers the law of each effect from the laws of causation on which that effect depends; not, however, from the law merely of one cause, as in the geometrical method; but by considering all the causes which conjunctly influence the effect, and compounding their laws with one another.[52]

It would appear that Mill has reduced the problem of social explanation and prediction to a matter of computation, yet he recognizes that it is a computation of great complexity. Pointing out that physicists had been unable to resolve the three-body problem with perfect precision, Mill acknowledges that the far greater number of forces active in society clearly suggest that the best one can hope for is "to distinguish correctly enough the tendencies" resulting from the interaction of those forces. Yet, while there may be imprecision in calculation and the need for estimates and approximation, Mill remains undeterred from the belief in physical laws as the model for both understanding nature

[51] Ryan, *John Stuart Mill*, 157-8.
[52] *Logic, CW,* VIII, 895.

and man's place within it. These limitations may leave sociology with a diminished scientific status compared to the precision of Newtonian mechanics, but its ability to detect tendencies provides a value comparable to forecasting tides or the weather. Mill thus alerts us that as a deductive sociology requires the recognition that "what is demonstrably the sole method capable of throwing the light of science even upon phenomena of a far inferior degree of complication, we ought to be aware that the same superior complexity which renders the instrument of Deduction more necessary, renders it also more precarious; and we must be prepared to meet, by appropriate contrivances, this increase of difficulty."[53] What accounts for this hesitation, and what are the contrivances?

While Mill expresses confidence that human behavior is governed by laws, the composition of those laws is far from clear, and Mill seems to acknowledge as much when he qualifies his account by "supposing...the laws of human actions and feelings be sufficiently known."[54] Yet, there is no further discussion of this supposition, leaving uncertainty and ambiguity about what exactly the governing laws are. But rather than examine this uncertainty, Mill remains more concerned by the sheer volume of the data. His introduction to concrete deduction claims that the complexity of social interaction "does not arise from the number of the laws themselves, which is not remarkably great," but from the data to be explained, the "extraordinary number and variety...of the agents." The problem, Mill argues, is one of accounting for the vast "composition of forces" at play and that "we incur the obligation of estimating and compounding the influences of all the causes which happen to exist in that case; we attempt a task to proceed...

[53] Ibid., 895-6.
[54] Ibid., 896.

which surpasses the compass of the human faculties."[55] It seems, however, that Mill's concern with the complexity of the data—and the problem of performing a calculation of the multiple causal forces and verifying the result with empirical tests—masks the more significant issue of how deductions can be made at all.[56] By Mill's concept of the composition of forces, the cause of a complex effect is analyzed by breaking it down into its simpler components, which are themselves claimed to be the consequences of specific causes for which the governing laws are known. But Mill offers no answer to how they are known, nor does he adequately distinguish between a complex effect and its simpler components. Indeed, until examined at the individual level, the supposedly simple components could surely have their own complexity. Mill's problem is not merely developing the empirical laws that encompass the variety and volume of the data, but how to define and distinguish the laws which would explain them. It is simply not sufficient to fall back on reference to the laws of human nature as if there were some universal consensus on what they are and how they can be known. Despite his ardent belief that explanation in the human sciences must follow the methodological rules of the physical sciences and the deductive methodology of mechanics in particular, Mill seems to proceed as if the behavior of the human agents who are the subjects of explanation share the uniformity of the inanimate masses and forces of physics. Not only does Mill's compatibilism not permit such a reach, but without that uniformity, the establishment and articulation of laws becomes problematic, as does the possibility of deduction itself.

Mill appears to recognize the problem posed by the question of uniformity and attributes it to the difficulty of isolating any element of social activity from the rest.

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[55] Ibid., 895, 896.
[56] Ryan makes a similar argument in *John Stuart Mill*, 150-152.

Social life is full of particularities and interdependencies in which "there is no social phenomenon which is not more or less influenced by every other part of the condition of the same society," and Mill suggests the possibility that the organic and unique nature of each "body politic" undermines the possibility of the causal analysis that deduction offers:

> There is, in short, what physiologists term a consensus, similar to that existing among the various organs and functions of the physical frame of man and the more perfect animals... It follows from this consensus, that unless two societies could be alike in all the circumstances which surround and influence them, (which would imply their being alike in their previous history,) no portion whatever of the phenomena will, unless by accident, precisely correspond; no one cause will produce exactly the same effects in both. Every cause, as its effect spreads through society, comes somewhere in contact with different sets of agencies, and thus has its effects on some of the social phenomena differently modified; and these differences, by their reaction, produce a difference even in those of the effects which would otherwise have been the same. *We can never, therefore, affirm with certainty that a cause which has a particular tendency in one people or in one age will have exactly the same tendency in another*, without referring back to our premises, and performing over again for the second age or nation, that analysis of the whole of its influencing circumstances which we had already performed for the first.[57]

Mill is thus compelled to conclude that a deductive social science cannot propose universally applicable theories of social behavior, but can only "teach us how to frame the proper theorem for the circumstances of any given case. It will not give the laws of society in general, but the means of determining the phenomena of any given society from the particular elements or data of that society."[58] Mill is left with no choice but to scale back his original ambitions for a deductive social science based on a uniform and invariable human nature to a social science that must be specific to a given society; there

[57] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 899. Italics added. It should not go unnoticed that the organicism implied by this passage contrasts sharply with the atomism that often characterizes Mill's vision of social interaction.
[58] Ibid.

can be no assurance that any causal laws derived and verified within that society will be applicable to any other, and this lack of universality calls into question whether they can be called laws at all. It would appear that even the possibility of discerning tendencies has given way to the particularity, complexity and variety of social life.

Mill's recognition of the limitations of concrete deduction forced a reassessment of its role in building a social science. His response was two-fold: concrete deduction could be retained provided that it was applied to explain a form of social behavior in which the complexity of untangling the psychology of motivation and behavior could be reduced and circumscribed. The second solution was to alter the order of the deductive process itself, to perform an "inverse deduction" which would limit reference to human nature. Following the former approach, Mill attempted to find a home for concrete deduction in political economy. There is some irony in this decision. In the "intellectual parricide" (to borrow a phrase from Stefan Collini[59]) that Mill had committed against his father's *Essay on Government*, he attacks the abstract geometrical method for having detached political theory from any social or historical context and for using a reductionist hypothesis of self-interest to explain all political motivation. Yet Mill commits nearly the same errors in applying concrete deduction to economic theory, though it is only fair to acknowledge that he was aware of this inconsistency and attempted a modest defense:

> The motive which suggests the separation of this portion [political economy] of social phenomena from the rest, and the creation of a distinct branch of science relating to them is,—that they do *mainly* depend, at least in the first resort, on one class of circumstances only; and that even when other circumstances interfere, the ascertainment of the effect due to the one class of circumstances alone, is a sufficiently intricate and difficult business to make it expedient to perform it once for all, and then allow for the effect of the modifying circumstances; especially as

[59] Stefan Collini, *That Noble Science of Politics*, 142.

> certain fixed combinations of the former are apt to recur often, in conjunction with ever-varying circumstances of the latter class.[60]

Because Mill's rationale for the distinction of economics within the social sciences "*mainly* depends...on one class of circumstances," one is naturally drawn to ask what that class is, and Mill explains those circumstances as those which "take place in consequence of the pursuit of wealth." Mill distinguishes economic activity as not a "class of circumstances" as such—for example, the concrete activities comprising production or commerce—but those which result from a distinct motive, or, in keeping with his deductive model, a principle of human nature. It is by virtue of its being deduced from a single motive that economics can be isolated from other social sciences, not by the isolation of a specific economic activity from its social context. As James had conducted an exercise in political theory premised on self-interest, John Stuart fell in line with the tradition of classical economic theory based on economic man's desire to maximize profit and better his condition.

The question is whether Mill had really advanced political economy from Benthamite abstract deduction to a science based on concrete deduction. In his 1836 essay "On the Definition of Political Economy," Mill's recognition of economics as an exercise in abstract deduction is unmistakable:

> In the definition which we have attempted to frame of the science of Political Economy, we have characterized it as essentially an *abstract* science, and its method as the method *à priori.* Such is undoubtedly its character as it has been understood and taught by all its most distinguished teachers. It reasons, and...must necessarily reason, from assumptions, not from facts. It is built upon hypotheses, strictly analogous to those which, under the name of definitions, are the foundation of the other abstract sciences. Geometry presupposes an arbitrary

[60] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 901. Apart from the awareness of an inconsistency with his critique of his father, Mill was also compelled to defend the unique status of economics from Comte's holistic view of social behavior. See Letters 46-48 in Haac, *Correspondence*, 222-238.

> definition of a line... Just in the same manner does Political Economy presuppose an arbitrary definition of man, as a being who invariably does that by which he may obtain the greatest amount of necessaries, conveniences, and luxuries, with the smallest quantity of labour and physical self-denial.[61]

A defining characteristic of the concrete deductive method—an empirical law at the foundation of a deductive proof—has given way to the arbitrary *a priori* supposition that defines the abstract method. Though Mill quoted extensively from this essay in the *Logic*, this passage was not included, and one must wonder whether he had recognized that his conception of economics was indistinguishable from his father's conception of politics. One might defend Mill, as Collini has, by claiming that he is correct in recognizing the different dimensions of economic and political activity, that economics has a more "limited and subordinate role" than politics, but the fact remains that Mill failed to define a role for his proposed concrete deduction that constituted an advance over the geometric method.[62] Even in recognizing the presence of "disturbing causes" in economic activity, Mill argues that such causes are based on "some other law[s] of human nature" which are outside the scope of political economy; Mill consigns such frictions "to some other science."[63] So much for employing the concept of the composition of forces which distinguishes concrete from geometric deduction. Mill appears to have attempted to find an application for concrete deduction by dissolving one of its distinctive features.

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[61] "On the Definition of Political Economy," *CW*, IV, 325-6. Mill likely held this position until the end of his life. In 1867, he claimed that political economy had attained a scientific status comparable in its method and findings to the physical sciences, and defended it against Carlyle's claim that it is a dismal science: "The same persons who cry down Logic will generally warn you against Political Economy. It is unfeeling, they will tell you. It recognises unpleasant facts. For my part, the most unfeeling thing I know of is the law of gravitation: it breaks the neck of the best and most amiable person without scruple, if he forgets for a single moment to give heed to it. The winds and waves too are very unfeeling." See "An Inaugural Address to the University of St Andrew's," *CW*, XXI, 245.

[62] Collini, *Noble Science of Politics*, 143.

[63] "On the Definition of Political Economy," *CW*, IV, 330-31.

It should not go unnoticed that even as Mill reverts to the geometric approach in economic theory, he calls the basic psychological assumptions of classical economics into question in the *Logic*'s chapter on ethology. He wonders whether the assumed universality of the traits of *homo economicus* are perhaps characteristic of only Anglo-American culture, and he muses on the prospect that advances in ethological research could diminish the attributes which had been thought to be immutable and universal:

> In political economy for instance, empirical laws of human nature are tacitly assumed by English thinkers, which are calculated only for Great Britain and the United States. Among other things, an intensity of competition is constantly supposed, which, as a general mercantile fact, exists in no country in the world except those two. An English political economist, like his countrymen in general, has seldom learned that it is possible that men, in conducting the business of selling their goods over a counter, should care more about their ease or their vanity than about their pecuniary gain. Yet those who know the habits of the Continent of Europe are aware how apparently small a motive often outweighs the desire of money-getting, even in the operations which have money-getting for their direct object. *The more highly the science of ethology is cultivated, and the better the diversities of individual and national character are understood, the smaller, probably, will the number of propositions become, which it will be considered safe to build on as universal principles of human nature*.[64]

Despite his many references to human nature as a foundation for deductive laws, Mill ultimately envisions the possibility that human nature is a historical creation, a product of periods and cultures, which was precisely the argument that Macaulay had directed against his father.[65] This possibility would surely undermine the claim that social science could be modelled on a deductive science like mechanics. It would also be an

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[64] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 906. Italics added.

[65] One example of Macaulay's argument: "Is the love of approbation a stronger motive than the love of wealth? It is impossible to answer this question generally, even in the case of an individual with whom we are very intimate... But when the question is propounded generally about the whole species, the impossibility of answering is still more evident. Man differs from man; generation from generation; nation from nation. Education, station, sex, age, accidental associations, produce infinite shades of variety." Macaulay, "Mill's Essay on Government," in Lively and Rees, *Utilitarian Logic*, 126-7.

unacknowledged concession to—and a clear vindication of—Macaulay's critique of utilitarian psychology and any social science that might be built upon it.

We have noted that Mill attributes the difficulties of concrete deduction to the complexity of social interaction, the multiplicity of agents and forces, and the various interdependencies of social institutions, customs and rules. I have argued that while these considerations cannot be dismissed, they are the symptoms of the underlying source of Mill's problem, namely the lack of uniformity in the individual human behavior that Mill places at the foundation of his deductive social science. John Gray has noted the fundamental tension between Mill's psychological assumptions and his scientific objective:

> Mill largely did free himself from any belief in the *constancy* of human nature as always and everywhere moved by a small, tight-knit family of motives; but he never decisively relinquished the empiricist project of a science of society, which must presuppose that human conduct is sufficiently *uniform* to be brought under law-like statements having both explanatory and predictive value... Though at times Mill's intellectual integrity and open-minded candor admitted bewilderment at the difficulties arising from the empiricist projects of a science of society, he never abandoned that project.[66]

Mill's rejection of the argument for an essential and universal human nature deprived him of the necessary condition that would have enabled him to model social science on the type of causal explanation available to natural science. The instability of human nature foreclosed the formulation of laws that could establish a moral science equivalent to Newtonian mechanics. As Struan Jacobs points out in his study of British liberalism and science, "We find him claiming that many uniformities of sociology are periodized or relative to particular states of society, and this doctrine has no real counterpart in his

[66] John Gray, "John Stuart Mill: Traditional and Revisionist Interpretations," *Literature of Liberty* II, 2 (April-June 1979), 30. Available online at http://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/mill-a-bibliographical-essay-by-john-gray.

philosophy of natural science."[67] If human nature must be periodized and localized, it is hard to see how a deductive model of explanation is possible. Rather than providing the axioms for explanation in the social sciences, human nature in its diverse cultural and historical manifestations would itself necessarily become to subject of empirical research. Given Mill's conviction that "it cannot be the ultimate aim of science to discover an empirical law,"[68] this leaves him in a position that plainly falls far short of his objective for a science of society.

Mill's reply might be that concrete deduction can be saved because the ethological laws that account for variation and differentiation are themselves derived from the universal psychological laws. As we have seen, he positioned them in the middle of the causal hierarchy between the laws of mind that he took to have been experimentally proven, and the empirical laws that capture and summarize the characteristics of a specific time and place or sequential pattern. Mill argues that the source of ethological laws "cannot be ascertained by observation and experiment," that the "high order of complexity" dictates that "the Deductive Method, setting out from general laws...is alone applicable."[69] Ethological laws are thus derived deductively from the laws of the mind: "The laws of the formation of character are, in short, derivative laws, resulting from the general laws of mind; and are to be obtained by deducing them from those general laws; by supposing any given set of circumstances, and then considering what, according to the laws of mind, will be the influence of those

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[67] Struan Jacobs, *Science and British Liberalism* (Hants, UK: Avebury Press, 1991), 139. Mill acknowledges that human nature is "changeable...from age to age" and that it is characteristic of human beings and their environment to reciprocally change one another over time (*Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 913). This doctrine is part of Mill's theory of progress and will be taken up in the following chapter.
[68] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 915.
[69] Ibid., 865.

circumstances on the formation of character."[70] Yet Mill never makes it clear how ethological laws are to be deduced from psychological laws, how the interaction of laws of mind and a "given set of circumstances" can yield a derivative law. Indeed, he problematizes the question as the province of sociology to resolve. We are told that "the problem of general sociology is to ascertain [empirical laws], and connect them with the laws of human nature, by deductions showing that such were the derivative laws *naturally to be expected* as the consequences of those ultimate ones."[71] It is not at all obvious what "naturally to be expected" means here, but it surely falls short of the logical connection one might expect from a deductive exercise. Indeed, Mill proceeds to suggest that a logical tie is "hardly ever possible":

> It is, indeed, hardly ever possible, even after history has suggested the derivative law, to demonstrate *à priori* that such was the only order of succession or of coexistence in which the effects could, consistently with the laws of human nature, have been produced. We can at most make out that there were strong *à priori* reasons for expecting it, and that no other order of succession or coexistence would have been so likely to result from the nature of man and the general circumstances of his position. Often we cannot do even this; we cannot even show that what did take place was probable *à priori*, but only that it was possible.[72]

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this admission wrecks Mill's proposal for a deductive social science. As Alan Ryan has noted, the "laws of human nature are rapidly ceasing to matter to social science."[73] We have already been told that the laws of human

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[70] Ibid., 869.
[71] Ibid., 916. Italics added.
[72] Ibid., 916-7.
[73] Ryan, *John Stuart Mill*, 156. Lewis Feuer, in an essay that is generally quite sympathetic to Mill, reaches a similar conclusion via a different line of argument about the value of reference to human nature in sociological theory. Feuer claims that Mill's associationist conception of human nature could not provide a foundation to explain, on the one hand, his pessimistic fears of a tendency to mediocrity and, on the other, his hope of moral improvement: "Mill asserted that the laws of association were a sufficient foundation for the explanation and derivation of sociological laws. Yet, it became clear to Mill, a far broader conception of human drives was required [to explain the contrary empirical laws of mediocritization and progress].

nature may be very few in number, and now we are told that there may not be a logical connection between them and supposedly derivative *axiomata media*. It appears that the entire deductive process is breaking down, leaving us with a science which produces laws that can do more than point to *possible* results. One can clearly speculate about any number of possibilities without the benefit of laws given by social science. It would appear that even if ethological laws could be derived *a priori*, there is no assurance that they can delimit the possible outcomes. Not only does Mill fail to explain how ethological laws are derived from the principles of human nature; we are now told that even if we could, they would not advance our understanding of social processes. We have a come a long way from Mill's announcement that "the science of Human Nature may be said to exist, in proportion as the approximate truths, which compose a practical knowledge of mankind, can be exhibited as corollaries from the universal laws of human nature on which they rest...and we should be enabled to deduce others for any new state of circumstances, in anticipation of specific experience."[74]

I have previously noted that Mill's presentation of the laws of human nature is frustratingly vague. I would now suggest that the source of this ambiguity is that Mill was attempting the development of a science of human nature, with the presumed objective of determining the laws of human behavior, while simultaneously assuming knowledge of those very laws in attempting to establish that science. Mill was forthright in his

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There were 'bad instincts' in men which, said Mill, 'it should be the aim of education not simply to regulate, but to extirpate...' But if so, on what psychological ground could an empirical law of progress safely repose? What combination of psychological axioms with middle principles would underwrite the empirical law of progress?"; see L.S. Feuer, "John Stuart Mill as a Sociologist," in Robson and Laine, *Papers of the Centenary Conference*, 89-90. I do not find Feuer's account as convincing as Ryan's, if only because, as I will argue, Mill's espousal of an empirical law of progress was tentative at most. While the possibility of progress does have solid grounding in associationism's emphasis on the efficacy of education, the larger problem for associationism was to account for the emotions and destructive behaviors ("bad instincts") which are obstacles to moral improvement (see note 23).

[74] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 848.

acknowledgement that his proposed science would be inexact, that it could not offer predictions with the same precision as astronomy, that it would fall well short of the "ideal perfection of a science" that could foretell "the thoughts, feelings, and actions of human beings."[75] Yet by suggesting that the "approximate truths" of this science could be "exhibited as corollaries from the universal laws of human nature on which they rest,"[76] Mill seems to have repeated the very same error that he accused some of his predecessors—his father surely among them—of committing: he was attempting to build a "firm superstructure" on an "unstable foundation." At the source of this mistake was Mill's claim that "human beings in society have no properties but those which are derived from, and may be resolved into, the laws of nature of individual man."[77] While it may be true that groups do not have properties that are not resolvable into the properties of individuals, what Mill failed to recognize is that individuals within groups take on properties that are not exhibited except in their social relations—trust, loyalty, authority and subordination, obedience to rules, and other reciprocal connections—and are only germane to those relationships. Mill does not show how they derived from the laws governing an isolated individual man, nor is it "naturally to be expected" that they can be; they are characteristics that follow from and are nurtured by social interaction. Indeed, there can be no social relations without them. Mill's claim that the characteristics of social relations must be resolved into elements of individual psychology seems to be dictated by his insistence on a deductive model at the expense of understanding their origins and operations within social interaction itself. As Fred Wilson has concluded, by

[75] Ibid., 846.
[76] Ibid., 848.
[77] Ibid., 879.

demanding that psychology form the basis for social theory, "we see Mill totally missing the significance of social relations."[78]

Mill's demand that any social science be grounded on individual psychology was challenged by Comte, and was a frequent topic within their correspondence during the period that Mill was completing the *Logic* and preparing the *Principles of Political Economy*. While psychology was central to Mill's concept of a science of man, Comte rejected its independent status as a science apart from biology. Indeed, in Comte's exhaustive mapping of the sciences, psychology was pointedly omitted. His objection to its scientific status was two-fold: first, he believed that the study of mental phenomena was the province of physiology and anatomy (Comte was committed to phrenology); and second, he regarded the concept of human nature as an abstraction characteristic of the metaphysical thinking that was being superseded by the oncoming age of science and positivism. For Mill, Comte's dismissal of psychology revealed a major weakness in his sociology, namely a failure to account for the equilibrium of forces in social statics. While Mill credited Comte with the crucial distinction between social statics and social dynamics, he believed that Comte had concentrated on the forces that lead to social change at the expense of those that create social stability:

> But our difference and the mode of thinking our discussion reveals on either side confirms me in the view that the intellectual basis of static sociology has not as yet been sufficiently prepared. The foundations of social dynamics are...fully established today. But not so for social statics, where history does not hold first place and can only be adduced more or less as an accessory (though I am not denying the importance of its secondary role). Transforming static sociology to a truly positive state consequently requires, if we compare it to social dynamics, a far greater perfection in the science of individual man. It requires above all a very

[78] Fred Wilson, "Mill on Psychology and the Moral Sciences," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 245.

> advanced state of the secondary science I have called ethology, that is, the theory of how external circumstances, either individual or social, influence the formation of moral and intellectual character.[79]

We see here the by-now familiar conviction that history occupies "second place" in social theory as a repository of data for formulating empirical laws and verifying deductive inferences. Yet, by specifically referencing its secondary role in social statics, Mill seems to open the possibility that history has a more significant role in formulating a theory of social dynamics.

Mill addresses the distinction between social statics and dynamics by first distinguishing between two forms of sociological inquiry. The first type, for which Mill's direct deduction was designed, is oriented toward assessing the possible consequences of a change in the conditions of a society that is in a stable equilibrium, or to determine what changes are necessary to achieve a desired result. By design, such inquiries have a narrow focus and are forward-looking, and they reflect Mill's ambition to put political decision-making on a scientific footing. The second type of inquiry has the more expansive concern of what Mill terms the State of Society which encompasses "the greater facts or phenomena" of society, including:

> the degree of knowledge, and of intellectual and moral culture, existing in the community, and in every class of it; the state of industry, of wealth and its distribution; the habitual occupations of the community; their division into classes, and the relations of those classes to one another; the common beliefs which they entertain on all the subjects most important to mankind, and the degree of assurance with which those beliefs are held; their tastes, and the character and degree of their æsthetic development; their form of government, and the more important of their laws and customs. The condition of all these things,

[79] Letter to Comte (30 October 1843), in Haac, *Correspondence*, 197-8. Comte not only dismissed psychology as unscientific, but also discouraged Mill from pursuing economic theory on the ground that sociology was the encompassing study of man and could only be treated holistically. Mill, as we have seen, placed psychology at the foundation of his economics, which he regarded as a branch of social statics.

> and of many more which will readily suggest themselves, constitute the state of society or the state of civilization at any given time.[80]

That state of society in which the elements are compatible and complementary is in a stable equilibrium, and for Comte and Mill is the subject of the science of social statics. Social statics is "the theory of the consensus...existing among the different parts of the social organism...the theory of the mutual actions and reactions of contemporaneous social phenomena." As an example of social statics, Mill quotes his own essay on Coleridge in which he discussed the conditions for social and political stability. Social dynamics, on the other hand, concerns itself with the "laws of progress," and considers society as "in a state of progressive movement."[81]

The problem for the theory of social dynamics is to determine the factors that disrupt social equilibrium and cause one state of society to evolve into another. Mill is thus carried to the recognition that within the theory of social dynamics, history is not in second place at all, that:

> the fundamental problem...is to find the laws according to which any state of society produces the state which succeeds it and takes its place. This opens the great and vexed question of the progressiveness of man and society; an idea involved in every just conception of social phenomena as the subject of a science."[82]

Careful to point out that progressiveness is not meant "to be understood as synonymous with improvement or the tendency to improvement," Mill clarifies that his interest is in the process by which human character changes such that "the majority are not the same in one age as in another." This process, he suggests, is a constantly reiterative interaction

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[80] *Logic, CW,* VIII, 911-12.
[81] Ibid., 918. Peter Allan Dale usefully suggests that "in our contemporary terms, the study of social statics is synchronic or structuralist, that of social dynamics is diachronic or historicist." *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 15.
[82] *Logic, CW,* VIII, 912.

between human beings and their circumstances: "The circumstances in which mankind are placed, operating according to their own laws and to the laws of human nature, form the characters of the human beings; but the human beings, in their turn, mould and shape the circumstances for themselves and for those who come after them."[83] Mill thus returns to the claim in "Coleridge" and later restated in his *Autobiography*, "that any general theory or philosophy of politics supposes a previous theory of human progress, and that this is the same thing with a philosophy of history."[84] While Mill had previously prioritized human nature as the explanatory principle on which the theory of social statics must rely, the development of a theory of social dynamics imposes the requirement of considering history's role in shaping character.

Mill initiates his assessment of history by rejecting the proposition advanced by unnamed French historians that that there is an independent law of progress which can deterministically account for historical change. While Mill grants that these efforts are superior to the chemical and geometrical methods that he had already rejected, he describes this method as "attempting, by a study and analysis of the general facts of history, to discover...the law of progress: which law...must...enable us to predict future events, just as after a few terms of an infinite series in algebra we are able to detect the principle of regularity in their information, and to predict the rest of the series." Mill rejects this claim as based on the misconception that an "order of succession" could ever attain the certainty of a law of nature; at best, it could represent only an empirical law, the recognition of a few instances of a replicated pattern of events: "The succession of states

[83] Ibid., 913.
[84] *Autobiography*, *CW,* I, 169. It will be recalled that in the Coleridge essay, Mill framed the priority of a philosophy of history as "the only form possible" for a "philosophy of society" and a "philosophy of human culture"; see "Coleridge," *CW,* X, 147.

of the human mind and of human society cannot have an independent law of its own; it must depend on the psychological and ethological laws which govern the action of circumstances on men and of men on circumstances."[85] While Mill's criticism correctly points out that a repeated order of succession might constitute nothing more than an ephemeral trend, his insistence that the only possible causal explanation must reference individual psychology does not seem to advance the argument or account for the problem he has set before us—how to provide a principle of explanation for social dynamics. As we previously noted, Mill had conceded that one cannot "set out from the principles of human nature and from the general circumstances of the position of our species, to determine *à priori* the order in which human development must take place, and to predict, consequently, the general facts of history up to the present time."[86] While direct deduction *can* project tendencies and probable outcomes within a stable society, and thus can be used as a principle of explanation in social statics, it cannot suggest the probability of dynamic shifts that could alter the cultural structure that characterizes a State of Society.

Despite the recognized inadequacy of direct deduction, Mill demands that the explanation and prediction of structural change must, to achieve scientific status, invoke the laws of human nature and remain within the methodological framework of natural science. This impasse, Mill claims, is breached by Comte's inverse deductive method. As

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[85] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 914. Mill excepts Comte from the French theorists seeking a principle of progress, and credits him with being alone in recognizing the need to connect "generalizations from history with the laws of human nature" (915). In this very questionable assertion, Mill is presumably distinguishing Comte from his former Saint-Simonian confrères and Condorcet. While one might wonder that Mill did not also consider German idealists in this context, particularly after becoming acquainted with them through the Coleridgeans, it appears that when the *Logic* was published Mill had not yet read Kant or Hegel, but "only knew them through their English and French interpreters"; see Mill's letter to Comte (13 March 1843) in Haac, *Correspondence*, 140.

[86] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 915.

we have already noted, Comte rejected Mill's insistence on the scientific status of psychology and the necessity of its role in a deductive social science. While Mill continues to insist on the role of psychology in deducing any causal laws, he concedes that the "original qualities of our species" recede as:

> the influence exercised over each generation by the generations which preceded it, becomes (as is well observed by the writer [Comte] last referred to) more and more preponderant over all other influences; until at length what we now are and do, is in a very small degree the result of the universal circumstances of the human race, or even of our own circumstances acting through the original qualities of our species, but mainly of the qualities produced in us by the whole previous history of humanity.[87]

In the reiterative and cumulative process of character interacting with environment, culture trumps "original" human nature in determining character. In a passage suggestive of the mechanistic determinism that served as the model for concrete deduction, Mill seems to suggest that a calculation could be performed to determine the results of this process if only it could be "computed by human faculties," but "the mere length of the series would be a sufficient obstacle, since a slight error in any one of the terms would augment in rapid progression at every subsequent step."[88] It is difficult to resist the conclusion that Mill is utterly missing the point, that the malleability of human nature in its successive cultural settings is not remotely amenable to a computation, and that the principles of a methodology that suggests that it could must be questioned.

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[87] Ibid., 915-6. In Mill's essay on Comte, he presented Comte's position slightly differently, suggesting that human nature has been superseded by "historical human beings": "We may, he says, draw from the universal laws of human nature some conclusions (though even these, we think, rather precarious) concerning the very earliest stages of human progress, of which there are either no, or very imperfect, historical records. But as society proceeds in its development, its phænomena are determined, more and more, not by the simple tendencies of universal human nature, but by the accumulated influence of past generations over the present. *The human beings themselves, on the laws of whose nature the facts of history depend, are not abstract or universal but historical human beings*, already shaped, and made what they are, by human society." *Comte and Positivism, CW,* X, 307. Italics added.

[88] *Logic, CW,* VIII, 916.

In fact, having reached this dead end, Mill does retreat and reassess, saying that "we should in vain attempt to construct a general science of society" if the series of causes and effects that comprise history do not exhibit sufficient "regularity." He suggests that we would have to be content with a methodology that was only applicable in social statics, but inadequate to the demands of social dynamics:

> We must in that case have contented ourselves with that subordinate order of sociological speculation formerly noticed, namely, with endeavouring to ascertain what would be the effect of the introduction of any new cause, in *a state of society supposed to be fixed*; a knowledge sufficient for the more common exigencies of daily political practice, but liable to fail in all cases in which *the progressive movement of society* is one of the influencing elements; and therefore more precarious in proportion as the case is more important.[89]

From here Mill makes a leap, arguing that we can proceed after all because there *is* sufficient regularity, the variety and diversity of mankind and its circumstances are "much less considerable than the points of agreement," and that there is accordingly "a certain degree of uniformity in the progressive development of the species and its works." With this assertion, Mill announces—and one can only imagine what Macaulay must have thought as he read this—that "History...when judiciously examined afford[s] Empirical Laws of Society."[90] Like empirical laws in social statics, Mill continues to insist that the empirical laws of history must be regarded as derivative laws, as deductions from the laws of human nature if they are to be regarded as having scientific merit. Yet here too Mill is again forced to admit that it is "hardly ever possible" to demonstrate *a priori* that the empirical law represents a necessary path of succession.

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[89] Ibid. Italics added.
[90] Ibid.

Faced with yet another impasse, Mill claims that Comte had come to the rescue. Empirical laws can achieve a scientific status to plausibly explain the movements of history if they can be shown to be consistent with—as opposed to derived from—psychological and ethological laws. The "only check or corrective" against "erroneous generalizations... made from the course of history" is "constant verification by psychological and ethological laws."[91] The deductive process is thus inverted, as laws of nature are used to verify empirical regularities. In his 1865 essay on Comte, Mill offers additional detail:

> The universal laws of human nature are part of the data of sociology, but in using them we must reverse the method of the deductive physical sciences: for while, in these, specific experience commonly serves to verify laws arrived at by deduction, in sociology it is specific experience which suggests the laws, and deduction which verifies them. If a sociological theory, collected from historical evidence, contradicts the established general laws of human nature; if (to use M. Comte's instances) it implies, in the mass of mankind, any very decided natural bent, either in a good or in a bad direction; if it supposes that the reason, in average human beings, predominates over the desires, or the disinterested desires over the personal; we may know that history has been misinterpreted, and that the theory is false.[92]

In inverse deduction, psychological and ethological laws thus serve as a "check or corrective"[93] to assure that it meets the conditions for a law in the moral sciences.

It is nonetheless far from clear that inverse deduction in itself is sufficient to explain social dynamics. Inverse deduction does not appear to explain the connection between human nature and social change. Indeed, the problem of social change seems even more intractable following the discussion of social statics. Mill claims that the consensus between the elements that compose a state of society is "so complete" that in

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[91] Ibid., 917.
[92] *Comte and Positivism, CW,* X, 307.
[93] *Logic, CW,* VIII, 917.

the "filiation of one generation and another, it is the whole which produces the whole." The empirical laws which can be generalized from history provide evidence of general tendencies, but because they are "too great a distance from the elementary laws of human nature," we still do not have a principle that can explain why change occurs:

> It is easily seen...that as society advances, mental tend more and more to prevail over bodily qualities, and masses over individuals: that...society becomes progressively more and more engrossed with productive pursuits, and the military spirit gradually gives way to the industrial; to which many similar truths might be added. And with generalizations of this description, ordinary inquirers...are satisfied. But these and all such results are still at too great a distance from the elementary laws of human nature on which they depend,—too many links intervene, and the concurrence of causes at each link is far too complicated,—to enable these propositions to be presented as direct corollaries from those elementary principles. They have, therefore, in the minds of most inquirers, remained in the state of empirical laws, applicable only within the bounds of actual observation; without any means of determining their real limits, and of judging whether the changes which have hitherto been in progress are destined to continue indefinitely, or to terminate, or even to be reversed.[94]

Mill again seems to have arrived at an impasse. It is not sufficient to point to progress in individual elements of society which offer no indication beyond the "relation of fragments of the effect to corresponding fragments of the cause." A more holistic view of the state of society is required, and Mill suggests that a way out may be "to combine the statical view of social phenomena with the dynamical" to obtain an empirical "law of correspondence not only between the simultaneous states, but between the simultaneous changes" of the discrete social elements. Once verified by the inverse method, we would achieve "the real scientific derivative law of the development of humanity and human affairs." This process would identify that one element which is the "prime agent of social movement."

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[94] Ibid., 924-5.

Mill proceeds to suggest that the prime agent that is "predominant, and almost paramount among the agents of the social progression" is "the state of the speculative faculties of mankind." Mill clarifies these faculties as including the "nature of the beliefs...concerning themselves and the world by which they are surrounded."[95] It is difficult to avoid the impression that Mill did not follow a chain of argument that drives us toward this conclusion, but rather proposes it as a way out of his impasse. It is, one might say, self-empowering and perhaps self-serving for a speculative thinker to claim that speculative thought is the prime mover of history. One is hardly deflected from this position when Mill pronounces that his conclusion is "deduced from the laws of human nature [and is] in entire accordance with the general facts of history."[96] The chain of reasoning in this deduction is not revealed. Indeed, this claim is made despite the acceptance that intellectual activity is not "among the more powerful propensities of human nature," nor is it pursued except by "exceptional individuals." Nonetheless, we are told that without the success of the speculative intellect, all other propensities and objectives of human nature would be left unfulfilled. Mill specifically singles out the "desire of increased material comfort," the basis of classical economics, as made possible by the "progress of knowledge," without which there would be no progress in industry. Similarly, the "progress of the fine arts" brings a higher level of cultivation to human nature, lifting mankind above selfish pursuits to a more refined sensibility. In sum, "we are justified in concluding, that the order of human progression in all respects will mainly

[95] Ibid., 926.
[96] Ibid.

depend on the order of progression in the intellectual convictions of mankind, that is, on the law of the successive transformations of human opinions."[97]

The elaboration of Mill's belief in the historical primacy of intellect and belief will be the subject of the following chapter. However, before proceeding, I would like to offer some concluding comments on Mill's effort to develop a scientific methodology for the study of society and history. There appears to be some tension between the claims that history can be understood as a succession of causes and effects, thus knowable through the methods of the physical sciences, and the claim that the prime mover of history is the imaginative and speculative explorations of the human intellect. In the former naturalistic case, we are presented with a mechanistic model premised on psychological determinism. For Mill, the laws of associationism provided the basis for understanding the development of personal character, and once developed, the knowledge of an individual's character was sufficient to confidently predict behavior. Several passages from the *Logic* have already been cited indicating Mill's conviction that the "law of invariable Causation holds true of human volitions,"[98] and that the doctrine of free will was an obstacle to a science of man. Perhaps Mill's most definitive statement regarding human behavior is contained in his critique of William Hamilton in which he claims that every empirical test confirms the predictability of human behavior:

> This is what Necessitarians affirm: and they court every possible mode in which its truth can be verified. They test it by each person's observation of his own volitions. They test it by each person's observation of the voluntary actions of those with whom he comes into contact; and by the power which every one has of foreseeing actions, with a degree of exactness proportioned to his previous experience and knowledge of the agents, and with a certainty often quite equal to that with which we predict the commonest physical events. They test it further, by

[97] Ibid., 927.
[98] Ibid., 930.

> the statistical results of the observation of human beings acting in numbers sufficient to eliminate the influences which operate only on a few, and which on a large scale neutralize one another, leaving the total result about the same as if the volitions of the whole mass had been affected by such only of the determining causes as were common to them all. In cases of this description the results are as uniform, and may be as accurately foretold, as in any physical enquiries in which the effect depends upon a multiplicity of causes.[99]

Mill concludes that volition can be as subject to the laws of causation as any physical entity:

> A volition is a moral effect, which follows the corresponding moral causes as certainly and invariably as physical effects follow their physical causes. Whether it *must* do so, I acknowledge myself to be entirely ignorant, be the phænomenon moral or physical; and I condemn, accordingly, the word Necessity as applied to either case. All I know is, that it always *does.*[100]

In the chapter "Additional Elucidations of the Science of History" which was added to the *Logic* in 1862, Mill's *a posteriori* case for determinism extended beyond the individual to social groups and to history itself: "But if this principle is true of individual man, it must be true of collective man. If it is the law of human life, the law must be realized in history."[101] Impressed by the development of statistical surveys and the regularities they revealed when time and populations were aggregated, Mill asserted that the "peculiarities of individuals" would wash out "by taking a sufficiently large cycle," rendering such anomalies as "purely accidental." Mill was convinced that history could be "reduced to regularity and law."[102] Though he accepted Hume's critique of causation, Hume's skepticism was largely set aside as Mill pursued his purpose of showing how human behavior was ruled by empirically grounded laws. In this respect, Mill, despite his

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[99] *An Examination of William Hamilton's Philosophy*, *CW,* IX, 447.
[100] Ibid., 447-8.
[101] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 932.
[102] Ibid., *CW,* VIII, 939. This argument and Mill's response to the "great man" theory of history will be discussed in the next chapter.

other differences with Comte, must be considered a positivist. Like Comte, Mill accepted the basic principle of positivism, which, as Maurice Mandelbaum has defined it, was distinguished from earlier forms of empiricism by its cardinal tenet that "'that the adequacy of our knowledge increases as it approximates the forms of explanation which have been achieved by the most advanced sciences."[103]

Yet Mill's seemingly definitive expressions of positivist faith contrast markedly with his vision of the role of intellectual activity in historical change, and the role of that activity in his definition of what constitutes being human. Even with due respect to Mill's attempt at a compatibilist solution to the free will problem, his language in defense of the power of intellect can be difficult to reconcile with his insistence on behavior conforming to causal laws. In 1868, the year in which he published his critique of Hamilton, Mill defended Comte against Herbert Spencer with the argument that:

> To say that men's intellectual beliefs do not determine their conduct, is like saying that the ship is moved by the steam and not by the steersman. The steam indeed is the motive power; the steersman, left to himself, could not advance the vessel a single inch; yet it is the steersman's will and the steersman's knowledge which decide in what direction it shall move and whither it shall go.[104]

This pronouncement of the control over conduct by will and knowledge is not exceptional. In *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill also asserts the supremacy of thought, belief, and rational choice over habit and interest, and is persuaded that a rational (and intellectually elite) leadership can overcome other social forces in determining "social arrangements" and forms of government:

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[103] Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason*, 11. See also Dale, *Pursuit of a Scientific Culture*, 12-21; and Walter F. Cannon, "The Normative Role of Science in Early Victorian Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25, no. 4 (Oct-Dec 1964): 487-502.
[104] *Comte and Positivism, CW,* X, 317.

> It is what men think that determines how they act and though the persuasions and convictions of average men are in a much greater degree determined by their personal position than by reason, no little power is exercised over them by the persuasions and convictions of those whose personal position is different and by the united authority of the instructed. When therefore the instructed in general can be brought to recognise one social arrangement as good and another as bad, very much has been done towards giving to the one or withholding from the other that preponderance of social force which enables it to subsist. And the maxim, that the government of a country is what the social forces in existence compel it to be, is true only in the sense in which it favours, instead of discouraging, the attempt to exercise, among all forms of government practicable in the existing condition of society, a rational choice.[105]

We have also noted the prominent role of belief in Mill's discussion of the sources of social stability. It is a consensus, even unanimity, of belief, not only habit or interest, that is necessary to social cohesion and stability; the shared belief in "something which is settled, something permanent, and not to be called in question; something which, by general agreement, has a right to be where it is, and to be secure against disturbance"[106] that provides a society with a sense of solidarity and permanence.

The distance that is traversed between Mill's most doctrinaire statements of social mechanistic determinism and his belief in the potency of individual intellect is perhaps no more evident than in *On Liberty*. His chapter "Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being" fulfills the promise of the epigram from von Humboldt on the "absolute and essential importance of human development," and places the burden of fulfilling that promise as much on the individual as on the open society that Mill advocates. In making his argument that man as a progressive being is endowed with the autonomous freedom to pursue a chosen path, Mill directly confronts the premise of his social theory, claiming that "Human nature is *not* a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the

[105] *Considerations on Representative Government, CW,* XIX, 382.
[106] "Coleridge," *CW,* X, 133-4.

work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing."[107] The claim that every event, whether natural or human, is the consequence of an antecedent cause thus gives way to a normative teleology in which purposive behavior is directed toward a life enriched by employing the "human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity and even moral preference," all of which result only from "making a choice" against the pressure of the customary and the habitual.[108] Mill again insists, as he did in his response to Spencer, that "strong impulses are but another name for energy," and that "A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character."[109] The Mill of *On Liberty* characterizes the human potential for purposeful growth, and, as John Robson has expressed it, the "engines for that movement [are] enthusiasm, high aspirations, and the pursuit of spiritual perfection; the desire for conformity to a standard of excellence, the love of congruity and of consistency in all things."[110]

In presenting Mill's case for compatibilism, it was noted that the *Logic* also suggested the possibility of a "habit of willing" and that fully developed character can be regarded as "steady and constant," and thus predictable. But surely this seems to be an effort not to reconcile two conflicting arguments but merely to have it both ways. Mill's compatibilist account hinges on the distinction between causation and coercion which he

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[107] *On Liberty*, *CW*, XIII, 263.
[108] Ibid., 262.
[109] Ibid., 263, 264.
[110] John Robson, "Civilization and Culture as Moral Concepts," in Skorupski, *Cambridge Companion to Mill*., 344.

claims is not recognized by Owenite determinism. While one can accept this argument, it is far from clear that Mill's account of causation can accommodate the kind of rational, critical and purposeful choices that he advocates as part of the good life. Associationism holds that the individual is the product of his education and environment and is thus susceptible to patterns of behavior that are predictable, and yet Mill also claims that the individual can willfully remove himself from such influences in the process of making rational decisions. Mill seems to accept the difficulty of reconciling these views when he argues that only "exceptional individuals" are capable of surmounting the propensities of lesser mortals—"It would be a great error, and one very little likely to be committed, to assert that speculation, intellectual activity, the pursuit of truth, is among the most powerful propensities of human nature, or holds a predominating place in the lives of any, saved decidedly exceptional, individuals"[111]—yet he never explains how such exceptional individuals are actually able to break out of the confines of associationist principles. Alan Ryan has pointed out the irony that Mill's own education was based on such principles, but also emphasized the development and exercise of a critical intellect which, Ryan notes, is "impossible to square with the associationist theory of learning."[112]

Whether or not Mill's compatibilism is successful, it is interesting to note the way in which it dovetails with his approach to the distinction between social statics and social dynamics. As we have argued, Mill struggled with the problem of explaining how structural change was possible within the apparently closed circle of a society in stable equilibrium. Mill claims that Comte's account of social statics was deficient because of Comte's refusal to accept the scientific status of psychology which, for Mill, provided the

[111] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 926.
[112] Ryan, *J.S. Mill*, 19.

necessary grounding laws for predicting the social and political consequences of reform. The theory of social dynamics, however, does not rely on the empirical laws that can be inferred within a static society, nor can major change be explained by reference to psychological laws. Social dynamics refers instead to free intellectual activity and growth for which Comte's theory of the three stages of history provided a model, as had the theories of such predecessors as Turgot, Condorcet and the Saint-Simonians. Mill's effort to define a common methodology for both social statics and social dynamics was likely doomed from the start, as John Gray has concluded:

> Mill's effort...to develop an account of the nature and scope of social explanation can be seen to embody an unresolved (and, very probably, insoluble) contradiction between the psychologistic methodological individualism (or 'science of human nature') he had inherited from the empiricist tradition, and the Comtean, historicist belief that "the fundamental problem of the social sciences [is to discover] the laws according to which any state of society produces the state which succeeds it and which takes its place." His attempt to synthesize a form of methodological individualism which was no longer narrowly psychologistic with an emphasis on the cultural and historical contexts in which human behavior occurs was not, and could never have been successful.[113]

One might trace Mill's failure to the fundamental incompatibility of the Benthamite and Coleridgean perspectives that Mill had hoped to combine in an unstable eclecticism, but I would suggest that the problem runs deeper as a reflection of his unconvincing attempt to graft a theory of free will on his deterministic associationist psychology. The incompatibility was rooted in Mill's inconsistent view of human behavior, whether willfully purposive or determined by ingrained habit.

This chapter has focused on Mill's effort to develop a "science of human nature," and I have attempted to reveal the tensions—if not the irreconcilable inconsistencies—

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[113] Gray, "Traditional and Revisionist Interpretations," 32. The cited passage is from the *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 912.

that emerge from his effort to offer a unified theory of explanation. In the past few pages, it has become clear that his analysis of explanation cannot be disentangled from a speculative account of the nature of society and the movement of history. In the next chapter we will see how Mill's two competing visions of what constitutes humanity play out in in his vision of history, particularly as they take the form of the social mass pitted against the individual. We will consider his adaptation of French philosophies of history, as well as the Scottish stadialism that Mill inherited from his father, and, as Mill himself put it, "the great and vexed question of the progressiveness of man and society."

Chapter V: History and Progress

> It has become the aim of really scientific thinkers to connect by theories the facts of universal history: it is acknowledged to be one of the requisites of a general system of social doctrine, that it should explain, so far as the data exist, the main facts of history; and a Philosophy of History is generally admitted to be at once the verification, and the initial form, of the Philosophy of the Progress of Society.[1]

> There are two things of importance and influence among mankind: the one is, property; the other, powers and acquirements of the mind.[2]

Lewis Feuer has claimed that in a century in which many of the great social theorists attempted a systematic explanation of the movement of history, Mill stands out for not having applied "categorical schemes" to the past that "censored [reality] though ideological prisms." Feuer asserts that only "Mill tried to do justice to all the competing drives and motives of human nature [and that] he would never banish from his consciousness the knowledge of the many-sidedness and many-levelledness of social reality."[3] One is tempted to suggest that Mill is being damned by faint praise, for these very qualities suggest the absence of a perspective, a banal and uncritical willingness to accommodate all possible explanations. It also implies that Mill was dismissive of attempts to produce an account of the underlying nature and pattern of historical development. It is certainly true that Mill, unlike Hegel, Comte, Marx and Spencer, did not devote a major volume to speculate about the course of history. Yet as the foregoing chapters have detailed, Mill had an acute historical consciousness: he read many of the great historians as a childhood avocation; he produced numerous reviews of both ancient

[1] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 930.
[2] "Civilization," *CW*, XVIII, 121.
[3] L.S. Feuer, "John Stuart Mill as Sociologist: The Unwritten Ethology," in Robson and Laine, *Papers of the Centenary Conference*, 86, 87. Feuer lists Hegel, Comte, Marx and Spencer as the great social theorists of the nineteenth century, unaccountably omitting Tocqueville

and modern histories; and he sought to establish rules regarding the use and misuse of historical reference in both politics and a nascent social science. Against this background, the question that now presents itself is whether Mill found meaning and pattern in history beyond its value as a data repository for the formulation of empirical laws by the social sciences.

In this chapter, I will argue that Feuer got it half right. It is true that Mill did not view history through categorical schemes or ideological prisms. However, to suggest that Mill did not have a speculative philosophy of history is a misreading of his work and, I would argue, loses sight of the depth and complexity of several of his most salient positions. As has been noted, Mill himself repeatedly stated that a philosophy of history was the necessary foundation for a political philosophy. I will argue that Mill had appropriated two recent traditions in the philosophy of history and viewed historical development as the consequence of a dualism of intellectual growth and the recognition of individual property rights. The first approach was derived from the development of historical consciousness in continental philosophy toward the end of the eighteenth century, specifically the optimism of the French Enlightenment and the development of German romanticism and idealism as it passed through the Saint-Simonians and Comte. This tradition emphasized the progress of intellect as the foundation for historical change. Intellectual achievement in the arts and sciences through individual expression and creativity was prized as the source of progress, and the fulfillment of human potential. Mill's appropriation of the Saint-Simonian theory of organic and critical periods reflects his belief in the primacy of intellectual development in moving history, as does his endorsement of Comte's three stages theory. However, it is important to note that Mill

did not accept the determinism of Comte or the German idealists. While the goal of politics and history was "the improvement of man himself as an intelligent and moral being,"[4] this goal was, for Mill, not a matter of destiny, but rather within the province of political Art, the purpose of which is to manage contingent forces and events using the knowledge provided by the social sciences. Unlike Comte, Mill insisted on a moral teleology without which there could be no assurance that the course of history would yield beneficial results or that undesirable tendencies could be thwarted.

Mill's second approach to history derived from the Scottish stadialist theory that was passed to him by his father and the classical political economists. This philosophy was primarily materialistic, looking to the advance of civilization as a story of both mastery over nature and of human organization, the purpose of which was the creation of wealth for the improved condition of life. In stadialist theory, the development of property rights and the division of labor were the decisive processes that determined social change. Mill laid out this theory in considerable detail in the opening to *Principles of Political Economy*, but it also was strongly present in "Civilization," as essay in which he grappled with the cultural effects of the developing commercial economy. Though Mill certainly recognized that intellectual growth was necessary to the advances in technology that produced commercial and industrial development, he was adamant regarding the limitations of economic growth in producing progress of the sort he felt most vital, and he ultimately regarded the mass culture of ushered in by the Age of Commerce as inimical to intellectual and moral improvement. Mill was also cognizant of the debilitating effects of the division of labor that made industrial civilization possible. The twin engines of human development—the growth of the intellect and the production

[4] Letter to Gustave d'Eichthal (8 October 1829), *CW,* XII, 36.

of wealth—which had heretofore been mutually reinforcing were thus becoming incompatible forces in determining the future. In addition to England, Mill regarded the United States as the clearest example of this conflict as dollar-chasing seemed to overwhelm the possibility of moral growth afforded by representative institutions. In the final chapter, I will propose that Mill's account of the stationary state was his attempt to reconcile the two sources of historical development in order to restore the possibility of individual excellence and achievement that was requisite to genuine progress. The key question about the stationary state is whether Mill saw it as a necessary historical outcome of the depletion of resources and reinvestment opportunities, or whether it was merely an aspirational vision. It was certainly the latter, and it seems that it was probably the former as well. As such, it could be viewed as an end of history in which the production and distribution of wealth became sufficient to enable a turn toward intellectual and moral rather than material enrichment.

When Mill emerged from his period of depression at the end of the eighteen-twenties, Macaulay's critique and his contact with the Coleridgeans had not been the only sources which challenged Bentham's ahistorical doctrine. Mill reports that he first became acquainted with the Saint-Simonians in 1829-30 through his contact with Gustave d'Eichthal, their representative in London, and he credits them as having introduced to him "more than by any others, a new mode of political thinking."[5] The Saint-Simonians suggested that the despair that Mill had suffered during his depression was symptomatic of a malaise within Europe which was failing to coalesce around a new governing philosophy in the wake of the French Revolution:

[5] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 171.

> Viewed as a whole, society today presents the spectacle of two warring camps. In one are entrenched the few remaining defenders of the religious and political organization of the Middle Ages; in the other, drawn up under the rather inappropriate name of partisans of the new ideas, are all those who either cooperated in or applauded the overthrow of the ancient edifice. We come to bring peace to these two armies by proclaiming a doctrine which preaches not only its horror of blood but its horror of strife under whatever name it may disguise itself... We do not allow to civilized humanity any natural right which obliges it to tear its own entrails.[6]

For Mill, whose engagement as a partisan had brought him to recognize this very impasse, the Saint-Simonians opened a new perspective that suggested that the very conflicts were themselves part of a cyclical historical process. The prospect of stepping outside of the grinding debates had immediate appeal, and Mill recounts the impact of the Saint-Simonian pamphlets provided by d'Eichthal:

> I was greatly struck with the connected view which they for the first time presented to me, of the natural order of human progress; and especially with their division of all history into organic periods and critical periods. During the organic periods (they said) mankind accept with firm conviction some positive creed, claiming jurisdiction over all their actions, and containing more or less of truth and adaptation to the needs of humanity. Under its influence they make all the progress compatible with the creed, and finally outgrow it; when a period follows of criticism and negation, in which mankind lose their old convictions without acquiring any new ones, of a general or authoritative character, except the conviction that the old are false.[7]

Though Mill would fend off d'Eichthal's overtures to become the Saint-Simonians' English advocate, they appear to have briefly offered an ideological home for Mill after his break with the Radicals.[8] Iris Mueller suggests that the Saint-Simonians offered Mill

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[6] From the "Doctrine de Saint-Simon" cited in Frank Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 159.
[7] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 171.
[8] In early 1829, Mill professed his loneliness resulting from "the absence of that feeling which has accompanied me through the greater part of my life, that which one fellow traveler, or one fellow soldier has towards another—the feeling of being engaged in the pursuit of a common object, and of mutually

the kind of "brotherhood" and "spiritual companionship" that he missed, despite his many doubts about their program for social renewal.[9] It is worth noting as well that because Comte was associated with the Saint-Simonians during this period, d'Eichthal introduced Mill to his work, and Mill would thus subsequently have an interlocutor who was writing about many of the philosophical issues that Mill was also engaged with; their correspondence started in late 1841 and comprised eighty-nine letters until Mill cut it off in May of 1847.

The influence of the Saint-Simonians—and particularly Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive*—pervades the series of articles entitled "Spirit of the Age" which Mill published in the *Examiner* in 1831. Though Mill had continued to write during his personal crisis, most of his output consisted of reviews and reports on events in France and "gave no opportunity for the development of any general mode of thought" which might reveal his changing beliefs. Among other reasons, Mill was reluctant to confront his father on any doctrinal issues. Nonetheless, as the title implies—any such reference to spirit was foreign to the vocabulary of Bentham and his followers—the articles reflect the expansion of Mill's outlook and his attention to the importance of historical context in determining the nature of political power and forms of government. The articles, which Mill later omitted from his *Dissertations and Discussions* compilation as "lumbering in style,"[10] are anything but that. Indeed, Mill himself recounts Carlyle's characterizing them as the work of a "new Mystic," and this assessment seems more on target. "Spirit of the Age" reflects the enthusiasm of Mill's intellectual independence. Employing a phrase

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cheering one another on, and of helping one another in an arduous undertaking." Letter to John Sterling (15 April 1929), *CW,* XII, 30.

[9] Mueller, *Mill and French Thought*, 53.

[10] *Autobiography*, *CW, I,* 181.

that Walter Houghton suggests is "the basic and almost universal conception" by which the Victorian era defined itself, Mill announces in the first of the "Spirit" articles that the present age is an "age of transition," that "mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones."[11] Mill identified the source of this political and ideological transition as "a change [that] has taken place in the human mind [and] has proceeded far before it was generally perceived," that this change had produced "new men, who insisted on being governed in a new way."[12] Europe had embarked on a passage toward a new stage of history, one that was superseding the residual institutions and values inherited from the feudal past. Mill thus implicitly abandons the abstract political theorizing of his father, and asserts that governance must be grounded on the nature of the people that history had delivered into the early nineteenth century. As early as 1831, Mill had begun to explore the implications of a shift from a rationalist to a historicist political philosophy, a matter which, as has been noted, he would continue to ponder through the "Bentham" and "Coleridge" essays, and subsequently in the *Logic*.

The matter that engaged Mill in "Spirit of the Age" was the process of history itself, what it was that distinguished his own age of transition from the less turbulent past, and how that transitional phase could be guided toward more satisfactory political institutions. Despite Carlyle's enthusiasm for Mill's effort, their approach and position differed. While Carlyle in *Signs of the Times* had polemically provided a vivid contrast between the organic past and the mechanical present, Mill's interest was to approach the

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[11] "Spirit of the Age I," *CW,* XXII, 230. For the common perception of the "age of transition," see Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 1 and *passim.* In her introduction to Mill's newspaper writings in the *Collected Works*, Ann Robson also remarks on the ubiquity of the phrase, and suggests that Mill may have picked up from his French contacts; see *CW,* XXII, xliv.
[12] Ibid., 228.

issue as an "investigation of abstract truth," to determine whether there were fundamental forces that could explain historical change.[13] In contrast to Carlyle's call for a spiritual renaissance which would supersede the Machine Age, and to conservatives like Southey who glumly "carry their eyes in the back of their heads and can see no other portion of the destined track of humanity than that which it has already travelled,"[14] Mill was eager to infuse the moment with an optimism for progress in the here-and-now world. Yet while endorsing the "march of intellect" and "the improvement of the age," Mill nonetheless departs from the Enlightenment's Baconian premise that this new age will result from the dissemination of scientific knowledge and positive truth against religious superstition. Declaring himself "unable to adopt the theory" that "we have learnt too much, and have become too wise, to be imposed upon by such sophisms and such prejudices," Mill asserts that only "superficial knowledge" has been diffused and that "the intellect of the age...is not the cause which we are in search of." Whether rich or poor, educated or ignorant, people remain as "accessible to the influence of imposture and charlatanerie" as they ever were. In an early example of many acknowledgements that a belief in progress cannot escape an honest appraisal of social reality, Mill continues:

> Neither do I see, in such observations as I am able to make upon my contemporaries, evidence that they have any principle within them which renders them much less liable now than at any former period to be misled by sophisms and prejudices. All I see is, that the opinions which have been transmitted to them from their ancestors, are not the kind of sophisms and prejudices which are fitted to possess any considerable ascendancy in their altered frame of mind. And I am rather inclined to account for this fact in a manner not reflecting such

[13] Letter to John Sterling (20 October 1831), *CW,* XII, 78.
[14] "Spirit of the Age I," *CW,* XXII, 229.

> extraordinarily great honour upon the times we live in, as would result from the theory by which all is ascribed to the superior expansion of our understandings.[15]

Claiming that the durability of fatuousness undermines any reason to believe in "the influence of reason over the minds of mankind," Mill not only dismisses Enlightenment optimism but the methods and assumptions of the Philosophic Radicals as they undertook to remake English politics and law. Mill would later recall that while he adhered to their goals and remained "as much as ever a radical and democrat for Europe, and especially for England," he had realized that to pursue those goals required a "change in the premises of my political philosophy."[16]

The problem of social and political change forced, by its very nature, a consideration of the role of history, and the referenced "change of premises" required a shift away from psychological modes of argument toward consideration of historical origins and development (once again validating Macaulay's critique of James Mill, however much John was unwilling to admit it). While it was in the "Coleridge" essay that Mill first stated that a philosophy of politics presupposes a philosophy of history, it appears that he had already come to this conclusion from his contact with the Saint-Simonians over a decade earlier. Similarly, the critique of the Enlightenment that appears in "Coleridge" was initially formed during Mill's Saint-Simonian period, and was a source of their appeal to him. The Saint-Simonians divided history into sequences of organic and critical epochs. Organic epochs exhibited social harmony as a consequence of a common adherence to spiritual and secular values which were articulated and enforced by religious and political authorities. The Saint-Simonians argued that it was the

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[15] Ibid., 231-2.
[16] *Autobiography*, *CW,* I, 177.

nature of the historic process for organic periods to become disturbed and stressed by external or internal challenges, and as these stresses became more potent, the organic period would give way to a critical period of rival perspectives and belief systems that would ultimately erode the social fabric. The critical epoch was thus characterized as lacking cohesion, but this too would ultimately resolve itself into a new set of beliefs around which a successor organic period would develop. In a letter to d'Eichthal, Mill expressed his belief that the Enlightenment had introduced a critical period, but that it had been limited by a negative spirit which failed to provide the foundation for a new organic period; Mill was hopeful that the Saint-Simonian movement offered a vision on which a new organic period could be introduced:

> They [the Saint-Simonians] have, and their system tends to produce...that eclecticism, and comprehensive liberality, which, as it widens the range both of our ideas and of our feelings, is far more pardonable & less mischievous even when most *exagéré*, than the opposite fault. They have that spirit which is most opposed to the spirit of criticism and disceptation; that which induces us, not to combat but to pass over & disregard the errors in what is presented to us, in order to seize and appropriate to ourselves that portion or fragment (however diminutive) of truth, which there must necessarily be at the bottom of every error, which is not a mere fallacy in ratiocination. As the great danger to mankind is not from seeing what is not, but from overlooking what is; since clever & intelligent men hardly ever err from the former cause, but no powers of mind are any protection against the evils arising from imperfect and partial views of what is real; since not errors but half truths are the bane of human improvement, it seems to follow that the proper mode of philosophizing & discussing for a person who pursues the good of mankind & not the gratification of his own vanity, should be the direct opposite of the *philosophie critique* of the last century: it should consist, not in attacking men's wrong opinions, but in giving them that knowledge which will enable them to form right ones that will push off the wrong ones, as the new leaves push off the withered ones of the last year.[17]

[17] Letter to d'Eichthal (7 November 1829), *CW,* XII, 41-2.

The Saint-Simonians thus provided Mill with the framework for a vision of history that could sustain his reformist instincts against a conservative reverence for tradition while asserting the power of political criticism to both destroy and rebuild.

In "Spirit of the Age," Mill presented his adaptation of Saint-Simonian doctrine of history as progressing through conflicting belief systems in an ongoing succession of "natural" and "transitional" states. He defines natural states as societies in which "worldly power, and moral influence, are habitually and undisputedly exercised by the fittest persons whom the existing state of society affords," and elaborates this definition by suggesting that in such states, the "material interests of the community" are supported by those with the "greatest capacity for management." Such states would also exhibit a general consensus supporting those who control the "office of thinking for the people," that is, those best qualified "to think and judge rightly and usefully." Mill thus suggests an alliance of political and ideological elites to maintain social stability through their "moral influence." While the people of the natural state might have their occasional discontents, they nonetheless submit habitually to authority and tradition, and individual ambition does not stray outside the accepted pathways of social ascent. Secure in their power over a docile populace, those who govern the natural society "have no immediate interest in counteracting the progress of civilization; society is either stationary, or moves onward solely in those directions in which its progress brings it into no collision with the established order of things."[18]

[18] "Spirit of the Age III," *CW*, XXII, 252. It bears mentioning that while Mill's direct influence was the Saint-Simonians, the dualism of natural and transitional states can also be found in Coleridge's concepts of Permanence and Progression which figured prominently in Mill's later essay on him.

Mill argues that entry into the transitional state occurs as a result of meritocratic challenges to the leadership and moral influence of the political and intellectual elites:

> Society may be said to be in its *transitional* state, when it contains other persons fitter for worldly power and moral influence than those who have hitherto enjoyed them: when worldly power, and the greatest existing capacity for worldly affairs, are no longer united but severed; and when the authority which sets the opinions and forms the feelings of those who are not accustomed to think for themselves, does not exist at all, or, existing, resides anywhere but in the most cultivated intellects, and the most exalted characters, of the age.

Mill claims that once the doctrinal authority of the elites is undermined, "the world of opinions is a mere chaos," and consequently, the rules governing the process of political change are no longer binding. Anyone with a complaint feels at liberty to press to "remove what he deems the cause of his dissatisfaction," initiating a "moral and social revolution" until "worldly power and moral influence [has been replaced] in the hands of the most competent." With the ascendency of the new competent elite, order is restored and society settles into a new natural state for which it "resumes its onward progress, at the point where it was stopped before by the social system which it has shivered."[19]

Though the role of elites is crucial in Mill's account, he is nonetheless able to retain and justify his advocacy of a liberal and representative politics. He distinguishes between "two states of society" which have the common attribute that "worldly power is exercised by the fittest men" but otherwise differ in all respects. As exemplified by the United States and the ancient republics, those who hold power in the first of the two social states "are purposely selected for their fitness" in some form of election. Merit determines power. Mill claims that such societies exhibit an internal stability assuring that as "every new intellectual power" develops, the existing social order and political

[19] Ibid., 252, 253.

process can accommodate and reward their ascendency. Such societies, Mill claims, do not "contain the seeds of their own dissolution," though their ultimate collapse can arrive as a consequence of external forces. The alternative "state of society," for which "most of the nations of Europe in the middle ages" provide an example, are based on hereditary passing of power, and such states must ultimately become unstable as the governing elite becomes corrupt and incompetent through the succession of generations. Unless such a society is isolated enough to fend off "the progress of civilization" itself—Mill mentions clans in the Scottish Highlands—its development will ultimately "render the monopolizers of power, actually less fit for it than they were originally," and "some of those who are excluded from power [will be] fitter for it." Mill claims that this latter case is the "correct account" of what has proceeded in Europe to produce the current age of transition.[20]

Though the distinction between two states of society allows Mill to claim the superiority of representative politics in accommodating progress (though, as we shall point out, he would revisit this claim after reading Tocqueville), his argument surprisingly turns away from this Benthamite conclusion and takes a conservative turn. The decisive issue determining the form of political institutions is the intellectual fitness of a nation in its stage of development, not the principles of human nature, and certainly not principles of abstract right. Indeed, he claims that it is an error to construct a "philosophy of politics on...the universal principles of human nature," and that "in no age, as civilization advances, are the prevailing tendencies exactly the same as in the preceding age, nor do those tendencies act under precisely the same combination of external circumstances." We have seen that Mill elaborates on these views in the *Logic*

[20] Ibid., 253-5.

and later essays, but at this early stage Mill embraces the relativist implication of his shift to a contextual perspective by suggesting that it is folly to assert the failures of the middle ages for "the irresponsible power of their rulers" and or to claim that "popular institutions" would have had greater utility:

> To find fault with our ancestors for not having annual parliaments, universal suffrage, and vote by ballot, would be like quarrelling with the Greeks and Romans for not using steam navigation, when we know it is so safe and expeditious; which would be, in short, simply finding fault with the third century before Christ for not being the eighteenth century after. It was necessary that many other things should be thought and done, before, according to the laws of human affairs, it was possible that steam navigation should be thought of. Human nature must proceed step by step, in politics as well as in physics.[21]

Mill's implication that the power of landed aristocrats had once had a legitimate place and that progress is the outcome of an organic process of step-wise maturation is a repudiation of the Benthamite perspective and a strikingly conservative position for a self-described "radical and democrat."

Mill's emphasis on the role of intellectual elites in historical progress and change constitutes another deviation from democratic orthodoxy. As earlier noted, Mill's adaptation of the Saint-Simonian distinction between organic and critical periods crucially relied on the role of ideas in both supporting the institutional stability of the organic/natural epoch, and in prompting and defining the period of turmoil that constitutes critical/transitional periods. In periods of stability, the multitude relies on the

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[21] Ibid., 256-7. As noted in the previous chapter, Mill's relativism was also exhibited in his "Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy," which was written at the same time "Spirit of the Age" was published. Mill rejected the argument of classical economists that their assumptions contained timeless truths about human nature, and insisted that their assumptions reflected their own specific historical period. See Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill*, 120-1 and note 99. See also Mueller, *Mill and French Thought*, 64-5. It should also be noted that in a letter to Carlyle, Mill objected to the relativistic implications of what he called German "historical fatalism," which he said "arrived at the annihilation of all moral distinctions except *success* and *not success*." Letter to Carlyle (2 February 1833), *CW*, XII, 139.

moral leadership of the "instructed," and the unity of the intellectual leadership assures adherence to public values and provides essential moral guidance. This authority, however, is nullified when divisions occur within the instructed class, causing the "uninstructed to lose faith in them." Without the guidance of the elites, "society is exposed to all the errors and dangers which are to be expected when persons who have never studied any branch of knowledge comprehensively and as a whole attempt to judge for themselves upon particular parts of it." Mill claims that "this is the condition we are really in," as the lack of coherent leadership yields to the "exercise of private judgement" which one can only hope will provide a source of improvement. [22]

The question of progress pervades "Spirit of the Age." As already noted, Mill dismisses the claim that there has been progress in the dissemination of anything but superficial knowledge, and he also claims that while he remained "a firm believer in the improvement of the age," that improvement could not be attributed to a "growth in human understanding [which] has now risen to the capacity of perceiving our true interests." Mill also appears to endorse the Saint-Simonian belief that the intellectual anarchy of a critical/transitional period is an impediment to progress, that progress depends on the orderly stability of the natural state. Indeed, the diffusion of superficial knowledge is attacked as emboldening those without credentials and creating a diversity of uninformed opinion that "is not a state of health, but, at the best, of convalescence. It is a necessary stage in the progress of civilization, but it is attended with numerous evils; as one part of a road may be rougher or more dangerous than another, although every step brings the traveller nearer to his desired end." Its role as a "necessary stage" appears to be founded on the requirement for a changing of the intellectual guard that occurs during

[22] "Spirit of the Age II," *CW,* XXII, 238.

transitional phases and suggests that Mill has accepted a deterministic account of progress. Yet the form of the progress itself has less to do with the role of the uninstructed than it does with the development of the intellectual leadership itself. The chief evil of the transitional period is that "the multitudes are without a guide; and society is exposed to all the errors and dangers which are to be expected when persons who have never studied any branch of knowledge comprehensively and as a whole attempt to judge for themselves upon particular parts of it."[23] For Mill, this anarchy of opinion in which everyone takes themselves to be an expert is an impediment and distraction from the source of genuine progress, which remains the province of the real experts, those who devote themselves to a scientific and systematic understanding of society and politics. Mill thus states an additional "necessary" condition for progress:

> It is, therefore, one of the necessary conditions of humanity, that the majority must either have wrong opinions, or no fixed opinions, or must place the degree of reliance warranted by reason, in the authority of those who have made moral and social philosophy their peculiar study. It is right that every man should attempt to understand his interest and his duty. It is right that he should follow his reason as far as his reason will carry him, and cultivate the faculty as highly as possible. But reason itself will teach most men that they must, in the last resort, fall back upon the authority of still more cultivated minds, as the ultimate sanction of the convictions of their reason itself.[24]

While one might focus on Mill's elitism—which, while subsequently softened, was never fully abandoned—the more essential point here is the central role of intellectual endeavor itself in the progressive movement of history.

The historical idealism presented in "Spirit of the Age" is not confined to the march of intellect and scientific achievement within the elite. Indeed, the moral influence

[23] Ibid., 238.
[24] Ibid., 244.

that is so crucial to the stability and the orderly progress under the natural state is defined explicitly to include a role for religion and religious leadership. Without placing much emphasis on it, Mill's discussion of the role of religion introduces an additional condition to the previously defined natural and transitional states. The natural state, as has been noted, does allow sufficient intellectual life to permit progressive change, albeit within the accepted principles upon which the natural state rests. Yet Mill distinguishes the possibility of another social condition, that of being stationary, to describe a culture in which there is no tolerance for deviation from orthodoxy. He cites the "Hindoos and the Turks" as "two great stationary communities" in which "religion possesses a sufficient ascendancy, to subdue the minds of the possessors of worldly power, and where the spirit of the prevailing religion is such as excludes the possibility of material conflict of opinion among its teachers." Mill proceeds to claim that "the same union of circumstances" that underlay the religious hegemony of the stationary Asian societies was also present in "only one *progressive* society—but that, the greatest which had ever existed: Christendom in the middle ages."[25] Because it was the sole repository of intellectual life, Mill argues that the Church provided its singular authority to maintain the natural state:

> When we consider for how long a period the Catholic clergy were the only members of the European community who could even read; that they were the sole depositaries of all the treasures of thought, and reservoirs of intellectual delight, handed down to us from the ancients; that the sanctity of their persons permitted to them alone, among nations of semi-barbarians, the tranquil pursuit of peaceful occupations and studies; that, howsoever defective the morality which they taught, they had at least a mission for curbing the unruly passions of mankind, and teaching them to set a value upon a distant end, paramount to immediate temptations, and to prize gratifications consisting of mental feelings above bodily sensation.[26]

[25] "Spirit of the Age V[1]," *CW*, XXII, 305. Italics in original.
[26] Ibid., 305-6.

Mill then proceeds to articulate the relativist implication of his recognition of the role of the Church:

> Reflecting on these things, I cannot persuade myself to doubt that the ascendancy of the Catholic clergy was to be desired, for that day, even by the philosopher; and that it has been a potent cause, if even it was not an indispensable condition, of the present civilization of Europe.[27]

The "great and flagrant" vices of the Church were excessive, but nonetheless excused as necessary to maintain "the conditions of a natural state of society."[28]

Mill's distinction between the stationary natural state of the "Hindoos and Turks" and the progressive natural state governed by the Catholic Church is not satisfactorily explained. He simply asserts that "the age of transition arrived" as the Church became "incompatible with improvement" and suppressed the "expansion of the human intellect" which could "not any longer consist with their ascendency." It is far from obvious why an expanding human intellect should only have been present in Christian Europe leaving Asia to wallow in a morass of stationary backwardness. One is tempted to accuse Mill of Orientalism (which surely could also be levelled at his father), though he proceeds to suggest that parts of Europe also remained under Catholic rule because "the materials were not sufficiently prepared" to resist the power of the "hateful edifice." One is left to guess at what was necessary to prepare the possibility for progress out of the stationary condition. Indeed, the question of how to account for a change in beliefs hovers over much of what Mill claims regarding the passage into a transitional state. There is an implication that the Reformation was enabled by the intellectual maturation of the people at large, by the wherewithal to "choose your own creed...instigated by conscience" and to

[27] Ibid., 306.
[28] Ibid.

regard the religious leader as no more than a teacher and guide, not merely as an "interpreter of religion" but as one having "a purer heart, and a more cultivated intelligence."[29] The leaders of the Reformation—Luther, Calvin, or even Henry VIII—are not mentioned, as one might expect given Mill's emphasis on the role of elites. Yet the suggestion that there had been a democratization of intellect which supported a fundamental doctrinal change deviates from the main thrust of Mill's argument that elite opinion and leadership impels or impedes progress. Mill's identification of a stationary condition thus easily mutates into a political charge that there are forces that are themselves stationary, and whose power depends upon the suppression of progressive elements. He demands that "worldly power must pass from the hands of the stationary part of mankind into those of the progressive part. There must be a moral and social revolution, which shall, indeed, take away no men's lives or property, but which shall leave to no man one fraction of unearned distinction or unearned importance."[30] This call for a bloodless revolution in which the rule of the dynastic landed elites would be deposed by a meritocracy seems oddly naïve in the wake of the French Revolution, and it seems to indicate that Mill's adoption of the Saint-Simonian distinction between organic

[29] "Spirit of the Age V[2]," *CW,* XXII, 312-3. While it is impossible to know whether Mill himself was troubled by his explanation of the breakdown of medieval Christendom, he revisited the subject in 1845 in his review, "Guizot's Essays and Lectures in History." He criticizes Guizot as falling short of a "scientific explanation" in his claim that feudal institutions failed "from their own defects." Instead, Mill elaborates an explanation which is consistent with the analysis in *Spirit*, and arrives at a stunning conclusion: "There can be but one answer; the feudal system, with all its deficiencies, was sufficiently a government, contained within itself a sufficient mixture of authority and liberty, afforded sufficient protection to industry, and encouragement and scope to the development of the human faculties, to enable the natural causes of social improvement to resume their course. What these causes were, and why they have been so much more active in Europe than in parts of the earth which were much earlier civilized, is far too difficult an inquiry to be entered upon in this place... About the matter of fact, in respect to the feudal period, there can be no doubt. When the history of what are called the dark ages, because they had not yet a vernacular literature, and did not write a correct Latin style, shall be written as it deserves to be, that will be seen by all, which is already recognized by the great historical inquirers of the present time—that *at no period of history was human intellect more active, or society more unmistakably in a state of rapid advance than during a great part of the so much vilified feudal period*." *CW,* XX, 288, 289-90. Italics added. Guizot's argument will be reviewed in the following chapter which will examine Mill's theory of the stationary state.

[30] "Spirit of the Age II," *CW,* XXII, 245.

and critical epochs is merely a way of claiming that history is on his side. By characterizing his own age as one of transition, he is able to dress up his claims about the enervation of the conservative elites and the need for a change of national leadership to formulate the moral and political principles of a new age.

Yet his attempt to stake out a perspective on history should not be dismissed as special pleading. Mill's initial effort to comprehend history claims that it is progressive, that it advances through successive periods of stability and revolutionary upheaval; that the advances are propelled by the diffusion of knowledge and intellectual advance among the instructed; that leadership is retained by those most qualified to defend prevailing doctrine; that changes of leadership emerge to advance a new doctrine. History, it might be claimed, is best understood as intellectual history, as the unfolding and progress of thought and ideas toward an improved human prospect. Capaldi argues that Mill links the evolution of social and moral doctrine to economic change, and, to be sure, Mill certainly does recognize the influence of wealth and "worldly power." [31] Nonetheless, there is scarcely any suggestion of a linkage between ideology and economic structure in "Spirit of the Age"; indeed, Mill often seems to suggest that the evolution of ruling beliefs have a life of their own, retaining their authority through tradition and reverence for the past, adapting to inquiry and critique by the intelligentsia, often evolving as a result of generational conflict and succession. While there should be no confusing it with the speculative claims of his German contemporaries which Mill always rejected as

[31] See Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill*, 133. It should be pointed out that even if "Spirit of the Age" does not provide an example of Capaldi's claim, Mill does state in the *Autobiography* that the Saint-Simonians opened his eyes "to the very limited and temporary value of the old political economy, which assumes private property and inheritance as indefeasible facts, and freedom of production and exchange as the *dernier mot* of social improvement" (*Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 176). It is also obvious enough that Mill was aware of the connection between social status and political belief throughout his life.

intuitionism, the emphasis of his argument on intellectual development and the central role of ideas and beliefs in defining political institutions and culture might be broadly characterized as a form of the continental idealism that had been adapted from such direct influences as the Coleridgeans and the Saint-Simonians.[32]

While Mill would later modify the major themes of "Spirit of the Age"—the relationship and political roles of intellectual elites and the uninstructed masses was revisited by Mill multiple times—he remained steadfast in his conviction about the indispensable power of ideas as a force for progressive change, culminating with *On Liberty*. Indeed, only a few years after the 1831 publication of "Spirit," Mill returned to the subject in yet another review of the history of the French Revolution. The author was Archibald Alison, a Tory whose political convictions could not have been more opposite to Mill's and who would later be an apologist for slavery and a supporter of the Confederacy in the American Civil War. Alison's method was precisely of the type that Mill disdained: a biographically-based narrative of goodness and perfidy, anything but the scientific history that Mill advocated. Mill is accordingly dismissive of Alison's effort, stating that "a *more* useless book than this of Mr. Alison's, one which approaches nearer to the ideal of absolute inutility, we believe we might go far to seek." Mill makes a modest contribution to the grand tradition of literary insult by observing that Alison's "negation of genius amounts almost to a positive quality."[33] Despite Mill's contempt for

[32] Many Mill scholars have noted Mill's (proudly) acknowledged eclecticism, his intellectual curiosity, and efforts to incorporate different beliefs and arguments with his own. Anschutz, for example, notes that Mill was "thoroughly representative of his age, in the eagerness with which he seeks out and endeavours to assimilate every last exotic line of thought which shows any signs of vitality" (Anschutz, *Philosophy of Mill*., 5). It should also be noted that the Saint-Simonians themselves had assimilated much German philosophy during the period. See Manuel, *Prophets of Paris*, ch. 4, and Mueller, *Mill and French Thought*, ch. 3.

[33] "Alison's History of the French Revolution," *CW*, XX, 116. The full passage states that "We have not often happened to meet with an author of any work of pretension less endowed than Mr. Alison with the

Alison's effort, he overcame his reluctance to proceed with his review in order to establish that the French Revolution was not merely a French phenomenon, but an example and consequence of a "progressive revolution embracing the whole human race." It was, indeed, a reflection of a moral revolution, a necessary condition for a political revolution, that itself was a consequence of the dissemination of learning:

> All political revolutions, not effected by foreign conquest, originate in moral revolutions. The subversion of established institutions is merely one consequence of the previous subversion of established opinions. The hundred political revolutions of the last three centuries were but a few outward manifestations of a moral revolution, which dates from the great breaking loose of the human faculties commonly described as the "revival of letters," and of which the main instrument and agent was the invention of printing.[34]

The moral revolution, Mill believed, was on-going, and the French Revolution was "but a mere incident in a great change in man himself, in his belief, in his principles of conduct, and therefore in the outward arrangements of society; a change which is but half completed, and which is now in a state of more rapid progress here in England, than anywhere else."[35]

Though Mill did not republish the "Spirit" essays or the Alison review in *Dissertations*, the theme of the role of ideas and beliefs in history remained central in his later and more mature works. As earlier noted, in the development of Mill's thinking, the influence of Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* was pivotal. First introduced to

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faculty of original thought; his negation of genius amounts almost to a positive quality. Notwithstanding, or, perhaps, in consequence of, this deficiency, he deals largely in general reflections; which accordingly are of the barrenest; when true, so true that no one ever thought them false; when false, nowise that kind of false propositions which come from a penetrating but partial or hasty glance at the thing spoken of, and, therefore. though not true, have instructive truth in them; but such as a country-gentleman, accustomed to be king of his company, talks after dinner."

[34] Ibid., 118.

[35] Ibid., It is notable that Mill's reference to a" revival of letters" and the "invention of printing" appears to reverse his dismissal in "Spirit of the Age" of Enlightenment optimism regarding the diffusion of scientific knowledge.

Comte's "Traité de Politique Positive" by d'Eichthal in 1829, Mill was intrigued but regarded Comte's approach to politics as overly concerned with systematizing and unacceptably deductive and reductionist.[36] In his *Autobiography* written over forty years later, Mill would fulminate that Comte's *Système de politique positive* was "the completest system of spiritual and temporal despotism which ever yet emanated from a human brain."[37] Yet between the inauspicious introduction and the utter rejection at the conclusion, Mill found a kindred spirit in the Comte of the *Cours*, a fellow philosopher dedicated to formulating a science of society. After reading the first two volumes of the *Cours*, Mill wrote in 1837 that it is "one of the most profound books ever written on the philosophy of the sciences."[38] As a leading theorist among the Saint-Simonians, Comte had already had by then an indirect influence on Mill's initial speculation in "Spirit of the Age," and the presence of Comte in Mill's writings about history became steadily more explicit. Their correspondence began as Mill was completing the *Logic*, and Mill's debt to Comte is an important presence in the final chapters. After they broke contact in 1847, Mill became increasingly alarmed by the trend of Comte's political beliefs, and in his 1865 essay *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, Mill offered a thorough examination of Comte's philosophy and politics. While the first part of the Comte essay was an appreciative critique of Comte's contribution to social theory and the philosophy of history, the second part on Comte's "Later Speculations" was an assault on his authoritarianism, his aspirations for a cult-like religion of humanity, and his derogatory attitude towards women. Nonetheless, despite their profound disagreements, Mill did not

[36] Letter to Gustave d'Eichthal (8 October 1829), *CW,* XII, 35-7. Written a mere six months after Macaulay's critique of his father, that it is hard to believe that Mill was not aware of how similar his arguments against Comte echoed Macaulay's.
[37] *Autobiography*, *CW,* I, 221.
[38] Letter to John Pringle Nichols (21 December 1837), *CW,* XII, 363.

believe that Comte's political program followed as a necessary consequence of his philosophy of history or his methodological arguments, which Mill considered on their own merits.

Comte's essential contribution to Mill's historical thinking was to advance beyond the cyclical model described in "Spirit of the Age" and the vague notion of moral revolution in "Alison" to provide a comprehensive and optimistic vision of history as a story of intellectual progress. As Shirley Letwin has put it, "Mill thought Comte was speaking of something admirably concrete" in his theory of progress as a "development subject to fixed conditions and operating according to necessary laws, advancing toward a definite, though never attained goal."[39] While the "Spirit" essays contained an implicit optimism, if only through Mill's evident enthusiasm for the outcome of his own age of transition, the theory did not include a rationale for such a claim and could easily be interpreted as suggesting cycles of intellectual stability and turbulence without any implication of improvement. Indeed, as we shall see, Mill would make a crucial distinction between progress and improvement in the *Logic* and in his 1836 essay "Civilization," and whether there had been improvement would become an open question.

Comte, however, offered a theory of history that did suggest that the human lot was improving through its intellectual advancement; as such, Comte was an inheritor of the French Enlightenment and the optimism that passed from Turgot through Condorcet, each of whom also traced historical progress as stages in the development of reason and science. Comte fully acknowledged his French Enlightenment sources, who also included

[39] Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Pursuit of Certainty: David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Beatrice Webb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 246.

Montesquieu, d'Alembert and Say, as well as those who reacted against them, Saint-Simon, de Maistre and de Bonald. As J.B. Bury and Friedrich Hayek have pointed out, Turgot anticipated Comte in the second of his *Discourses on Universal History*, in which he also posited that the "progress of the human mind" had passed through three stages, defining them much as Comte would later.[40] Yet among this disparate group, Condorcet was pre-eminent, Comte having acknowledged that "from the outset of my career, I have never ceased to represent the great Condorcet as my spiritual father."[41] Among the reasons for Mill's early affinity with Comte may have been their similar programs of synthesis and reconciliation. Comte's effort to combine the progressive liberalism of Turgot and Condorcet with the reactionary organicism of de Maistre parallels Mill's "many-sided" attempt to show how Bentham and Coleridge "completed" each other. Mill was deeply familiar with Comte's liberal influences, and frequently expressed his admiration for them as both philosophers and statesmen. In the *Autobiography*, Mill recounts reading Condorcet's *Life of Turgot*, and considering it "a book well calculated to excite the best sort of enthusiasm, since it contains one of the noblest and wisest of lives, described by one of the noblest and wisest of men."[42] This late encomium to Turgot mirrors an early digression in which he was praised as "a sublime character...strictly under the dominion of principle...for whose elevated, comprehensive and searching intellect no speculation was too vast."[43] Having imagined himself a "Girondist [as

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[40] O*n Universal History*, in *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics*, Ronald Meek, trans. and ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 102. For commentaries on Turgot's anticipation of Comte, see J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 157; and F.A. von Hayek, "The Counter-Revolution of Science," *Economica* 8, no. 29 (February 1941): 11.
[41] Cited in Kenneth Thompson, *Auguste Comte: The Foundation of Sociology* (New York: John Wiley, 1975), 9.
[42] *Autobiography*, *CW,* I, 115.
[43] "The Use of History," *CW,* XXVI, 396.

Condorcet had been] in an English Convention,"[44] the young Mill, who would become a lifelong Francophile, might well have imagined himself as the heir to progressive French liberalism.

Comte's philosophy of history is offered in his Law of the Three Stages. Much as Condorcet had claimed that the expansion of knowledge and scientific understanding was the necessary foundation for moral progress and freedom, Comte argued for the connection between intellectual and other forms of development, and asserted that "intellectual evolution" is the "predominant principle" governing history:

> If our reason required at the outset the awakening and stimulating influence or the appetites, the passions, and the sentiments, not the less has human progression gone forward under its direction. It is only through the more and more marked influence of the reason over the general conduct of man and of society, that the gradual march of our race has attained that regularity and persevering continuity which distinguish it so radically from the desultory and barren expansion of even the highest of the animal orders... Since the birth of philosophy, the history of society has been regarded as governed by the history of the human mind.[45]

Comte thus claims that "the natural guide to all historical study of humanity" is the "general history of the human mind," which, in turn, compels us to study the history of human thought at the highest and most abstract level. Comte defined three epistemic approaches (or stages) through which mankind encounters the world, and it was through the delineation of these approaches that Comte produced a comprehensive theory of history and culture.

The three stages are termed the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. The theological stage is characterized by the belief that nature is animated by spiritual beings, and that natural events can thus be explained through reference to supernatural or

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[44] *Autobiography*, *CW,* I, 67.
[45] Comte, *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, in Thompson, *Comte,* 158.

god-like agencies. Social organization in the theological phase is sustained by religious commitment and tribal affiliation, under the political domination of priests or shamans who acquire privileges and power due to their insight into the divine. A military class is regarded as imbued with superhuman powers. Comte sought to explain the passage into the subsequent metaphysical phase as the result of continued efforts to refine explanations of natural occurrences and the growing recognition of regularity instead of extraordinary events. The metaphysical phase is ushered in as belief in spiritual forces and the random intervention of divine powers is replaced by the theory that the phenomenal world is governed by inherent natural essences or abstract forces and principles.[46] With its emphasis on uniformity and regularity, social and political life of the metaphysical stage migrates from the dominance of religious and military classes toward the rule of civil authorities who codify, administer and enforce law. Finally, with the advent of the positive or scientific period, the speculative search for supernatural or essential being draws to a close as observation of actual phenomena under the discipline of scientific method is accepted as the only method for discovering the laws that govern the world. Cultural leadership devolves to scientists and industrialists who understand the laws of nature and are able to apply them to the creation of an improved standard of living. Specialization and the division of labor become the norm in determining social and economic roles.

[46] Comte's metaphysical stage was posited as a transition between the theological and the positive, and was frequently misunderstood. Mill, for example, accused Whewell of misconstruing Comte's meaning, and helpfully clarified that in the metaphysical stage "the qualities of things were mistaken for real entities dwelling in the things; when the phenomena of living bodies were thought to be accounted for by being referred to as a 'vital force;' when, in short, the abstract names of phenomena were mistaken for the causes of their existence." (*Logic, CW,* VIII, 929n).

For Comte, as with his Enlightenment forbearers, history is characterized by the ascendency of the faculties of reason and scientific understanding, and the process was analogized to the process of intellectual maturity in an individual:

> The general, like the individual human mind, is governed by imagination first, and then, after a sufficient exercise of the faculties at large, more and more by reason. The same grounds on which the process takes place in the individual case determine that of the whole species; and with the more certainty and power on account of the greater complexity and perpetuity of the social organism.[47]

Comte's critical insight, however, was to map his theory of the stages of development to a proposed hierarchy of the sciences. Comte argued that the various scientific disciplines can be placed in a cumulative hierarchy in which the pinnacle, sociology, encompasses the truths uncovered in all of those beneath it. The mastery of each of the disciplines proceeds, Comte claims, through the three stages, initially comprehended in an imaginative-theological stage and ultimately proceeding to the rational-positive stage. Asserting that "the most simple phenomena must be the most general," Comte argued that science begins at this most abstract level and proceeds toward study of the more concrete and complex. The understanding of mathematics thus precedes other specialties, followed by astronomy and physics, ultimately advancing to sociology as the science of humanity. Each specialty successively builds upon those preceding it as necessary steps. Mill summarized Comte's argument:

> It follows that the order in which the sciences succeed one another in the series, cannot but be, in the main, the historical order of their development; and is the only order in which they can rationally be studied. For this last there is an additional reason: since the more special and complete sciences require not only the truths of the simpler and more general ones, but still more their methods. The scientific intellect, both in the individual and in the race, must learn in the more elementary studies that art of investigation and those canons of proof which are to

[47] Comte, *Cours*, in Thompson, *Comte*, 163.

> be put in practice in the more elevated. No intellect is properly qualified for the higher part of the scale, without due practice in the lower.[48]

As history advances, the progress of the scientific disciplines can become asynchronous, some proceeding faster and further than others, with the result that the historical process itself does not contain clean breaks from one stage to the next and that in any historical moment the presence of theological, metaphysical and positive thinking can coexist. Comte argues that because it awaits achievements in sciences lower in the hierarchy, the most complex science of all, sociology, is also the least understood and thus remains in the theological stage, having "hitherto taken no scientific form at all."[49] Comte, of course, regarded himself as the pioneer who would advance sociology to the positive stage. Comte also believed that progress toward a science of man would be accompanied by a spiritual renewal, a Religion of Humanity, which would transcend the destructive "spiritual anarchy" that had been initiated by the Reformation and brought to fruition by the Enlightenment and Revolution. Here too Comte would lead the way. By subsuming and conflating scientific, social, moral and spiritual progress under the Law of the Three Stages, Comte believed himself able to claim that it was "by this law alone that the history of the human mind [had been] rendered intelligible."[50] Positivism not only offered mastery but redemption.

As we have noted, Mill responded to Comte's messianic vision with revulsion, but in both the *Logic* and his later essay on Comte, he nonetheless offers an almost unqualified endorsement of the Law of the Three Stages and the hierarchy of the sciences. Notwithstanding some caveats, Mill would assert that "we find no fundamental

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[48] *Comte and Positivism*, *CW*, X, 283-4.
[49] Comte, *Cours*, in Thompson, *Comte*, 165.
[50] Ibid.

errors in M. Comte's general conception of history" and "we do not think [it] likely to be ever, in its general features, superseded."[51] The appeal of Comte's pivotal argument was that it provided extension and structure to Mill's belief that "the state of the speculative faculties of mankind" is the "one social element which is predominant, and almost paramount, among the agents of the social progression."[52] By putting a "flood of light... upon the whole course of history" with the Law of the Three Stages, Comte traced the state of the intellect to the "correlative condition of other social phenomena,"[53] and explained "the general principles which, in this division of the social science, may be considered as established; namely, the necessary correlation between the form of government existing in any society and the contemporaneous state of civilization: a natural law which stamps the endless discussions and innumerable theories respecting forms of government in the abstract, as fruitless and worthless."[54] Comte had suggested that his three stages of history offered "the natural order of intellectual progress among mankind… their general mode of conceiving the universe must give its character to all their conceptions of detail." Comte's great accomplishment was a "connected view of history" which had demonstrated that the apparently separate histories of science, social organization and political power had a "necessary connexion and interdependence" with one another. Comte had grounded human progress in the "state of the speculative faculties of mankind," the "state of knowledge or in the prevalent beliefs."[55]

While Mill was impressed by Comte's account of historical process, his endorsement was not absolute, and his reservations ultimately undermined Comte's intent

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[51] *Comte and Positivism*, *CW,* X, 322 327.
[52] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 926.
[53] Ibid., 928.
[54] Ibid., 919-20.
[55] *Comte and Positivism*, *CW,* X, 318; *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 926, 927.

and ambition. Though he never wavered in his belief that the foundation of historical progress was based on the cumulative process of intellectual advancement, Mill resisted the claim that Comte's Law had achieved the status of a genuine scientific law. In the essay on Comte, Mill observes that "the history of our species, looked at as a comprehensive whole, does exhibit a determinate course, a certain order of development: though history alone cannot prove this to be a necessary law, as distinguished from a temporary accident."[56] To advance from an empirical law to a "necessary law" required that it be demonstrated to be consistent with the laws of human nature:

> We are justified in concluding, that the order of human progression in all respects will mainly depend on the order of progression in the intellectual convictions of mankind, that is, on the law of the successive transformations of human opinions. The question remains, whether this law can be determined; at first from history as an empirical law, then converted into a scientific theorem by deducing it *à priori* from the principles of human nature.[57]

We should recognize the additional step that Mill proposes is the process of inverse deduction in which patterns of fact achieve the status of law only if they can be shown to be consistent with psychology. Inverse deduction thus turned the verification process of the natural sciences—in which a hypothesis achieves status as a theory through empirical validation—on its head.

While Mill claimed that he had arrived at inverse deduction through his reading of Comte, Comte himself had strongly resisted Mill's insistence on referencing any psychological criterion to validate his claims. Comte regarded psychology as a false science—he had actually embraced phrenology because of its physical relation to anatomy, while conceding the remote possibility that psychology could be encompassed

[56] *Comte and Positivism*, *CW,* X, 307.
[57] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 927.

within physiology—which purported to explain the individual outside and apart from his social and historical context. For Comte this was a mistake, and Mill's reference to the "principles of human nature" was hopelessly speculative, an example of metaphysical thinking. Comte's sole concession to a concept of human nature was to admit man's instinctive propensity to social existence, starting with family life. The science of man was not psychology but sociology, the pinnacle of the hierarchy of sciences.

Mill recognized Comte's approach to sociology as holistic and organic, "proceeding from the whole to the details"; the individual was to be understood from within the social organism, and all human endeavors—"Religious belief, philosophy, science, the fine arts, the industrial arts, commerce, navigation, government"—were all to be understood within their "close mutual dependence on one another."[58] Similarly, the Law of the Three Stages provided the context for understand and assessing the state of progress within any society. Comte was thus satisfied that the Law had achieved a scientific status without any *a priori* foundation. Mill, for his part, congratulated Comte for his historical erudition and insight, but found Comte's pretensions to scientific certainty unjustified. Mill was adamant that Comte's "low opinion of psychology" was a fatal mistake, particularly for the theory of social statics, and that "as a science, sociology can make no significant progress without supporting itself by a deeper understanding of human nature."[59] Moreover, Mill accused Comte of making no effort at understanding the complexity of inductive causal analysis, an issue that Mill believed to be crucial to forming a sound methodology for the human sciences. In the end, Mill's judgement was harsh, finding that "Mr. Comte's system makes no room" for the methods of

[58] *Comte and Positivism*, *CW*, X, 308.
[59] Letter to Comte (26 March 1846), in Haac, *Correspondence*, 366.

discriminating between complex conditions in assigning causation.[60] Maintaining that "his predictions and recommendations with respect to the Future of society...appear to me greatly inferior in value to his appreciation of the Past," Mill's praise for Comte thus held back from awarding it the scientific status that it laid claim to.[61] This is a crucial qualification since, for both Comte and Mill, the whole point of sociology was to uncover "what artificial means may be used" to shape and control "the future history of the human race" and "accelerate...natural progress."[62] For all of Comte's grandiosity and despite Mill's enthusiasm for his theory of history, Mill concluded that Comte's model for a science of society failed in the most fundamental ways: it could neither offer reliable causal explanations, nor provide forecasts of future events, nor provide the means or methods for managing events.[63]

The role of the individual was the source of a second major difference between Comte and Mill, and it has significant bearing on their approaches to understanding historical change. As Maurice Mandelbaum has pointed out, "unlike Comte, Mill did not believe that there were laws of social change which operated in a necessary manner, independently of men's wills."[64] While Mill and Comte agreed that "the intellectual element in mankind...is the predominant circumstance in determining their progress,"[65] Mill did not accept the providential determinism, whether in the form of "order and progress" presented by Comte, or as a teleological unfolding of reason and freedom as

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[60] *Comte and Positivism*, *CW,* X, 309.
[61] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 928.
[62] Ibid., 929.
[63] Mill's judgement was restated in the essay on Comte: "M. Comte has not, in our opinion, created Sociology. Except his analysis of history, to which there is much to be added, but which we do not think likely to be ever, in its general features, superseded, he has done nothing in Sociology which does not require to be done over again, and better." *Comte and Positivism*, *CW,* X, 327.
[64] Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason*, 199.
[65] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 935.

argued by Hegel. In our discussion of his methodological individualism, we have already noted that Mill believed that social and political institutions had no ontological status beyond the individuals composing them. Similarly, ideas, beliefs and knowledge were all, in Mill's view, the product of individual minds without any independent reality. To be sure, those individual minds, in the collective, could exhibit uniform beliefs and hold to customs and traditions passed through generations into a common culture; it had been Mill's intention to study the composition and influence of culture in his planned ethology. Though Mill did not specify a precise definition, he regarded a nation's culture as a "general cause" which could be referred in explaining the tendencies of both the community as a whole and its political leaders:

> But I insist only on what is true of all rulers, viz., that the character and course of their actions is largely influenced...by the habitual sentiments and feelings, the general modes of thinking and acting, which prevail throughout the community of which they are members; as well as by the feelings, habits, and modes of thought which characterize the particular class in that community to which they themselves belong. And no one will understand or be able to decipher their system of conduct, who does not take all these things into account. They are also much influenced by the maxims and traditions which have descended to them from other rulers, their predecessors; which maxims and traditions have been known to retain an ascendancy during long periods... I put aside the influence of other less general causes.[66]

As Mill explained in "Coleridge," the prevalence and power of such cultural "general causes" provides the source of political and social stability. And, as presented in "Spirit of the Age," they defined the nature of organic or natural periods of history.

However, what Mill left unexplored in "Spirit" was the process by which natural periods destabilize into periods of transition, thus leaving unanswered the question of how historical change is to be accounted for. What disrupts the "general causes" and

[66] Ibid., 891.

enables progress? In a chapter to the *Logic* first published in the 1862 edition, Mill frames this question as a variation of the problem of free will and determinism, posing the opposition of "the subjection of historical facts to uniform laws" against "the characters of individuals and the acts of government."[67] The chapter had been added as Mill's response to the controversy inspired by Henry Thomas Buckle's *History of Civilization in England*, in which he claimed to have discovered incontrovertible laws of history, comparable to laws of physics. Mill's response was to affirm that there was no incompatibility between a scientific history and the recognition that the individual will can alter its course. Just as he had resolved the question of free will and necessity, he claimed that their opposition was based on a misunderstanding of causality and the confusion of determinism with fatalism. Mill asserted that the will of the individual agent can act within a deterministic world as a cause that can alter events:

> Because whatever happens will be the effect of causes, human volitions among the rest, it does not follow that volitions, even those of peculiar individuals, are not of great efficacy as causes... However universal the laws of social development may be, they cannot be more universal or more rigorous than those of the physical agencies of nature; yet human will can convert these into instruments of its designs... Human and social facts...are not less, but more, modifiable, than mechanical and chemical facts; human agency, therefore, has still greater power over them.[68]

Mill thus reaffirms that a free, choosing individual can influence and overcome his circumstances through the use of his personal endowments and moral clarity, a doctrine that would later become central to his utilitarian ethics and conception of man as a progressive being. Yet Mill appears to go further by moving beyond the context of moral volition to assert that the individual has the power not only to change himself, but that he

[67] Ibid., 936.
[68] Ibid., 936-7.

also has the potential to change the conditions and course of events in which he has been placed. The exertion of human will introduces contingency into a determined world, and specifically to change "the collective knowledge and intellectual development of the race."[69]

The cause of historical change, the vehicle by which a natural state enters a transitional period, can thus be accounted for by the intelligence, creativity and action of the exceptional individual. Ordinary individuals adhere to the conventions of their age, and to the extent that there are variations among them, their differences "neutralize one another" so as not to disrupt social order. But the presence of the great individual is among the "special causes" that can interrupt and interfere with the flow of history as would otherwise be determined by the general causes imbedded in a culture. Indeed, the "volitions of exceptional persons" are "indispensable links in the chain of causation by which even the general causes produce their effect."[70] The role of exceptional individuals is a theme that runs through Mill's work, initially suggested in "Spirit of the Age" in the context of elites in cultural leadership, and continued in *On Liberty*:

> The initiation of all wise or noble things, comes and must come from individuals; generally at first from some one individual. The honour and glory of the average man is that he is capable of following that initiative; that he can respond internally to wise and noble things, and be led to them with his eyes open.[71]

Mill was careful to clarify that he was not advocating Carlylian hero-worship, nor a providential role for the individual embodying a spiritual quest. For Mill, the efficacy of exceptional individuals was simply a matter of fact, and one which should be encouraged as indispensable to cultural vitality and progress. Replying to Macaulay's claim that great

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[69] Ibid., 937.
[70] Ibid.
[71] *On Liberty*, *CW*, XVIII, 269.

men are merely at the advance of movements that would have occurred regardless of their presence, Mill maintains that "Eminent men do not merely see the coming light from the hill-top, they mount on the hill-top and evoke it; and if no one had ever ascended thither, the light, in many cases, might never have risen upon the plain at all." He cites Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, without whom "there would have been no philosophy for the next two thousand years," and Christ and St. Paul, without whom (as should go without saying) "there would have been no Christianity." Similarly, Mill suggests that cultural differences can be attributed to the impact of singular individuals:

> It is, at all events, a fact, that different portions of mankind, under the influence of different circumstances, have developed themselves in a more or less different manner and into different forms; and among these determining circumstances, the individual character of their great speculative thinkers or practical organizers may well have been one.[72]

Mill offers the impact of Confucius on China and the Norman Conquest —"no other person but [William] could have accomplished the enterprise"—on the character of Britain as additional examples.

Perhaps sensing that he has strayed too far in emphasizing the role of individuals, Mill claims his argument "is consistent with the fullest recognition that there are invariable laws of historical phenomena."[73] But rather than confront and explore the theoretical problem of necessity and contingency in history, Mill pivots to a claim that would become central to his cultural critique, that the role of the individual has become progressively diminished over time. Citing his friend George Grote's observation that the "whole destiny of subsequent civilization" turned on the "personal character...of some one individual" in ancient Greece, Mill argues that the passage into modernity has

[72] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 938.
[73] Ibid., 939.

reduced the impact that a single individual can have (somehow forgetting Napoleon!) on the "general tendencies of human affairs":

> Neither ordinary accidents, nor the characters of individuals, can ever again be so vitally important as they then were. The longer our species lasts, *and the more civilized it becomes*, the more...does the influence of past generations over the present, and of mankind *en masse* over every individual in it, predominate over other forces: and though the course of affairs never ceases to be susceptible of alteration both by accidents and by personal qualities, the increasing preponderance of the collective agency of the species over all minor causes, is constantly bringing the general evolution of the race into something which deviates less from a certain and preappointed track.[74]

Mill's argument that the cumulative power of the past over the present suggests a very different reading of history than the one we have been describing. History is not only the story of the triumphant progress of intellectual achievement, propelled forward by the science, art and moral vision of great men who provide leadership to the mass of humanity. It appears that it is also the story of their decaying influence against the weight of history itself as mankind becomes "more civilized."

This alternative version of history was rooted in the materialism of the Scottish stadial theory that passed to Mill from his father. Despite the idealist-positivist philosophy of history that he presented through the publication of the *Logic*, Mill never abandoned the stadial theory, alluding to it as late as 1868 in the Comte essay.[75] In fact, though it has scarcely been noted by the major commentators on Mill's economic theory, the "Preliminary Remarks" to the *Principles of Political Economy* contains an extended presentation of stadialism, in at least as much detail as anything published by his father or

[74] Ibid., 942. Italics added.
[75] *Comte and Positivism*, *CW*, X, 279.

Adam Smith in advocating the theory.[76] The materialism of the stadial theory was also strongly suggested in two earlier works in which Mill lashed out at the commercial culture which had been unleashed by the early stages of industrialization in England. The stadial philosophy of history provides a crucial context for Mill's prolonged attack on mass culture in *On Liberty* and for the ambiguity that hangs over Mill's commitment to historical progress.

We will turn first to the version of stadial theory that Mill presented in the *Principles*. The stadial schema in Mill's version of the theory conforms exactly to Smith's version: the natural history of political economy begins with hunter societies; pastoral or nomadic societies emerge as animals are domesticated; the tilling of pasture land leads to the agricultural stage; and the growing diversity of desires with the emergence of trade and artisanship provide the foundation for commercial and industrial society. Mill's speculative history also bears the imprint of Malthus and of his loathing for landed aristocracy ("the squandering class"), and it offers considerably more detail about the stages and transitions than Smith had offered. While the stadial theory is centered on the concept of property and how societies emerge from poverty toward prosperity, Mill weaves the social and political implications of this development into his narrative, with particular attention to the security of property and its accumulation, the distribution of wealth and social inequality, the division of labor, the emergence of desire

[76] *Political Economy*, *CW*, II, 10-21. The "Preliminary Remarks" have received little notice. Pedro Schwartz does not refer to them at all. Samuel Hollander refers to them as "a convenient peg to attach a largely descriptive prologue to the *Principles*"; see *The Economics of John Stuart Mill*, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 198. While Hollander's reference is rather dismissive, it must be admitted that Mill's philosophy of history is not really germane to the construction of his economic theory, and it is not altogether clear why Mill introduced the *Political Economy* in this way. Mill's economic theory made little reference to historical economic development and, as we saw in the previous chapter, was explicitly *a prioristic*.

for comfort and luxury, and rivalry between commercial and landed classes. There is an element of triumphalism in Mill's description of the wealth generated by commercial state:

> The world now contains several extensive regions, provided with the various ingredients of wealth in a degree of abundance of which former ages had not even the idea. Without compulsory labour, an enormous mass of food is annually extracted from the soil, and maintains, besides the actual producers, an equal, sometimes a greater number of labourers, occupied in producing conveniences and luxuries of innumerable kinds, or in transporting them from place to place; also a multitude of persons employed in directing and superintending these various labours... The food thus raised supports a far larger population than had ever existed...on an equal space of ground; and supports them with certainty, exempt from those periodically recurring famines so abundant in the early history of Europe... Besides this great increase in the quantity of food, it has greatly improved in quality and variety; while conveniences and luxuries, other than food, are no longer limited to a small and opulent class, but descend, in great abundance, through many widening strata in society. The collective resources of one of these communities, when it chooses to put them forth for any unexpected purpose; its ability to maintain fleets and armies, to execute public works, either useful or ornamental, to perform national acts of beneficence, to found colonies, to have its people taught, to do anything in short which requires expense, and to do it with no sacrifice of the necessaries or even the substantial comforts of its inhabitants, are such as the world never saw before.[77]

Mill's presentation, like those of his predecessors, is entirely oriented around describing an internal logic of economic development, that the basic requirements for shelter and sustenance, once satisfied, inevitably spawn desires for greater levels of comfort and pleasure, and that these desires are met by enterprise and innovation. While Mill and the Scots agreed that a society could stall at any stage, the stadial theory contains an implicit teleology suggesting that human striving is most fully satisfied by the liberated individualism that is constitutive of the present Age of Commerce. And also like the Scots, Mill's account in the *Principles* is entirely materialistic, and seemingly at odds

[77] *Principles*, *CW*, II, 18-9.

with the version of history based on intellectual progress that had been presented in "Spirit of the Age" and the *Logic*.

Confronting this possible inconsistency, Mill was emphatic that any materialist account of history must be subordinated to the recognition that "acquirements of the mind" retain primacy. Smith had famously grounded his theory on the claim that all societies will exhibit the tendency toward a higher stage because mankind shares an innate "desire of bettering our condition."[78] Given Mill's demand that any law of society have an *a priori* grounding in psychology, he faced a challenge in showing that the desire for material improvement could be subordinated to a propensity for "intellectual activity [and] the pursuit of truth...save [in] decidedly exceptional individuals." Mill had to acknowledge the "impelling force" of the psychological "desire to increased material comfort." Mill's response is that the satisfaction of this desire depends upon accomplishments in the "progress of knowledge" to enable new technologies and productive methods:

> The impelling force to most of the improvements effected in the arts of life, is the desire of increased material comfort; but as we can only act upon external objects in proportion to our knowledge of them, the state of knowledge at any time is the limit of the industrial improvements possible at that time; and the progress of industry must follow, and depend on, the progress of knowledge. The same thing may be shown to be true...of the progress of the fine arts.[79]

Moreover, Mill makes the Coleridgean argument that society itself would fly apart if competitive instincts were not subordinated to a common creed, particularly in light of the Hobbesian drives within human nature:

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[78] Smith, *Wealth of Nations,* 341.
[79] *Logic*, *CW,* VIII, 926.

> Further, as the strongest propensities of uncultivated or half-cultivated human nature (being the purely selfish ones, and those of a sympathetic character which partake most of the nature of selfishness) evidently tend in themselves to disunite mankind, not to unite them,—to make them rivals, not confederates; social existence is only possible by a disciplining of those more powerful propensities, which consists in subordinating them to a common system of opinions.[80]

Mill thus affirms that the "state of their knowledge...or in their prevalent beliefs" is the foundation for both social stability and the orderly progress described by stadial theory.

The problem confronting Mill was the moral harm that could be unleashed if a society's prevalent belief is to enable each individual to pursue his own material gain. Smith had famously argued that the emerging civil society based on unregulated commercial activity was self-correcting and would ultimately redound to the common welfare. Yet Smith had confined this claim to economic well-being. He had also recognized that the division of labor was debilitating workers and that a society dominated by transactional relationships was eroding traditional civic virtues. Among his contemporaries, Smith was not alone in these concerns; we earlier reviewed the misgivings about the emergence of commercial society among other theorists of the Scottish Enlightenment, particularly Kames and Ferguson. Even as industrialization began to generate transformative wealth and inequality, questions about its social impact persisted and became more urgent, with Carlyle's Condition of England question following the romantic critiques. Had the progress of commerce and industry unleashed destructive forces on society? And for Mill, there was an additional question: Were the intellectual feats of ingenuity and inventiveness for the sake of material gain dominating and diminishing other forms of intellectual endeavor and purpose?

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[80] Ibid. Mill repeated a variation of these arguments in defending Comte against the criticism of Herbert Spencer; See *Comte and Positivism, CW,* X, 316-7.

The optimistic tone in "Spirit of the Age" conveyed an excitement about the prospect for social and political reform in which the traditional landed elites would be displaced by a new enlightened leadership and meritocratic culture. While the introduction to *Spirit* dismissed the gloomy nostalgia of Southey's *Colloquies*, Mill's outlook was increasingly less sanguine. The conservative critiques of the Coleridgeans and Carlyle had made an impact, and Mill was particularly unsettled by the growing dominance of "the commercial spirit." One of his first expressions of disenchantment was provoked by the Saint-Simonian admiration of English acumen and accomplishment in contrast to the clumsy business dealings and lack of entrepreneurship among the French. Soon after meeting Gustave d'Eichthal, Mill issued a caustic critique which characterized the English middle class as materialistic and deaf to any consideration beyond personal gain:

> You were very naturally struck with the superiority of the English to the French in all those qualities by which a nation is enabled to turn its productive and commercial resources to the best account. But this superiority is closely connected with the very worst point in our national character, the disposition to sacrifice every thing to accumulation, & that exclusive & engrossing selfishness which accompanies it. I am well aware how much of this is owing to our political institutions, under which every thing is accessible to wealth and scarcely any thing to poverty. But I fear that the commercial spirit, amidst all its good effects, is almost sure to bring with it wherever it prevails, a certain amount of this evil; because that which necessarily occupies every man's time & thoughts for the greater part of his life, naturally acquires an ascendency over his mind disproportionate to its real importance; & when the pursuit of wealth, in a degree greater than is required for comfortable subsistence,—an occupation which concerns only a man himself & his family,—becomes the main object of his life, it almost invariably happens that his sympathies & his feelings of interest become incapable of going much beyond himself & his family.

The English obsession with "advancement in life" had not only pushed aside all other considerations, but had resulted in an "odious… coldness & selfishness… indifference,

moral insensibility": "Our middle class moreover have but one object in life, to ape their superiors; for whom they have an open-mouthed & besotted admiration, attaching itself to the bad more than to the good points, being those they can most easily comprehend & imitate." While Mill acknowledged that "sound ideas and good sense applied to public affairs have… considerably more chance of being listened to & exercising influence" than in the past, "where are they to be found? There are no men of talents among us."[81]

While this expression of disgust with the vulgar pecuniary ambitions of the English middle class was contained in a private letter, Mill's feelings on the subject continued to fester and deepen in the ensuing years, sufficiently for him to give them public expression, albeit anonymously, in 1834. Mill was again prompted by an expression of French envy of English accomplishment:

> Did M. Chales ever know what it was to live in a country where the whole of life is but one incessant turmoil and struggle about obtaining the means of livelihood? ...where next to *getting* more, the ruling passion is to *appear* to the world as if you had already got more, by spending or seeming to spend more than you have? where hardly any branch of education is valued, hardly any kind of knowledge cultivated, which does not lead in the directest way to some money-getting end?[82]

As Mill continues, he offers a striking disparagement of the "spirit of the age" in conflict with "higher culture" and "old customs and traditional feelings":

> Where whatever of any higher culture still forms part of the received systems of education, is strikingly in contrast with *the spirit of the age*, and is kept alive only by some remains of respect for old customs and traditional feelings? where... scarce a man can be found who has leisure to think, leisure to read, leisure to feel? where such a phenomenon is scarcely known, as a man who prefers his liberty to a little more money.[83]

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[81] Letter to Gustave d'Eichthal (15 May 1829), *CW*, XII, 31-3.
[82] "The English National Character," *CW*, XXIII, 720.
[83] Ibid., 720-1.

Though these remarks were included in a brief essay entitled "The English National Character," it soon became apparent that the cultural change was not peculiar to England. In 1835-36, Mill read and reviewed Tocqueville's first volume of *Democracy in America* and the reflections of his companion, Gustave de Beaumont. While admiring the middle class virtues of thrift, enterprise and honesty, Mill concluded that what he had seen in the English middle class was "characteristic of a middle class in other countries" as well, namely:

> A general indifference to those kinds of knowledge and mental culture which cannot be immediately converted into pounds, shillings, and pence; very little perception or enjoyment of the beautiful, either in nature or in the productions of genius; indifference to refinements and elegancies for their own sake, but a vehement desire to possess what are accounted such by others.[84]

R. J. Halliday's characterization of Mill's thinking in this period as an "ideal and contemplative toryism" seems particularly apposite.[85]

While agreeing with Tocqueville's fears concerning the debasement of culture, Mill did not accept his claim that it was a consequence of a providential trend toward democracy. For Mill, the problem resided in the nature of the burgeoning development of the commercial class which, unlike democratic institutions, was the common feature of the United States and Britain.[86] Mill's alarm about the pedestrian ambitions of the

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[84] "State of Society in America," *CW*, XVIII, 101-2.

[85] R. J. Halliday, *John Stuart Mill* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), 33. Gertrude Himmelfarb also seizes on Mill's sentiments during this period as evidence of an "other" Mill (whom she vastly prefers) in contrast to the individualist liberal of his later writings; see "The Other John Stuart Mill" in *Victorian Minds* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), ch. 4. I think Himmelfarb makes too much of the inconsistency between the post-trauma and the more mature Mill, particularly concerning her (and Hayek's) claims about the overbearing influence of Harriet Taylor in Mill's tilt to the left. Capaldi offers a convincing response to this thesis in *John Stuart Mill*, 218-220, as does John Rees, "The Thesis of the Two Mills," *Political Studies* 25, no. 3 (Sept 1977): 369-382. Though Mill certainly had his inconsistencies, I think his largely apolitical theme of individual "self-culture" and its political extension to the "improvement of mankind" unifies much of his cultural criticism.

[86] Mill expresses this difference in "De Tocqueville on *Democracy in America II*": "The evil is not in the preponderance of a democratic class, but of any class. The defects which M. de Tocqueville points out in

English middle class came to a head with his 1836 essay "Civilization," and never significantly lifted thereafter. The essay claimed that the advance of English morals and intellect had not kept pace with its material wealth, and indicted the educational system for its failure to prepare the populace for the duties of responsible citizenship as politics became more democratized and power devolved from the traditional elites to the masses. As he had in "Spirit of the Age," Mill grounded his demands for reform in a philosophy of history; in "Civilization," however, the foundation of his critique turned away from the influence of the Saint-Simonians and continental idealism toward the stadial theory of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Nathaniel Wolloch has pointed out that the term "civilization" had gained currency in the late eighteenth century as "the rising middle class were beginning to look consciously upon themselves as a civilization, engrossed in the march of history toward ever more progress—material, social, and political."[87] This new coinage implicitly carried with it the generally optimistic view of the Scots, the conviction that the nascent culture based on free commerce represented the highest stage that history had attained and that the future held the prospect of further progress. Perhaps with this in mind, Mill introduces the essay by carefully distinguishing the "general" meaning of civilization—

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the American, and which we see in the modern English mind, are the ordinary ones of a commercial class. The portion of society which is predominant in America, and that which is attaining predominance here, the American Many, and our middle class, agree in being commercial classes. The one country is affording a complete, and the other a progressive exemplification, that whenever any variety of human nature becomes preponderant in a community, it imposes upon all the rest of society its own type; forcing all, either to submit to it or to imitate it." *CW*, XVIII, 196.

[87] Nathaniel Wolloch, "The Civilizing Process, Nature, and Stadial Theory," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2011), 246. In support of this claim, Wolloch cites Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 3–41; Anthony Pagden, "The 'Defense of Civilization' in Eighteenth-Century Social Theory," *History of the Human Sciences* 1 (1988): 33–45; Bruce Mazlish, "Civilization in a Historical and Global Perspective," *International Sociology* 16 (2001): 293–300; and Brett Bowden, "The Ideal of Civilization: Its Origins and Socio-Political Character," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 7 (2004): 25–50. The OED traces the first use of 'civilization' as referencing a civilized state to Boswell in 1770.

"Man and Society...advanced in the road to perfection; happier, nobler and wiser"—from the more "particular" meaning in which "it stands for that kind of improvement only, which distinguishes a wealthy and powerful nation from savages or barbarians." Having employed the characteristic contrast of stadial theory, Mill clarifies that he uses "civilization" in the narrow sense that evokes the concept of the current commercial culture:

> We shall on the present occasion use the word civilization only in the restricted sense: not that in which it is synonymous with improvement, but that in which it is the direct converse or contrary of rudeness or barbarism... In savage life there is no commerce, no manufactures, no agriculture, or next to none: a country rich in the fruits of agriculture, commerce, and manufactures, we call civilized... Wherever we find human beings acting together for common purposes in large bodies, and enjoying the pleasures of social intercourse, we term them civilized...We accordingly call a people civilized, where the arrangements of society, for protecting the persons and property of its members, are sufficiently perfect to maintain peace among them.[88]

Civilization, Mill asserts, has developed "upon the natural laws of the progress of wealth...and the increase of the facilities of human intercourse."[89] Mill advances the possible paradox that while civilization represents much that is good, "we think there is other good, much even of the highest good, which civilization in this sense does not provide for, and some which it has a tendency...to impede."[90] Mill's essay is thus an inquiry into whether the age of commerce might undermine the prospects for civilization in its more expansive and higher meaning, whether the transactional culture created by commerce is an obstacle to the realization of the moral and intellectual capabilities of humanity.

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[88] "Civilization," *CW*, XVIII, 120.
[89] Ibid., 127.
[90] Ibid., 119.

Having framed the problem, Mill describes the unfortunate impasse that history had delivered, that "the present era is pre-eminently the era of civilization in the narrow sense" but that "we do not regard the age as either equally advanced or equally progressive in many of the other kinds of improvement. In some it appears to us stationary, in some even retrograde."[91] Having problematized the connection between narrow commercial progress and expansive improvement, Mill argues that other kinds of improvement—intellectual development, more elevated moral objectives—remain possible, but would require "many new rules, and new courses of action" to "realize the benefits of the new state or preserve those of the old."[92] Mill's position advances two major points which were each to remain prominent concerns in his later writing about democracy and representative government. The first point is the political emergence of the masses at the expense of elites, and the risk of submerging individual excellence and expression; and , second, that the masses have been ill-prepared to assume power because of the gross deficiencies of the English educational system. From the polemical and often despairing tone of "Civilization," it appears that the age of transition optimistically announced in "Spirit of the Age" had, in a mere five years, settled into a natural state of stagnation as the middle class consolidated its cultural power.

Mill's analysis of the genesis of mass society is presented entirely within the framework of the stadial theory. Asserting that it is a "law of human affairs"[93] that the power and importance of the mass and the individual have an inverse relationship, Mill

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[91] Ibid.
[92] It is notable that Mill suggests the desire to "preserve…the old." It is an indication that Mill had fully abandoned the slash-and-burn reformism of Philosophic Radicalism and continued to be impressed by the conservatism of Coleridge, whom he had started reading in 1829. It also suggests that Mill's embrace of "progress" in "Spirit of the Age" had been somewhat tempered. In a letter to J.P. Nichol (15 April 1834), Mill remarked, "On the whole, there is more food for thought—and the best kind of thought—in Coleridge than in all other contemporary writers." *CW,* XII, Letter 102.
[93] "Civilization," *CW,* XVIII, 121.

traces the changing balance to the passage from the individual independence and isolation within the hunter and pastoral stage, to the agricultural economy in which power is concentrated among landowners, and finally to the commercial stages in which there is a greater diffusion of property and education with a rising middle class:

> It must at least be evident, that if, as civilization advances, property and intelligence become thus widely diffused among the millions, it must also be an effect of civilization, that the portion of either of these which can belong to an individual must have a tendency to become less and less influential, and all results must more and more be decided by the movements of masses.[94]

The necessity for combined efforts and cooperative division of tasks becomes steadily more important through the pastoral and agricultural stages, reaching a pinnacle in commercial society. Mill argues that the power of the individual declines with the division of labor and is further diminished within society as a whole as independence is eroded:

> The division of employments—the accomplishment by the combined labour of several, of tasks which could not be achieved by any number of persons singly—is the great school of co-operation... Mankind learned the value of combination; they see how much and with what ease it accomplishes, which never could be accomplished without it.[95]

Civilization thus developed with the recognition that through cooperation all could prosper, first in mutual security, and then in economic exchange. Following Smith's insight, Mill regards the division of labor as the decisive distinction separating the primitive from an advancing civilization. Moreover, Mill extends Smith's emphasis on productivity to recognize that the submission of the individual to a specific social-economic role is necessary to the cooperation that makes civil society possible.

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[94] Ibid., 122.
[95] Ibid., 123-4.

Yet the advantages of cooperation come at the price of individuality and diversity. As civilization requires "the sacrifice of some portion of individual will, for a common purpose," Mill suggests this sacrifice permeates society, demanding in multiple spheres that individuals "subdue themselves to act as interdependent parts of a complex whole."[96] Mill acknowledges that increasing social wealth has had the benefit of raising the living standards of workers, including their level of education and knowledge. The proliferation of newspapers encourages greater political awareness within the working class, but Mill laments that they only reinforce a uniformity of opinion, such that everyone speaks "in the same voice at once." Regarding those who "enjoy superior advantages," Mill finds no advance in their "intellectual power or moral energy," concluding instead that there had been a "very marked decrease of vigor and energy." Despite the apparent benefits of commercial progress, intellectual advances have been stifled:

> With all the advantages of this age, its facilities for mental cultivation, the incitements and rewards which it holds out to exalted talents, there can scarcely be pointed out in the European annals any stirring times which have brought so little that is distinguished, either morally or intellectually, to the surface... When the masses become powerful, an individual, or a small band of individuals, can accomplish nothing considerable except by influencing the masses; and to do this becomes daily more difficult... Our position, therefore, is established, that by the natural growth of civilization, power passes from individuals to masses, and the weight and importance of an individual, as compared with the mass, sink into greater and greater insignificance.[97]

In "Civilization," Mill was already expressing the concern elaborated in *On Liberty* twenty-three years later, not just for individual expression but for individuality itself.

Mill's fear of mass uniformity was not only a product of his variation on Scottish conjectural history. It also had firm roots in associationist psychology. While

[96] Ibid., 124.
[97] Ibid., 125-6.

associationism allowed for the possibility of a limited number of innate traits—aversion to pain, seeking pleasure—its adherents generally denied that human characteristics could be traced to an indelible human nature. One might thus assume that associationism would provide grounds for explaining the diversity of human behavior, but its adherents drew the opposite conclusion. Following in the tradition of Lockean empiricism, associationism held that not only ideas and knowledge, but that patterns of behavior could also be explained through reference to experience. It would follow from this that individuals raised and educated in a common cultural environment will display similar traits, thus explaining the development of unique national characteristics. As Maurice Mandelbaum has pointed out, philosophers including Hume and Smith, would invoke the principles of associationism to explain commonalities, and Hartley himself recognized that there would be a tendency toward social uniformity:

> If Beings of the same Nature, but whose Affections and Passions are, at present, in different Proportions to each other, be exposed for an indefinite Time to the same Impressions and Associations, all their particular Differences will, at last, be over-ruled, and they will become perfectly similar, in a finite Time, by a proper Adjustment of the Impressions and Associations.
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> Our original bodily Make, and the Impressions and Associations which affect us in passing through Life, are so much alike, and yet not the same, that there must be both a great general Resemblance amongst Mankind, in respect of their intellectual Affections, and also many particular Differences.[98]

Hartley thus concludes that "association tends to make us all similar." Mill's fears for a lack of diversity were thus entirely consistent with psychological beliefs which posited the probability that mass culture would be self-reinforcing. It may also account for his

[98] David Hartley, *Observations on Man*, cited in Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason*, 157.

despairing observation in *On Liberty* that "the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind."[99]

There is stunningly little evidence in the first half of "Civilization" to support an argument for a belief in any form of progress beyond economic growth and whatever intellectual development is necessary to sustain it. Indeed, the thrust of Mill's argument reveals a pessimism that carried into *On Liberty*'s chapter on individuality. After his excoriating critique of English education and the self-absorption of the ruling aristocracy, Mill at length asks, "Is there, then, no remedy? …Are these the price we necessarily pay for the benefits of civilization?" Ever the reformer, Mill concludes "Civilization*"* summarizing his hope that the ineptitude of the present political elite, while not reversible, may yet be supplanted by a new meritocratic phase:

> Civilization has brought about a degree of security and fixity in the possession of all advantages once acquired, which has rendered it possible for a rich man to lead the life of a Sybarite, and nevertheless enjoy throughout life a degree of power and consideration which could formerly be earned or retained only by personal activity. We cannot undo what civilization has done, and again stimulate the energy of the higher classes by insecurity of property, or danger of life or limb. The only adventitious motive it is in the power of society to hold out, is reputation and consequence; and of this as much use as possible should be made for the encouragement of desert. The main thing which social changes can do for the improvement of the higher classes—and it is what the progress of democracy is insensibly but certainly accomplishing—is gradually to put an end to every kind of unearned distinction, and *let the only road open to honour and ascendancy be that of personal qualities*.[100]

The possibility of steering history in the direction of meritocracy—where democracy, in any case, seemed to be taking it—affords the possibility that the inherited wealth and power of the undeserving landowning classes will be finished off for good. But that only

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[99] *On Liberty, CW,* XVIII, 268. The tendency toward uniformity posited by associationism may also account for Mill's suspicion of state-sponsored public education.
[100] "Civilization," *CW,* XVIII, 146-7.

resolved one aspect of Mill's unease: How would assuring that each gets his just deserts based on his ability resolve the problem of the masses overwhelming individual distinctiveness? How would meritocracy reverse the historical and psychological impulse toward material comfort and provide incentives to seek after higher objectives? With the conclusion of "Civilization," it would appear that Mill's aspirations for moral and intellectual progress have been reduced to little more than a hope for mere competence.

We now arrive at a position where we can assess Mill's repeated insistence that a philosophy of history is a necessary condition for both political philosophy and practice, his belief that "the aim of really scientific thinkers [is] to connect by theories the facts of universal history [and that] it is acknowledged to be one of the requisites of a general system of social doctrine."[101] Just as he had claimed that any social theory must be consistent with the laws of individual psychology to achieve the status of science, he made the same demand of a philosophy of history. Claiming that the actions of individual men "are the joint result of the general laws and circumstances of human nature" and of the "natural and artificial circumstances that constitute their education," Mill argues that this doctrine must also apply to history: "If this principle is true of the individual man, it must be true of collective man. If it is the law of human life, the law must be realized in history."[102] For a science of history to be possible, there must be "laws which regulate the succession between one state of society and another":

> The fundamental problem...is to find the laws according to which any state of society produces the state which succeeds it and takes its place. This opens the great and vexed question of the progressiveness of man and society; an idea

[101] *Logic*, *CW*, VIII, 930.
[102] Ibid., 932.

> involved in every just conception of social phenomena as the subject of a science.[103]

The question before us is whether Mill achieved any success in presenting a coherent philosophy of history that was consistent with individual human nature and met the standards of science.

This chapter began with an epigraph from Mill's "Civilization" stating that "there are two things of importance and influence among mankind: the one is, property; the other, powers and acquirements of the mind." It has been my argument that Mill accordingly drew from two traditions of historical thinking, the Scottish materialist stadial theory, and French idealism and positivism. While I hope that I have demonstrated that there is ample evidence of these dual influences, it must be recognized that Mill never made any effort at integrating them. Indeed, they seem to inhabit parallel universes within his body of work: stadialism prominently appears in "Civilization" and the *Principles of Political Economy*, and is also an implied presence in his reviews of *Democracy in America* and in *On Liberty*. Idealism and positivism appear most prominently in the "Spirit of the Age" essays, the *System of Logic*, and *Comte and Positivism*. The only instance in which both theories are alluded to is in his defense of Comte's claim that the Theological, Metaphysical and Positive ages can coexist:

> Some, for example, think the doctrine of the three successive stages of speculation and belief, inconsistent with the fact that they all three existed contemporaneously; much as if the natural succession of the hunting, the nomad, and the agricultural state could be refuted by the fact that there are still hunters and nomads. That the three states were contemporaneous, that they all began before authentic history, and still coexist, is M. Comte's express statement: as

[103] Ibid., 912.

> well as that the advent of the two later modes of thought was the very cause which disorganized and is gradually destroying the primitive one.[104]

This passing reference to stadial theory to defend Comte's Law of the Three Stages is offered without any effort to integrate them or show their consistency. Indeed, in defending Comte's Law, Mill appears to take the acceptance of stadial theory as a given.

The presumption that the stages of stadial theory do not require explanation or defense points to the rather curious status of the theory in Mill's philosophy. While I have claimed that it is a vital component of his historical thinking, Mill never presents the stadial theory as a philosophy of history as such. It is offered as introductory remarks to the *Principles*, but his theory of political economy contains no further reference to it. It is the assumed rationale for his polemics about the mass culture swamping and denying individual expression. It resides among the assumptions of his philosophy of politics and culture without being articulated for what it is, as if it is hiding in plain sight. The orphan status of stadialism is even more confounding because, at least on a cursory view, it conforms to Mill requirements for a social science, that it be derived from a recognized pattern or sequence (an empirical law), and that this sequence can be explained by reference to a law of human nature, namely the desire for improving the conditions of life. Stadial theory appears to meet the standards of inverse deduction.

Given the potential for stadial theory to provide the foundation for the science of history that Mill sought, one is left to speculate on why it remained in the shadows of his thinking. I would suggest that one possible explanation resides in the distinction that Mill made between the use of the term "civilization," which could be narrowly defined to reflect the stadial age of commerce, or more expansively to reference to "human

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[104] *Comte and Positivism, CW,* X, 279.

improvement in general."[105] This distinction made a second appearance in somewhat altered form in the *Logic*:

> The words Progress and Progressiveness are not here to be understood as synonymous with improvement and tendency to improvement. It is conceivable that the laws of human nature might determine, and even necessitate, a certain series of changes in man and society, which might not in every case, or which might not on the whole, be improvements.[106]

This distinction—which should be recalled whenever a citation about "progress" is interpreted to suggest that Mill was an optimist—is a crucial indicator of Mill's priorities. Stadial theory presented an explanation of past progress, but it was concerned only with the conditions of wealth and impoverishment. Stadial theory had little to offer with regard to intellectual and moral progress, which for Mill was the source of genuine improvement. Indeed, far from contributing to a theory of improvement, stadial theory provided a theory of the commercial society and money-chasing mass culture that Mill had identified as the obstacle to improvement.

It is accordingly not surprising that Mill would turn to a theory of history that focused on intellectual development, and specifically, the role of great men and intellectual elites in providing guidance to the masses and envisioning the conditions of a better world. But apart from matters of priority, the question remains whether the combination of these two approaches to history are compatible. One can only conclude that they are not. Mill's philosophy of history is a forced marriage, as if stadial theory and positivism reside in the same house, but on separate floors. Stadial theory is a materialist and mechanistic determinism. Positivism, as Mill accepted it from Comte, presents history as a process of epistemic development toward a comprehensive understanding

[105] "Civilization," *CW,* XVIII, 119.
[106] *Logic, CW,* VIII, 913.

and mastery of nature and mankind. Each points to entirely distinct causes of human progress. As incompatible as they are, Mill was nonetheless able to utilize each of them separately to provide a theory of history that would provide intellectual depth and support for the cultural critiques and political positions he wished to advance. They also suggested a way forward. The decisive role of intellectual development in human improvement provided the rationale for Mill's demand for freedom of expression and individual autonomy, without which humanity risked the stagnation of Asiatic stationary states. Stadial theory also offered the grounds for speculation: Might there be a fifth stage in stadial theory that describes a future beyond the Age of Commerce, a new era in which basic needs were provided for, unshackling an intellectual vitality in which the individual could flourish? Might the current Age of Transition yield yet another economic restructuring? The inevitability of the economic stationary state envisioned by Smith and Ricardo suggested that possibility.

Chapter VI: Stationary States and History

> All countries which have long continued progressive, or been durably great, have been so because there has been an organized opposition to the ruling power, of whatever kind that power was: plebeians to patricians, clergy to kings, freethinkers to clergy, kings to barons, commons to king and aristocracy. Almost all the greatest men who ever lived have formed part of such an Opposition. Wherever some such quarrel has not been going on—wherever it has been terminated by the complete victory of one of the contending principles, and no new contest has taken the place of the old—society has either hardened into Chinese stationariness, or fallen into dissolution.[1]

John Stuart Mill describes two types of stationary state. The first reflects the static societies typified by India and China, frozen cultures in which the rare deviations from habitual behavior and the uniformity of belief are put down by despotic political and religious regimes. The specter of such an illiberal dystopia haunted Mill's entire career, appearing as early as 1831 in "Spirit of the Age" and as late as 1859 in *On Liberty*. It is arguably an implicit presence in Mill's 1865 attack on Comte's alleged "spiritual despotism." The Asiatic stationary state was the dead end of history. By contrast, Mill's second vision is of an economic stationary state. Mill's remarks on a stationary economy make a solitary and abbreviated appearance as a chapter containing a mere nine paragraphs in the *Principles of Political Economy*, a work of nearly one thousand pages. The stationary state is mentioned in only a few paragraphs leading up to that chapter, and is altogether absent in Mill's other works on economic theory. Yet it too can be claimed as a long-term presence within Mill's later work. The original text survived nearly unaltered in all seven editions of the *Principles* published between 1848 and 1871, despite the otherwise "huge number of variants" that Mill introduced as each new edition

[1] "Bentham," *CW*, X, 108.

was prepared.[2] Mill apparently was steadfast in maintaining the claims of this brief chapter for the final twenty-five years of his life, and though he never offered any further elaboration of it, I will argue that he regarded his theory of the economic stationary state as fundamental to his program for human improvement. By the same token, he regarded the political stationary state on the Asian model (which was also economically stationary) as anathema to individuality and as a warning against the trend toward mass culture spawned by mid-century capitalism. As distinct as they are, the two stationary states provide important context for Mill's political philosophy as well as his conception of an Art of Living. They also provide additional insight into his philosophy of history

We will turn first to Mill's characterization of the Asian stationary state, and here we begin with Mill's personal involvement with India. Having been secured a place by his father, Mill began work at the East India Company in 1823, and like his father, he never set foot in India. At this early stage, Mill's knowledge of India reflected his father's *History of British India*, which, Mill later claimed, "first threw the light of reason on Hindoo society."[3] Though he had also found his father's effort to be "saturated" with Benthamite dogma, he nonetheless credited him for his honest critique of English policy and for his later role as an executive with the East India Company.[4] While it is certainly true that James Mill regarded India through the lens of utilitarian political and legal theory, the illumination that he had cast on India was also well within the framework

[2] J.M. Robson, "Textual Introduction" to the *Principles* in *CW,* II, lxvi. Robson counts nearly 3,500 "substantive variants" (i.e. not error-correcting) in the seven editions. Mill made only thirteen revisions to the chapter on the stationary state, all but one of which were editorial in nature.
[3] *Comte and Positivism*, *CW,* X, 320.
[4] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 29.

established by Scottish philosophical history and stadialism.[5] Indeed, the elder Mill had stated his purpose as attempting to place India within the "scale of civilization" to assure that the British adapt its method of government "to the state of the people to whose use it is intended," and specifically not to mistake "the Hindus to be a people of high civilization, while they have in reality made but a few of the earliest steps in the progress to civilization."[6] However, James Mill's publicly-stated intentions extended beyond the practical questions of British governance; in a letter to Ricardo, he expresses the hope that his *History* would "make no bad introduction to the study of civil society in general" and that it might exhibit "the principles and laws of the social order in almost all its most remarkable states, from the most crude to the most perfect with which we are yet acquainted."[7] For the historian to achieve such lofty aims, Mill stipulates a high order of skills, implying that despite his never having visited India or developed an acquaintance with its languages, he met the requirements of the philosophical historian as had been envisioned by the most demanding of his Scottish mentors:

> It is the business of the historian not merely to display the obvious outside of things; the qualities which strike the most ignorant observer... His duty is, to

[5] An excellent (though rather floridly written) analysis of James Mill's debt to the Scottish Enlightenment is offered by J.H. Burns, "The Light of Reason: Philosophical History in the Two Mills" in Robson and Laine, *Papers of the Centenary Conference*, 3-20. Bruce Mazlish also discusses Mill's Scottish approach to history in *James and John Stuart Mill* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 119-23.

[6] James Mill, *The History of British India*, 6 vols. (Third Edition) (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1826), II, 135. The *History* is available on-line at http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/mill-the-history-of-british-india-6-vols-1826. It is worth noting that Mill's claim that legislation must consider the "state of the people" appears to introduce a rare note of relativism into Benthamite rationalist legal doctrine, though it is more likely a veiled criticism of British policy treating the Indians as if they had advanced into a civilized society. Once in power at the East India Company, Mill's approach was that of an enlightened despot imposing utilitarian solutions without much regard to Indian history or current practice. As Eric Stokes puts it, Bentham and James Mill regarded the form of government and laws as the "keystone of the arch", that "political education determined directly the moral forces acting upon the individual... [Mill] had simplified the Indian question to three issues—the form of government, the nature of the laws, and the mode of taxation. Reform these, Mill argued, and the whole of Indian society would undergo a vast transformation, setting it on a rapid advance up the scale of civilization." Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, 56.

[7] James Mill to David Ricardo (19 October 1817), *Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, Piero Sraffa, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), VII, 195-6. Cited in Burns,"Light of Reason," 11.

> convey just ideas of all those objects; of all the transactions, legislative, administrative, judicial, mercantile, military, which he is called upon to describe. But in just ideas...what is implied? A clear discernment, undoubtedly, of their causes; a clear discernment of their consequences; a clear discernment of their natural tendencies; and of the circumstances likely to operate either in combination with these natural tendencies, or in opposition to them. To qualify a man for this great duty...he needs the most profound knowledge of the laws of human nature, which is the end, as well as instrument, of every thing. It is plain, that he requires the most perfect comprehension of the principles of human society; or the course, into which the laws of human nature impel the human being, in his gregarious state, or when formed into a complex body along with others of his kind... In short, the whole field of human nature, the whole field of legislation, the whole field of judicature, the whole field of administration, down to war, commerce, and diplomacy, ought to be familiar to his mind.[8]

For the young John Mill, his father's pretensions to meet such magisterial expectations must have been deeply impressive, particularly since they set the requirements for the type of historical inquiry that reached beyond the romantic narratives that he had come to disdain. Yet if this was what was demanded of an historian, it is no wonder that John Mill dropped his planned history of the French Revolution for a career in philosophy.

Whether James Mill's met the standards that he had set for himself is beyond my purpose here, but we need to pay some attention to his characterization of Indian culture as a way of understanding the sources of the Asiatic stationary state as John Mill would later understand it. In this respect, it is hardly without interest that James Mill himself regarded the culture of nearly the entire Asian sub-continent as undifferentiated in their "stage of civilization":

> No one can take an accurate survey of the different nations of Asia, and of their different ages, without remarking the near approaches they make to the same stage of civilization. This gives a peculiar interest and importance to the inquiry respecting the Hindus. There can be no doubt that they are in a state of civilization

[8] James Mill, *History* I, xvii-xviii.

> very nearly the same with that of the Chinese, the Persians, and the Arabians; who, together, compose the great branches of the Asiatic population.[9]

Narrowing his focus to the Hindus, Mill disputes the claim that the pre-colonial "sovereigns of Hindustan were masters of great power and great magnificence" who ruled "a state of high civilization from which they had fallen through the miseries of foreign conquest and subjugation." Finding no evidence of past glory, Mill asserts that "when we look for the particulars of those pretended reigns of mighty kings, the universal lords of India, under whom science flourished, and civilization rose to the greatest height, we meet with nothing but fable, more wild, and inconsistent, and hyperbolical, than is any where else to be found."[10] Far from either being progressive in the past or having regressed due to invasion, Mill claims their "manners, institutions, and attainments...have been stationary for many ages." Indian dynasties came and went, but the cultural and social traditions of India have endured without change through centuries: "The village remains entire, [and] they care not to what power it is transferred, or to what sovereign it devolves; its internal economy remains unchanged."[11] Indeed, Mill offers the present-day Hindus up for conjectural historians who would wish to understand the ancient peoples of Asia and Africa:

> In beholding the Hindus of the present day, we are beholding the Hindus of many ages past; and are carried back, as it were, into the deepest recesses of antiquity. Of some of the oldest nations, about which our curiosity is the most alive, and information the most defective, we acquire a practical, and what may be almost denominated a personal knowledge, by our acquaintance with a living people, who have continued on the same soil from the very times of those ancient nations, partake largely of the same manners, and are placed at nearly the same stage in the progress of society. By conversing with the Hindus of the present day, we, in

[9] Ibid., II, 188-9.
[10] Ibid., II, 147.
[11] Ibid., I, 268.

> some measure, converse with the Chaldeans and Babylonians of the time of Cyrus; with the Persians and Egyptians of the time of Alexander.[12]

The claim of a "personal knowledge" from one who never set foot in Asia would be astoundingly presumptuous in itself were it not for the way in which Mill went on to castigate the "manners" of a people with whom he had no contact whatever. Indians and Chinese alike were "dissembling, treacherous, mendacious, to an excess which surpasses even the usual measure of uncultivated society."[13]

Speculating on the origins of the Indian stationary state, Mill observes that the "leading institutions" of Hindu society carry the mark of their origin as "men roaming in the pastoral state." Because "men quit not easily the practices to which they have been accustomed," this primitive state "lingered in this uneasy situation," until the appearance of a "superior man" who laid the foundations for the caste divisions:

> It would appear that there arose among them one of those superior men, who are capable of accelerating the improvement of society. Perceiving the advantage which would accrue to his countrymen from a division of employments, he conceived the design of overcoming at once the obstacles by which this regulation was retarded; and clothing himself with a Divine character, established as a positive law, under the sanction of Heaven, the classification of the people, and the distribution of occupations... Ignorant that professions, when once separated, were in no danger of being confounded, he established a law...which erected a barrier against further progress; that the children of those who were assigned to each of the classes, into which he distributed the people, should invariably follow the occupation of their father through all generations.[14]

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[12] Ibid., II, 190.

[13] Mill's sweeping denunciation of Asian culture is worth quoting in full : "Even in manners, and in the leading parts of the moral character, the lines of resemblance [between the Indians and Chinese] are strong. Both nations are to nearly an equal degree tainted with the vices of insincerity; dissembling, treacherous, mendacious, to an excess which surpasses even the usual measure of uncultivated society. Both are disposed to excessive exaggeration with regard to every thing relating to themselves. Both are cowardly and unfeeling. Both are in the highest degree conceited of themselves, and full of affected contempt for others. Both are, in the physical sense, disgustingly unclean in their persons and houses." Ibid., II, 195. In a footnote, Mill throws in the Persians for good measure in this condemnation.

[14] Ibid., II, 156-7.

Mill's account thus traces the origins of Indian stationariness to the iron rule of tyrants and priests, abetted by poverty and a compliant populace. Mill notes that it is common "for a people, who have passed but a small number of stages in the career of civilization, to be united, extensively, under one government, and to remain steady for a great length of time in that situation."[15] In the Indian example, the domination was complete and utterly debilitating:

> We have already seen, in reviewing the Hindu form of government, that despotism, in one of its simplest and least artificial shapes, was established in Hindustan, and confirmed by laws of Divine authority. We have seen likewise, that by the division of the people into castes, and the prejudices which the detestable views of the Brahmens raised to separate them, a degrading and pernicious system of subordination was established among the Hindus, and that the vices of such a system were there carried to a more destructive height than among any other people. And we have seen that by a system of priestcraft, built upon the most enormous and tormenting superstition that ever harassed and degraded any portion of mankind, their minds were enchained more intolerably than their bodies; in short that, despotism and priestcraft taken together, the Hindus, in mind and body, were the most enslaved portion of the human race.[16]

The echo of the Enlightenment is obvious enough in this passage, and one suspects that Mill's assessment of Indian society and politics is as much reflective of his attitude toward English aristocracy as it is an assessment of Indian history. Mill may well have been following the Enlightenment example of using Asian nations as proxies for attacks on European society.[17]

As Mill regarded the stratification of Indian society to have been put in place by a "superior man" and enforced by clerical and political elites thereafter, his approach to social reform relied entirely on a top-down remaking of Indian culture. Eric Stokes points

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[15] Ibid., II, 157.
[16] Ibid., II, 166-7.
[17] Mazlish makes this argument in *James and John Stuart Mill*, 120-1.

out that Mill dismissed the evangelical and liberal proposals for popular education as wholly insufficient, and insisted that only fundamental change to "the primary sources of good and evil" could effectively move India from its stationary condition. The primary sources were India's political and legal institutions, and only by addressing them could India be removed from the mire of poverty and ignorance:

> The most efficient part of education is that which is derived from the tone and temper of the society: and the tone and temper of the society depend altogether upon the laws, and the government. Again; ignorance is the natural concomitant of poverty; a people wretchedly poor, are always wretchedly ignorant. But poverty is the effect of bad laws, and bad government; and is never a characteristic of any people who are governed well. It is necessary, therefore, before education can operate to any great result, that the poverty of the people should be redressed; that their laws and government should operate beneficently.[18]

Like Bentham, Mill was predisposed to believe that the reform of the legal system and the rationalization of a codified public morality would inevitably bring about improvements in private morality, eventually undermining ancient customs and traditions that reinforced India's static social and political structures.[19] Indeed, Mill went further to offer a rationale for England's imperial interests with the claim that after the reform of government and law, the "intellectual and moral character of the natives" would be further ameliorated by the "diffusion of Englishmen in the society by means of

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[18] Mill, *History*, V, 541. Cited in Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, 56-7.

[19] Mill was explicit in claiming that matters of public and private morality were imbedded in India's labyrinthine legal system: "Amid the imperfections adhering to the state of law among a rude and ignorant people, one is, that they preserve not their maxims of justice, and their rules of judicial procedure, distinct from other subjects. In the law books of the Hindus, the details of jurisprudence and judicature occupy comparatively a very moderate space. The doctrines and ceremonies of religion; the rules and practice of education; the institutions, duties, and customs of domestic life; the maxims of private morality, and even of domestic economy; the rules of government, of war, and of negotiation; all form essential parts of the Hindu codes of law, and are treated in the same style, and laid down with the same authority, as the rules for the distribution of justice." *History* I, 192-3.

colonization."[20] The remaking of India into a progressive society was not within the capabilities of the Indians themselves, at least not until its politics and laws were aligned with Benthamite principles and its culture was exposed to the influx of British colonists. Yet notwithstanding the benefits of imperialism, it is evident that for James Mill, the stationary condition of India was at its origin a consequence of political oppression, was maintained by a legal system under the cloak of divine sanction against which there was no opposition, and could only be resolved by external intervention to reconstruct Indian politics.

James Mill was not alone in claiming the backward and stationary character of Asian cultures. While several Enlightenment figures—Voltaire and Diderot among them—looked to Asia as offering examples of enlightened despotism, and regarded the cultures as remarkable for their stability and achievements, others presented a more critical view. Though he had earlier satirized European mores through the perspective of visiting Persians, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* disputed claims of the superiority of China and India. While Asia appeared tranquil, Montesquieu argued that such stability was based on fear of despotic rule and passivity rather than consent or contentment. The effects of climate render the Indians to be "naturally a pusillanimous people" who believe that "inaction is the most perfect of all states"; their "natural indolence" is reinforced by "laws which give the lands to the prince and destroy the spirit of property among the subjects."[21] Observing that "the manners and customs of a despotic empire ought never to be changed, for nothing would more speedily produce a revolution," Montesquieu adds that "China is the place where the customs of the country have never been changed...

[20] Ibid., V, 543-4.
[21] Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, I, 224-226.

These things being once taught by precept, and inculcated by grave doctors, become fixed, like the principles of morality, and are never changed."[22] Much as James Mill claimed that the Indians conflate public and private morality and law, Montesquieu notes that the "legislators of China...confounded their religion, laws, manners, and customs; all these were morality, all these were virtue."[23] Attributing an "indolence of mind" to the people of "Eastern Countries," Montesquieu claimed that the "laws, manners, and customs, even those which seem quite indifferent...are the same to this very day, in eastern countries, as they were a thousand years ago."[24] The cumulative effect of Montesquieu's portrayal is that the people of Asia are submissive, that the cultures are static, that the governments are despotic, that Asian history is an unbroken continuity.

Among philosophers who wrote disparagingly about Asian societies, Hegel is probably the most notorious. In contrast to the quasi-empirical analyses of Montesquieu and Mill, Hegel considered Asian culture from within the philosophical context of his belief in history as the realization of freedom. Claiming that the "history of the world travels from east to west," Hegel asserts that Asia had "remained stationary and fixed" within its original social and political composition while Europe advanced toward "the end of history." Asian realms represent "the childhood of history" in which the institutions of the patriarchal state have "spatial stability," but undergo no change within themselves and thus do not occupy the "form of time." Theirs is an "unhistorical History." They are forever trapped in "the first political form which we observe in History," patriarchal despotism in which "the One Individual is that substantial being to which all belongs, so that no other individual has a separate existence, or mirrors himself

[22] Ibid., I, 297, 298.
[23] Ibid., I, 301.
[24] Ibid., I, 225.

in his subjective freedom."[25] Unlike the partial freedom of the "Greek and Roman World" which provided the progressive foundation for enlightened Europe, and ultimately the rational monarchical state of the "Germanic World," Asia remained in a stationary state of perpetual unfreedom.

While Montesquieu and Hegel concentrated on the moral and cultural deficiencies of the East, Adam Smith analyzed the economic stagnation in India and China. Smith claimed that despite China's vast wealth, its "lower ranks" had been impoverished for centuries by its lack of growth:

> China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in the world. It seems, however, to have been long stationary. Marco Polo, who visited it more than five hundred years ago, describes its cultivation, industry, and populousness, almost in the same terms in which they are described by travellers in the present times... The accounts of all travellers, inconsistent in many other respects, agree in the low wages of labour, and in the difficulty which a labourer finds in bringing up a family in China... The poverty of the lower ranks of people in China far surpasses that of the most beggarly nations in Europe.[26]

China was opulent but stationary because it "neglects or despises foreign commerce," and because its wealth is hoarded by the rich, supported by oppressive laws which render the "poor or the owners of small capitals [to be] liable, under the pretense of justice, to be pilloried and plundered at any time by the inferior mandarins." China could enjoy growth if its laws protected the property rights of the poor, and if interest rates were reduced and capital accumulation was encouraged. They have "acquired the full complement of riches... consistent with the nature of its laws and institutions," but national wealth will

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[25] Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 103-5, 139.
[26] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I, 89.

remain stationary unless they are reformed.[27] Smith offers a similar diagnosis of India as a "ruined country," noting the exorbitant interest rates that keep farmers in perpetual poverty.[28] These assessments easily mutated into a rationale for imperialism, since "colonists carry with them a knowledge of agriculture and other useful arts, superior to what can grow up of its own accord in the course of many centuries among savage and barbarous nations."[29] Smith cites the British colonization of America to make his case.

This necessarily cursory review is intended to suggest that James Mill was not alone in viewing India and other Asian cultures as static. Indeed, the changing perspective of European philosophers on Asia may well have reflected changes in public opinion more than they led it. While the wide-eyed tales of missionaries and adventurous travelers had leant an exoticism and an imputed sophistication to Asian cultures, the opening of commerce had changed perceptions as traders recounted stories of greed and untrustworthy behavior among their negotiating partners. At the turn of the century, the combination of the French Revolution and the advances of nascent industrialization also combined to make Asian cultures appear despotic and backward.[30] While James Mill's influence on his son in these matters was certainly direct and authoritative, his assessment was not unusual in an intellectual climate which had turned against earlier suggestions that Asian cultures might be used as positive examples. The assertions by John Mill of

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[27] Ibid., I, 111-2.
[28] Ibid., I, 111.
[29] Ibid., II, 564.
[30] See Geoffrey Hudson, *Europe and China* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1961), 326-7. Montesquieu addressed the issue of sources of information about China directly: "Our missionaries inform us that the government of the vast empire of China is admirable, and that it has a proper mixture of fear, honour, and virtue... But I cannot conceive what this honour can be, among a people who act only through fear of being bastinadoed. Again, our merchants are far from giving us any such accounts of the virtue so much talked of by the missionaries; we need only consult them in relation to the robberies and extortions of the mandarins." *Spirit of the Laws*, I, 122-3

Asiatic stationariness had likely come to be regarded as common wisdom, and they are certainly presented that way.

It is notable that for Smith and James Mill, the stationary states of Asia were not the result of depleted resources and declining profits, the causes of the stationary condition that classical political economy had projected to be the inevitable outcome of capitalism (and which will be discussed in more detail later). India and China were stationary because of the moral failures of their people and the political failures of their rulers. They were stationary as a consequence of laws and traditions which discouraged savings and capital accumulation, allowed usurious lending practices, failed to provide security for property owners, and oppressed the poor in a stratified social system. The stationariness of China and India was total: it was economic and cultural in the widest sense. For both Smith and James Mill, while these problems were understood to have been imbedded in history, they were not historically inevitable, and could, at least in principle, be amenable to reform and transformation. Indeed, after the Napoleonic War, the urgency of preparing India as a market for British industry made modernization a priority, and the Radicals seized the opportunity to lay the foundation for a program of legal and political reform guided by liberal and utilitarian principles. James Mill was at the forefront of those who regarded the objective in India as a "British civilizing mission," a mission which would be executed by force of law and raw power rather than by "educating and cooperating with the Indian mind." Stokes notes that Bentham too was enthusiastic about drafting a legal system for India. [31]

[31] Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, xiii-xiv, 51, 302.

Despite his employment at the East India Company from 1823 to 1858, John Mill offers no account of his work in his *Autobiography*; he mentions only his appointment through his father, and a retirement which was welcomed after his failed resistance to the transfer of the Company's ruling authority in India to the direct control of the British government. Convinced that the stewardship of the Company would be more beneficial to India than the direct rule of politicians, he refused a new position on an advisory council, claiming that it would have only produced "useless vexation and waste of effort from any participation in it."[32] That Mill omits discussion of his thirty-five year employment is perhaps not entirely surprising. Stokes explains that in contrast to his father's sense of mission and deep commitment to Indian governance, Mill "left a small mark on Indian policy," and suggests that he was unsuited by temperament to carry on his father's work. There is evidence that Stokes is right that John "lacked the clear objectives, the range of opportunity and the enthusiasm for Indian affairs which his father had possessed"[33] Mill's reference to his tenure at India House as part of his "outward existence" [34] reflects a lack of conviction, and in two letters following his father's death, he referred to the "drudgery" of his job.[35] The job—which only required six hours a day—had the benefit of not being particularly demanding, and Bain speculates that Mill "'probably never gave more than half of that time to his office routine," and worked on the *Logic* and the *Principles* during his office hours.[36]

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[32] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 249.
[33] Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, 50.
[34] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 249.
[35] Letter to Sarah Austin (28 January 1837), *CW*, XII, 321; Letter to John Pringle Nichol (29 January 1837), *CW*, XII, 323.
[36] Bain, *John Stuart Mill*., 147. Cited in Mazlish, *James and John Stuart Mill*, 199. In a letter to Carlyle, Mill complained that his employment "hampers my freedom of action in a thousand ways" (22 December 1833; *CW*, XII, 200), but in a later letter wrote that his duties left him with "intervals of leisure" during which he could "get on with my book...a treatise on Logic" (30 June 1837; *CW*, XII, 340).

Yet Stokes' explanation of Mill's disengagement from Indian affairs does not seem to go far enough, and ignores the possibility that Mill could not challenge his father's authority while he was alive, and would not interfere with his legacy after his death. James Mill was clearly the family expert on India, and we know from his *Autobiography* that Mill was reluctant to expose views at variance with his father's convictions, and that, moreover, he was protective of his reputation and felt that his accomplishments both as a historian and administrator were underappreciated. It is also worth noting that Mill wrote remarkably little about India, despite his thirty-five years at India House, until the very end of his tenure there. It may not have been a matter of temperament that prevented Mill from being more assertive—no one questions his assertiveness in favor of women's rights during his time in Parliament—but a matter of staying out of his father's way. I could find no example on which Mill diverged from his father's positions on Indian policy while he was alive.

With respect to India's stationary economy, James and John Mill were in agreement, particularly on the need for land reform. They regarded the Permanent Settlement of 1793 as not only a failed effort to create a landowning class whose members would improve their estates and recognize property rights; they believed that its unintended consequence was the creation of a new form of despotism. Far from advancing the Indian countryside, the Settlement immobilized it into a feudalism that Europe itself had left behind. The Mills considered the *zamindars* as every bit as corrupt and reactionary as their counterparts in the British aristocracy, and they viewed the Settlement as giving them license to lord it over the *ryots* and deprive them of their traditional rights of occupation. Perhaps even worse, the *zamindars* proved to be

uninterested in accumulating capital to invest in the improvement of their estates, preferring instead to lead lavish lifestyles without regard for the future: "They are not saving men; and I think that may be predicated generally of the persons that live upon rent. I know no country in which the class of men whose income is derived from rent can be considered as accumulators; they are men who spend their incomes."[37] For James Mill, it was imperative that the *ryots* be emancipated and able to assume some control over their economic lives. With an Enlightenment faith in individual initiative and free markets, James Mill advocated that the East India Company enable and encourage capital accumulation:

> The right thing in my opinion, is, to teach people to look for their elevation to their own resources, their industry and economy. Let the means of accumulation be afforded to our Indian subjects; let them grow rich as cultivators, merchants, manufacturers; and not accustom themselves to look for wealth and dignity to successful intriguing for places under government; the benefit from which, whatever it may be, can never extend beyond a very insignificant portion of the whole population.[38]

For the elder Mill, those governing India need only "take little from them in the way of taxes; prevent them from injuring one another; and make no absurd laws, to restrain them in the harmless disposal of their property and labour. Light taxes and good laws; nothing more is wanting for national and individual prosperity all over the globe."[39] Adam Smith himself could scarcely have made the argument more succinctly.

In the *Principles of Political Economy*, John Mill notes the failure to save and accumulate capital that had caused both China and India to lapse into a stationary state:

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[37] James Mill, cited in Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 16.
[38] James Mill, cited in Donald Winch, "Philosophic Whigs v. Philosophic Radicals," in Collini, Winch and Burrow, *Noble Science of Politics*, 118.
[39] James Mill, *History* V, 538.

> When a country has carried production as far as in the existing state of knowledge it can be carried with an amount of return corresponding to the average strength of the effective desire of accumulation in that country, it has reached what is called the stationary state; the state in which no further addition will be made to capital, unless there takes place either some improvement in the arts of production, or an increase in the strength of the desire to accumulate. [40]

Mill suggests that a cultural "defect of providence" afflicted both the Chinese and the "semi-agriculturalized Indians," that in their "incessant toil" and "insufferable wretchedness" they were "content to live from day to day" without a thought of the future. Yet these assertions notwithstanding, Mill's analysis is notable for *not* reducing the explanation of Asia's stationary economy to inherent Asian failures of character, and he denounces the claim that cultural differences are "natural" and thus irremediable:

> Of all vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effect of social and moral influences on the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences. What race would not be indolent and insouciant when things are so arranged, that they derive no advantage from forethought or exertion?[41]

For Mill, the cause of the economic stasis in Asia was that their progress through the stages of development had stalled in the agricultural period, that, as Mill said of India, Asian economies remained semi-agricultural. Stadial theory thus provided the conceptual reference for diagnosing the Asian stationary state; it also suggested the steps necessary for the renewal of progress.

Improvidence was thus not so much a failure of character as the result of the insecurity of property. This insecurity was also manifested by the tendency to build stores of wealth in precious metals and jewels, the portability of which safeguarded them from

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[40] *Principles*, *CW*, II, 169.
[41] *Principles*, *CW*, II, 319. Mill made this remark in the context of discussing "the Celtic race," but there should be little doubt that he was stating a general principle.

seizure, but which also depleted the pool of liquid capital available for investment. Citing the recognition of property rights, Mill draws a critical distinction between the progressive agricultural society of medieval Europe and the stationary state of Asia:

> The greater stability, the fixity of personal position, which this state of [medieval European] society afforded, in comparison with the Asiatic polity to which it economically corresponded, was one main reason why it was also found more favourable to improvement. From this time the economical advancement of society has not been further interrupted. Security of person and property grew slowly, but steadily; the arts of life made constant progress; plunder ceased to be the principal source of accumulation; and feudal Europe ripened into commercial and manufacturing Europe.[42]

Mill's foray into comparative socio-economics thus yielded an analysis that stressed structural as the cause of behavioral differences, and he accordingly turned to policies on land ownership, rent and taxation as both the explanation and the potential solution to India's economic stagnation. Mill's analysis and his conclusions relied heavily on his father (an unnamed "philosophical historian of India"), and quoting him at length, Mill traces the history of rural exploitation culminating in the Settlement establishing the *zemindar*-based system.[43] Mill actually regarded the Settlement as an honorable effort to introduce reforms in Britain's own image, but believed that there had been a failure to recognize that the *ryots* would be exploited without any improvement to the land or process of cultivation:

> The measure proved a total failure, as to the main effects which its well-meaning promoters expected from it. Unaccustomed to estimate the mode in which the operation of any given institution is modified even by such variety of circumstances as exists within a single kingdom, they flattered themselves that they had created, throughout the Bengal provinces, English landlords, and it proved that they had only created Irish ones. The new landed aristocracy

[42] Ibid., 18.
[43] Ibid., 319-23.

> disappointed every expectation built upon them. They did nothing for the improvement of their estates, but everything for their own ruin.[44]

The heart of the problem was that while the *ryot* was traditionally accorded a "right of property in the tenant, or...a right to permanent possession,"[45] the unlimited powers granted the *zemindar* to demand payment in rent and taxes (which were ultimately indistinguishable) on behalf of the state rendered them *de facto* proprietors, but without the incentive or title to make improvements. Mill thus endorsed as an essential reform a system of *ryot* proprietorship or perpetual leases combined with a predictable system of taxation and rents, in the expectation that it would lead to a class of entrepreneurial landowners. Mill believed that ownership would be the key to not only improving the land, but improving the peasants themselves, generating "the moral virtues of prudence, temperance and self-control" while also engaging their minds into "turning to practical use every fragment of knowledge acquired."[46]

Mill's observations on the Indian economy did not diverge significantly from those of his father, and to a great extent amount to an endorsement of James Mill's land reform policies.[47] However, soon after the elder Mill's death, John Mill took a tentative and unsuccessful step on education policy, a matter on which his father might have discouraged his intervention. I have earlier noted the low priority James Mill assigned to education in imperial policy. Stokes claims that his diagnosis of India's inertia was centered on its poverty, and that "with the gesture of one demonstrating a geometrical

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[44] Ibid., 321-2.
[45] Ibid., 320.
[46] Ibid., 281.
[47] Stokes refers to him as "a true son of his father in favouring peasant proprietorship, and...gave his full blessing to the developments in the North-Western provinces" in which the *zemindars* were excluded from a role in tax collection; Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, 115-6. Stokes provides a thorough review of the controversy over land policy in chapter II-1.

theorem, he had simplified the Indian question to three issues—the form of government, the nature of the laws, and the mode of taxation. Reform these, argued Mill, and the whole of Indian society would undergo a vast transformation, setting it on a rapid advance up the scale of civilization."[48] Mill's belittling of education as part of Indian policy was not accidental; in his *History*, he claimed it was a secondary matter that could only be effectively addressed after government and legal reform:

> It has been alledged...that most of the Indian judges point to education, as the only power from the operation of which a favourable change can be expected in the moral character of the people; on this subject...their views are superficial. The most efficient part of education is that which is derived from the tone and temper of the society: and the tone and temper of the society depend altogether upon the laws, and the government. Again; ignorance is the natural concomitant of poverty; a people wretchedly poor, are always wretchedly ignorant. But poverty is the effect of bad laws, and bad government; and is never a characteristic of any people who are governed well. It is necessary, therefore, before education can operate to any great result, that the poverty of the people should be redressed; that their laws and government should operate beneficently.[49]

Stokes notes that the controversy over education was crucial, and that James Mill was isolated in his pessimism about its efficacy. While liberals and evangelicals debated the details of reform, they agreed that it "could provide India's panacea."[50] Despite his skepticism, Mill did take a position in these controversies, his perspective reflecting a strictly utilitarian focus on the "useful knowledge" provided by technical education.[51]

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[48] Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, 56.
[49] James Mill, *History*, V, 541. Cited in Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, 57.
[50] Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, 56.
[51] In his Dispatch to Bengal (18 February 1824), James Mill wrote that "The great end should not have been to teach Hindoo learning or Mahomedan learning, but useful learning. No doubt in teaching useful learning to the Hindoos or Mahomedans, Hindoo *media* or Mahomedan *media*, so far as they were found the most effectual, would have been proper to be employed." Cited in Stokes, *English Utilitarians*, 57 and 324, note D. See also K. A. Ballhatchet, "The Home Government and Bentinck's Education Policy," *Cambridge Historical Journal* 10, no. 2 (1951): 225.

For James Mill, India's stationary condition was an economic problem that could be addressed in tax policy and by mandated reforms in political and social structure. However, for John Mill, India was both economically and intellectually stationary, and addressing India's economic stagnation alone was not sufficient to launch it on a progressive path. Indeed, in "Spirit of the Age," Mill cited Asian stationariness as a consequence of religious hegemony, with no mention of its economic stagnation. Mill's position in the debate over Indian education and the role of religious teachers is thus worth examining, particularly since it occurred when his father's health was in decline, thus giving Mill more freedom to express himself in the policy debate.

With the objective "to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern," the thrust of efforts by education reformers, among whose leaders was Thomas Babington Macaulay, was to promote Western culture through science and literature, and with all teaching to be in English. If successful, this reform would produce a deracinated ruling elite which would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect...and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population."[52] The opportunity for the reformers to press their case came in 1833 with the resignation of Horace Wilson, who had dominated education policy since 1820. Though not a high ranking official, Wilson was a member of the General Committee of Public Instruction (GCPI), and had derailed multiple attempts at reform while maintaining a conservative Orientalist policy throughout his reign. Wilson's resignation provided an opening for the reformers, and the appointment of Charles Trevelyan, Macaulay's future brother-in-law, to the GCPI

[52] Macaulay, cited in Abram L. Harris, "John Stuart Mill: Servant of the East India Company," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 30, no. 2 (May 1964): 196.

initiated a renewal of the effort to implement English language instruction of a Western curriculum. The new policy was proposed by Macaulay in his "Minute Upon Indian Education" in early 1835 and was approved by Governor General Bentinck. The minute denounced Wilson's longstanding policy of vernacular teaching of classic Asian texts, and the subsequent English Education Act provided for a gradual reallocation of funds away from traditional schools toward English language education. Having been approved by Bentinck and the Council of India, the Court of Directors of the East India Company tasked Mill to respond to the new order. While not disputing the reformer's objectives, Mill's dispatch on "Recent Changes in Native Education"[53] vehemently objected to the new policy and advocated continued funding of the traditional curriculum taught in native languages, albeit with modifications to include Western science and literature. The dispatch was approved by the Court of Directors and sent on to the Board of Control which had oversight over the East India Company. However, rather than being routinely signed off, Mill's dispatch was carefully reviewed by John Cam Hobhouse, President of the Board, and rejected in favor of the Macaulay-Trevelyan reform proposal. Mill was bitterly disappointed by Hobhouse's decision, particularly since Macaulay was his adversary.[54]

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[53] Unfortunately, none of Mill's dispatches for the EIC are included in the *Collected Works*. The volume dedicated to India contains only published writings, most written after 1858 when the EIC was nationalized. Mill's dispatches, including the "Recent Changes in Native Education," are apparently only available from the archives of the India Office in the British Museum in the original handwritten form, and were inaccessible to me. All citations from the dispatch are taken from secondary sources.

[54] In an undated letter from 1837, Mill, referring to his defeat and to Macaulay in particular, wrote that "In any case you will sympathize in the annoyance of one having for years, (contrary to the instincts of his own nature, which are all for *rapid* change) assisted in nurturing & raising up a system of cautious & deliberate measures for a great public end, & having been rewarded with a success quite beyond expectation, finds them upset in a week by a coxcombical dilettante litterateur who never did a thing for a practical object in his life." *CW,* XVII, 1970. Mill clearly despised Macaulay, and it must have struck him as a grim irony that it was his father who, after he had been so viciously attacked by Macaulay, had actually secured his appointment at the EIC.

Mill's response appears to defy what one might expect from a liberal reformer. While his defense of teaching in native languages is consistent with his father's views, his position on retaining the "Orientalist" curriculum of classical Sanskrit and Arabic literature would certainly not have been endorsed, given the elder Mill's contempt for Indian culture and his expressed preference for teaching "useful knowledge." An analysis of Mill's position by Gerald and Natalie Sirkin concludes that it was entirely retrograde, and they proceed to indulge in the counterfactual claim that had he been successful in stopping Macaulay's modernizing reforms, there would have been "incalculable consequences for India's future well-being."[55] After suggesting that Mill's analysis of Macaulay's proposal was at best disingenuous in its use of evidence, they conclude that the case for funding traditional education was so weak that "not even John Stuart Mill could fabricate a coherent argument out of the Orientalist materials."[56] Despite their apparent desire to participate in a debate that concluded in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Sirkins nonetheless raise the legitimate question of why Mill rejected the liberal education program and why he believed that the continued support for the traditional policy would lift India out of its stationary position.

The question is particularly perplexing because Mill had attributed the intellectually stationary condition of the "Hindoos and the Turks" to cultures in which "the spirit of the prevailing religion is such as excludes the possibility of material conflict

[55] Gerald Sirkin and Natalie Robinson Sirkin, "John Stuart Mill and Disutilitarianism in Indian Education," *The Journal of General Education* 24, no. 4 (January 1973): 235. The Sirkins ignore the 1854 education dispatch by Charles Wood which is credited with resolving the debate on Indian education. One analyst has stated that the Wood dispatch "is in closer accord with Mill's "Recent Changes in Native Education" than with anything Macaulay had said on the subject"; see Harris, "Servant of the East India Company," 201.
[56] Sirkin, "Mill and Indian Education," 265.

of opinion among its teachers."[57] Among the teachers in India were the Brahman *pandits* and Muslim *maulawis* who comprised the faculties of the colleges supported through the education fund of the East India Company. Endorsing Wilson's objections to the policy change, Mill argued that Western knowledge could be engrafted onto Indian classical learning, thus improving the curriculum by building on established foundations. For Mill, it was essential that the Sanskrit and Arabic teachers be retained because of the respect that they maintained within the wider community:

> The testimony of the most competent witnesses affirms that the lettered classes are still held by the people of India in high estimation, and their degradation and extinction cannot be received with indifference by their countrymen nor submitted to without resentment by themselves.[58]

Mill may have been misguided in believing that the curriculum could have been reformed without changing the instructors, but his purpose in retaining them reached beyond the particular needs of the education program. He had been deeply impressed by Coleridge's concept of a clerisy in his *On the Constitution of the Church and State* in 1830, and the "Spirit of the Age" published the following year indicates the influence of not only the Saint-Simonians, but of Coleridge as well. Mill argues that beliefs are formed through the influence of cultural leaders, that it is "one of the necessary conditions of humanity that the majority must either have wrong opinions, or no fixed opinions, or must place the degree of reliance warranted by reason, in the authority of those who have made moral and social philosophy their peculiar study." While every man should be encouraged to exercise his own abilities and judgement, "reason itself will teach most men that they must, in the last resort, fall back upon the authority of still more cultivated minds, as the

[57] "Spirit of the Age V-1," *CW*, XXII, 304-5. This was written in 1831, well before the education debate erupted.
[58] "Recent Changes in Native Education," cited in Zastoupil, *Mill and India*, 42.

ultimate sanction of the convictions of their reason itself."[59] Mill had identified the *pandits* and *maulawis* as the "learned class" that could exercise this intellectual and moral authority for the masses of India. They might serve as the foundation of a "grand institution for the education of the whole people" as Mill defined the clerisy in 1833, and it would include "not their school education merely...but for training and rearing them, by systematic culture continued throughout life, to the highest perfection of their mental and spiritual nature."[60]

In assigning this role to Sanskrit and Arabic educators in the Indian colleges, Mill was possibly naive, for his ideal of a non-sectarian clerisy was unlikely to have been realized using teachers so closely associated with their religious traditions. Yet Mill was unwilling to consider dogmatic commitments as a disqualification for those selected for leadership, and he hoped that an Indian clerisy could encompass both Western and indigenous learning:

> The mistake, I think, is in applying the *test* to the *doctrines* which the clergy shall teach, instead of applying it to their qualifications as teachers, and to the spirit in which they teach. When you give a man a diploma as a physician, you do not bind him to follow a prescribed method; you merely assure yourself of his being duly *acquainted* with what is known or believed on the subject, and of his having competent powers of mind.[61]

In this optimistic spirit, Mill proposed in his dispatch on "Native Education" that the "learned class" of Sanskrit and Arabic teachers could themselves be educated in Western

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[59] "Spirit of the Age II," *CW,* XXII, 244.
[60] "Corporation and Church Property," *CW,* IV, 220.
[61] Letter to James Martineau (26 May 1835), *CW,* XII, 264-5. Mill expressed similar sentiments in an earlier letter to John Sterling (20-22 October 1831), *CW,* XII, 76, suggesting that a "national clergy" could be composed "of all denominations of Christians, nay even among those who are not Christian at all," provided that they commit to be "teachers of the knowledge which fits people to perform their duties & exercise their rights, and as exhorters to the right performance & exercise of them."

literature and science and to use their authority to broaden the perspective of their students:

> What we may hope to do by means of English tuition is to teach the teachers; to raise up a class of persons who having derived from an intimate acquaintance with European literature the improved ideas and feelings which are derivable from that source will make it their occupation to spread those ideas and feelings among their countrymen.[62]

The plan to "teach the teachers" to be the intellectual couriers of Western ideas was, in Mill's view, indispensable. Not only did they have the intellectual authority to present the expanded and more open curriculum, but without their involvement, there was a risk that they would undermine the endeavor:

> The class to whom alone we can look for instruments in bringing home English ideas to Oriental comprehension, upon whom alone we can rely as our "interpreters," is the learned class: men of letters by birth and profession: the very class whom it is the necessary effect of your recent measures to alienate; to convert into enemies of our schemes of education. if not enemies of our rule.[63]

While objecting to the Macaulay-Trevelyan plan, Mill was not resisting the addition of European science and literature so much as attempting to introduce the new subjects in a way that would be most effective. Mill's argument was both prudential and, in its endeavor to fashion an Indian version of Coleridge's clerisy, an example of his effort to unify theory and practice.

Perhaps because Mill was advocating for an educational policy rather than constructing a theoretical explanation of how education could enable India's progress, he never fully explains how a learned class of Oriental classicists would break beyond the encapsulated world of Indian religious teaching to enable social progress. This gap is also

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[62] "Recent Changes in Native Education," cited in Ballhatchet, "Home Government," 226. See also Notes to Later Letters *CW,* XVII, 1969-70. Attached to Letter to Henry Taylor (Letter 184.1) 1837.
[63] "Recent Changes in Native Education," cited in Sirkin, "Mill and Indian Education," 253.

present in the more theoretically focused "Spirit of the Age" articles, for there too Mill failed to clarify why, despite their commonalities, "Hindoos and Turks" were stationary, yet medieval Christendom was a "*progressive* society...the greatest which had ever existed." What exactly was progressive about a society which Mill characterized as a dominated by the Church which was actively crushing all dissent to protect a hardened doctrine, and which finally had to yield to the external intellectual forces of the scientific revolution and the reformation? It was not reform from within, but revolutionary forces that accounted for modernization. Indeed, Trevelyan made precisely this argument in responding to Mill and Wilson, claiming that "If Luther had addressed the Roman Catholic clergy, and Bacon the schoolmen, instead of the rising generation, and all who were not strongly pre-engaged in behalf of any system, we should have missed our European Reformation, both of philosophy and religion."[64] The Sirkins provide some evidence that the "learned class" that Mill would have trained to be heterogeneous scholars of Eastern and Western thought "was the class *least* likely ever to acquire new learning or ever to assist others to acquire it... No group in India was less promising material for bridging East and West."[65] It seems that Mill, who grew up in the company of learned men—his father, Bentham, Ricardo, Grote, et al.—and spent his adolescence in debating societies and reading groups, could not imagine that a similar group entrusted with their country's intellectual leadership could be insular, dogmatic and self-serving.

However misplaced Mill's trust in the *pandits* and *maulawis* may have been, his theory of how cultures advance from a stationary state turned away from the top-down leadership of an educated class. His enthusiasm for an institutionalized clerisy cooled,

[64] Cited in Sirkin, "Mill and Indian Education," 280 note 94.
[65] Ibid., 253.

and while he continued to believe strongly in the authority of experts and "instructed minds," he recognized that Coleridge's proposal to maintain cultural heritage could lead toward Comte's version of a despotic centralized and official Spiritual Power. Yet while denouncing Comte, Mill's final statement on the problem of primitive societies argued quite explicitly for a form of enlightened despotism. Both of Mill's mature definitive statements of political philosophy—*On Liberty* and *Considerations on Representative Government*—advance the claim that liberty and representative institutions are only appropriate and viable for "human beings in the maturity of their faculties." In the introduction to *On Liberty*, written only a year after his tenure at the East India Company had come to an end, Mill reflected on the difficulty of progress in primitive societies and the expedient of despotic rule:

> Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury... The early difficulties in the way of spontaneous progress are so great, that there is seldom any choice of means for overcoming them; and a ruler full of the spirit of improvement is warranted in the use of any expedients that will attain an end, perhaps otherwise unattainable. Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.[66]

Mill elaborates on this argument in the final chapter of *Considerations*, in which he attempts to provide a rationale for a paternalistic and civilized despotism:

> [Government by a dominant country] is as legitimate as any other, if it is the one which in the existing state of civilization of the subject people, most facilitates their transition to a higher stage of improvement. There are, as we have already seen, conditions of society in which a vigorous despotism is in itself the best mode of government for training the people in what is specifically wanting to render them capable of a higher civilization. There are others, in which the mere fact of despotism has indeed no beneficial effect, the lessons which it teaches having already been only too completely learnt; but in which, there being no

[66] *On Liberty*, *CW,* XVIII, 224.

> spring of spontaneous improvement in the people themselves, their almost only hope of making any steps in advance depends on the chances of a good despot... When the dominion they are under is that of a more civilized people, that people ought to be able to supply it constantly.[67]

The problem Mill left unresolved was how colonial despotism, however benevolent in its intent, could "train the people" for "higher civilization." Unless the "spring of spontaneous improvement" is already present, there is no obvious way out of the conundrum of a perpetual paternalistic domination in which a subject people is denied the opportunity to decide its own destiny.

Mill unfortunately provides fodder to those who might impute a racist subtext when he endorses British policy to grant "colonies of European race, equally with the parent country...the fullest measure of internal self-government."[68] Colonies like India with large aboriginal majorities did not appear to have been similarly prepared. While the racist implications of Mill's justification for imperialism are evident enough, it appears that his distinction between colonized and potentially independent peoples did not depend on race but on history and culture. As one analyst of Mill's defense of imperialism puts it, "A people's lack of civilization was not an innate or genetic characteristic; it was a result of history and could be remedied by history."[69] Yet the remedy itself appears to have been elusive; advice on the order of "a people of savages should be taught obedience, but not in such a manner as to convert them into a people of slaves"[70] only begs all of the practical questions of how such a thing is to be accomplished, to say nothing of the problem of teaching them how to become politically independent. Indeed, Mill confesses

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[67] *Considerations on Representative Government*, *CW*, XIX, 567.
[68] Ibid., 563.
[69] Eileen Sullivan, "J.S. Mill's Defense of the British Empire," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1983): 610.
[70] *Considerations on Representative Government*, *CW*, XIX, 396.

that the effort by a "free country" to advance "backward populations" in a "distant dependency inhabited by a dissimilar people...will almost inevitably fail."[71] Well aware of the possibilities for abuse and exploitation, he believed they could be mitigated by an independent "delegated body"—namely, the East India Company—rather than direct control by the government. Nonetheless, he never shows how a subject country can be led to self-governance, and the 1857 Indian rebellion hardly suggests that the East India Company's effort to civilize the natives was on a path to success.

Though Mill struggled to find the remedy to advance a primitive people toward civilization, he was confident of the cause of their stagnation. The aforementioned "spring of spontaneous improvement" which was the necessary historical and cultural condition for progress was the presence of intellectual freedom and critical thinking. One could certainly argue that Mill's conclusion is little more than a convenient and tendentious application of his own values to complex societies, and that his analysis of them barely reached the standards he himself had set in his call for a political ethology in the *Logic*. Be that as it may, while Mill followed the tradition of classical political economy in identifying the pre-civilized stationary state as an economic phenomenon which could addressed by sound policy, he ultimately came to define it as a cultural failure, much as Montesquieu and Hegel had. The primitive stationary state for Mill was the consequence of an absence of intellectual diversity and the suppression of individuality. And, indeed, the suppression of individuality took both economic and cultural forms, as both the denial of property rights and the denial of personal expression.

[71] Ibid., 568, 573.

Mill made his case for the connection between the stationary state and the diversity of opinion in two additional examples. The first appears in his admiring review in 1845 of Guizot's *Cours d'Histoire Moderne.* It is of particular interest because Mill returns to the question of how Europe broke free of the constraints of feudal hierarchy and Church dominance, a question which, as we have seen, was not clearly resolved in "Spirit of the Age." John Robson points out that having been written soon after the publication of the *Logic*, the theme of scientific history was "still running through his mind"; unexplained assertions from "Spirit" like "the age of transition arrived" would not have been acceptable to the post-*Logic* Mill. Robson further notes that the Guizot essay was "predictive of Mill's future work" for its introduction of the claim that intellectual and cultural diversity are essential to social progress, and particularly to resolving the problem of exiting the stationary state.[72] Mill's review cites Guizot's analysis of progress and stagnation at length, and despite some caveats, asserts that "the substantial truth of the doctrine appears unimpeachable."[73] It was Guizot's claim that the difference between modern civilization and ancient cultures is that the latter came under the domination of "some one element, some one power in society" which gave those societies "a remarkable character of unity and simplicity." In ancient Egypt, for example, the "theocratic principle absorbed everything," as a "caste of priests" dominated all political and moral life. Sparta was controlled by its military elite, and in ancient Gaul the "spirit of clanship" was predominant. Guizot argues that the predominance of an uncontested set of values that provide the unity and overall character of ancient cultures ultimately resulted in their decline or stagnation, and he cites the rise and subsequent exhaustion of

[72] John Robson, "Textual Introduction to Essays on French History and Historians," *CW,* XX, civ.
[73] "Guizot's Essays and Lectures on History," *CW,* XX, 269.

Athens which exemplified the democratic principle, and the examples of Egypt and India in which "the unity of the dominant principle had a different effect; society fell into a stationary state. Simplicity produced monotony: the State did not fall into dissolution; society continued to subsist, but immovable, and as it were congealed."[74]

By contrast, Guizot claims that the civilization of modern Europe is characterized by multiple and conflicting principles, and is thus "confused, diversified, stormy," as "all forms, all principles of social organization co-exist." With none of the rival elements strong enough to stifle the others and gain exclusive authority, society is in a state of perpetual turmoil. As Mill puts it, "the modern world, while inferior to many of the ancient forms of human life in the characteristic excellence of each, yet in all things taken together, is richer and more developed than any of them."[75] Mill's characterization may have been more optimistic than the conservative Guizot's, but they nonetheless agreed that the "systematic antagonism [of] separate and independent sources of power" in modern Europe account for its dynamism and "the spirit of improvement, which has never ceased to exist, and still makes progress."[76] Mill thus claims that perpetually contending forces are not just a characteristic of modern Europe, but of European history from its beginning—"At no time has Europe been free from a contest of rival powers for dominion over society"—and while he recognizes that among those forces are powers that represent religion, military classes and wealth, he particularly emphasizes "the general power of knowledge and cultivated intelligence." Thus retreating from his account in "Spirit of the Age" which claimed the uncontested hegemony of the Church over medieval Christendom, Mill shifts his focus to more worldly institutions and asserts

[74] Guizot, cited by Mill in ibid., 267-8.
[75] Ibid., 269.
[76] Ibid., 269-70.

that the "feudal system...contained within itself a sufficient mixture of authority and liberty, afforded sufficient protection to industry, and encouragement and scope to the development of the human faculties, to enable the natural causes of social improvement to resume their course." Mill proceeds to an even stronger conclusion:

> When the history of what are called the dark ages...shall be written as it deserves to be, that will be seen by all, which is already recognized by the great historical inquirers of the present time—that at no period of history was human intellect more active, or society more unmistakably in a state of rapid advance, than during a great part of the so much vilified feudal period.[77]

Though it claims the authority of "great historical inquirers," in this rather breathtaking statement—imagine how Voltaire might have reacted!—one senses that Mill is engaging in a surmise which can only be based on a conclusion arrived at *a priori*. Indeed, after considering the rising power of the monarchy and the third estate which circumscribed the authority of the feudal nobility, Mill claims that this explanation is insufficient, that regarding "these imputed causes of the fall of feudalism, the question recurs, what caused the causes themselves?" It falls to the "philosophic interpreter of historical phenomena" to penetrate to the deeper cause, which can only be the found in the drive of the human intellect to progress, the liberty for it to do so, and the creative dynamism of intellectual conflict.[78]

Returning to the issue of how progressive and stationary states are distinguished, Mill arrived at much the same conclusion in *Considerations on Representative Government*. The context of the discussion is the inadequacy of the familiar dualisms of the period—Coleridgean Permanence and Progression, and Order and Progress

[77] Ibid., 289-90.
[78] Ibid., 289.

(attributed to unnamed French thinkers, but surely referring to Comte)—for determining the best form of government for a given society. The best form, Mill contends, is tailored to the characteristics of the people, the most important of which is the "virtue and intelligence of the human beings composing the community,"[79] which he proceeds to variously refer to as the community's "state of civilization" or "stage of advancement." Mill contends that the functions of government fall into two broad classes: "conducting the collective affairs of the people," i.e. administering justice, collecting taxes, providing for common defense, etc.; and "national education."[80] The former of these functions is required of all governments, and the people's state of civilization has little bearing on the way they are executed. The way in which government provides for education, however, varies significantly based on the people's stage of advancement, and it is the role of government, Mill claims, to conduct education in a fashion that brings about the community's advancement toward self-government. It is in this role that the governments of Asia have failed, and the continued subjection of Indians and Chinese, their "want of mental liberty and individuality," has rendered them stationary. Mill, however, notes an exception to this pattern of failure, the "comparatively insignificant Oriental people—the Jews."[81]

In Mill's account, the Jews started with institutions similar to the Chinese and Indians—an "absolute monarchy and a hierarchy, and their organized institutions were...of sacerdotal origin"—which assured public order and "gave them a national life." Yet unlike other Asian peoples, the political and religious hierarchies governing the Jews did not have exclusive control over the "moulding of their character." The moral

[79] *Considerations on Representative Government*, *CW*, XIX, 390.
[80] Ibid., 393.
[81] Ibid., 396-7.

education of the Jews was also influenced by the independent "unorganized institution" which Mill refers to as the Order of Prophets. They were, Mill claims, "often more than a match for kings and priests," and it was their independence and often antagonistic relationship with other institutions which created the conditions for progress. Mill suggests that the role of the prophets was "equivalent to the modern liberty of the press" in confronting efforts to "consecrate all that was established." The tensions created by the prophets in challenging interpretations of the Pentateuch gave continued life to the sacred teachings, and were of course ultimately included among them. Mill concludes:

> Conditions more favourable to Progress could not easily exist: accordingly, the Jews, instead of being stationary like other Asiatics, were, next to the Greeks, the most progressive people of antiquity, and, jointly with them, have been the starting-point and main propelling agency of modern cultivation.[82]

For Mill, progress required an ongoing cultural dialectic which could only be assured by the presence of multiple competing social forces, be they political institutions, religious hierarchies, or criticism from public intellectuals like Mill himself. Yet Mill's claim that cultural conflict distinguished the Jews as more progressive than the stationary Asian nations compels us to consider the nature of their progress, a question which Mill never even asks. Indeed, Jewish history appears scarcely an example of improvement so much as it is about persecution, exclusion, displacement and tenuous survival. The history of such a beleaguered people hardly seems to set a standard for progress by any metric of utility. Having sensed that Mill had engaged in an *a priori* explanation of the progressiveness of the medieval Europe by its internal conflicts, we now must question whether Mill is actually engaging in a tautology: It appears that cultural progress is not so much explained by the conflict of ideas among diverse social and political interests, as it

[82] Ibid., 397.

is defined by them. The conflict of ideas appears not as a means to progress but as evidence of progress itself, and perhaps as a good in itself.[83] Conversely, as Guizot had argued, the appearance of cultural consensus would pose the threat of stagnation.

The consequence of Mill's conclusion about the nature of progress and stagnation was the recognition that history had delivered a grand paradox. In the dualistic philosophy of history that was described in the previous chapter, Mill had traced the progressive stadial evolution of the means by which mankind assured its material sustenance in the pre-agriculture stages of development, and ultimately achieved comfort and, for some, luxury as technical skills and the division of labor advanced into the age of commerce. In parallel with its economic development, mankind grew intellectually and morally as religious and metaphysical thinking gave way to scientific method and rationalism, and social and political life came under the rule of law and justice. The improvement of humanity depended on a vital, dynamic and self-critical cultural life, which in turn crucially depended on a balanced array of social and political powers, a multiplicity of perspectives and the resultant intellectual conflict. The loss of conflict and diversity to a single all-powerful social force demanding adherence to its own orthodoxy and suppressing any alternative principle of living was a threat to moral and intellectual development. For Mill, the ascendency of the commercial spirit which had ushered in the improvements that came with modernity now posed precisely this threat. The ascendency of the commercial and industrial middle class so dominated the values and culture of England that a form of stationary state could be envisioned:

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[83] For a discussion of the ambiguity of means and ends in Mill's concepts of happiness and "individual liberty, variety and justice," see Isaiah Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," in *J. S. Mill's On Liberty in Focus*, eds. John Gray and G. W. Smith (London: Routledge, 1991), 131-61.

> The spirit of commerce and industry is one of the greatest instruments not only of civilization in the narrowest, but of improvement and culture in the widest sense: to it, or to its consequences, we owe nearly all that advantageously distinguishes the present period from the middle ages... But example and theory alike justify the expectation, that with its complete preponderance would commence an era either of stationariness or of decline. [84]

Mill thus suggests an unlikely convergence: that the commercial civilization of the West that had developed as a consequence of intellectual diversity and debate would likely culminate in a society displaying the cultural uniformity of the stationary East. The wealth-producing success of free market capitalism was creating a culture of intimidation which put further progress at risk by suppressing voices of opposition offering "contending principles," without which past "societ[ies have] either hardened into Chinese stationariness, or [have] fallen into dissolution.[85] Mill was thus proposing that society had reached a juncture in which two alternative paths lay ahead: the path of continued economic progress with the prospective stagnation of human potential in a cultural stationary state; or the path of a free, diverse and contentious culture in which a nation's economic progress is constrained to produce only enough to assure a comfortable standard of living for its population. Mill presented his preference in the 1848 publication of the *Principles of Political Economy*.

Like the *Logic* which had appeared five years earlier, the *Principles* was an immediate success, and confirmed Mill's position among the most eminent public intellectuals in Britain. Mill attributed the success of *Principles* to its design as a book not "merely of abstract science, but also of application, and treated political economy not as a thing by itself, but as a fragment of a greater whole; a branch of Social Philosophy."

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[84] "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II]," *CW*, XVIII, 197.
[85] "Bentham," *CW*, X, 108.

Regardless of whether Mill's explanation of his success was valid, it certainly reflected his intent. The *Principles* was both a vehicle for applying the methodology of the *Logic*, and, particularly in its later editions, a platform for Mill to express himself on what was necessary to "regenerate society."[86] Mill had long believed that a treatise on political economy could have a wider scope and impact than merely contributing to the refinement of economic theory *per se*. Before his depression and break from Benthamism, he had written a review of McCulloch's *Discourse on Political Economy*, and insisted on the value of economics toward enhancing "human happiness," if not "perfectibility":

> Political economists, as a class, have often been held up to hatred because their doctrines were considered as adverse to the scheme of perfectibility. This hatred has, however, been extremely ill-placed. For, waiving any opinion as to the scheme of perfectibility, and as to the possibility of attaching any very precise idea to the term, it must be allowed that political economists have shown in what manner the condition of mankind may be considerably improved. …If, therefore, they are of opinion that the perfectibility of the species is a mere vision, although bright and fascinating to dwell upon, they have, at all events, produced a plan by which a large addition may almost immediately be made to human happiness, and which will ultimately raise the species to a state at least approaching to the perfectibility which has been aimed at.[87]

While the young Mill of 1825 was thus satisfied that the development of a more prosperous nation was a step in the path toward human perfection, by 1848 he had come to recognize not only that happiness was more complex than the Benthamites had envisioned, but also that the assumed compatibility between happiness and wealth was also problematic. To be sure, happiness required sustenance, shelter and some degree of comfort. An understanding of political economy was essential to provide for these needs,

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[86] *Autobiography*, *CW*, I, 243, 239. Pedro Schwartz has made a powerful case that Mill's shortcomings as an economist are in large measure due to the primacy of his reformist instincts, which, Schwartz argues, were emphasized at the expense of theoretical innovation and advances over the Smith-Malthus-Ricardo tradition; *The New Political Economy of J.S. Mill* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968), *passim.*
[87] *McCulloch's Discourse on Political Economy*, *CW*, V, 758.

and to avert the kinds of policies and practices that jeopardized them. The *Principles* thus presents powerful arguments for free trade, land reform and population control, though none of these arguments were significant advances over Mill's predecessors. Yet Mill's objective remained consistent with his earlier position: to rescue economics from its reputation as a dismal science concentrating on scarcity and subsistence, and to establish it as the foundation for scientifically-based social reforms. Mill's celebrated extended analysis of socialist critiques of capitalism and his own advocacy of market-based worker's cooperatives are examples of Mill's approach, as were his arguments for taxes on rents and inheritance. The chapter on the stationary state is also such an example, the introduction of an explicit advocacy within the context of economic theory. As such, Mill's argument breached the self-imposed limits of the classical economics, which, Ricardo had argued, was not to venture outside its province into moral questions of whether it was a social or individual good to accumulate wealth.[88] For Mill as for Comte, the establishment of the human sciences—and they certainly included political economy—had the "improvement of mankind" as its normative principle. For Mill, moral questions about the pursuit of wealth were certainly in play.

As introduced by Smith in the *Wealth of Nations,* the stationary state was a strictly economic concept. Smith's definition was straightforward: an economy in which national wealth is neither growing nor declining. For Smith, the stationary economy was a dreaded anathema, as it would be for Malthus and Ricardo. The very purpose of the classical economists—and of nearly all economists who have followed—was to explain

[88] David Ricardo, "Notes on Malthus," *Works and Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), II, 338: "It has been well said by M. Say that it is not the province of the Political Economist to advise: —he is to tell you how you may become rich, but he is not to advise you to prefer riches to indolence, or indolence to riches." Regardless of whether Mill would have found this statement to be as disingenuous as it sounds today, he would certainly have disagreed on the merits.

(and advocate) the policies that would promote the growth of a nation's prosperity. For Smith, a growing economy was essential not just for the creation of wealth, but also for its wider distribution; the growth of national wealth lifted the laboring class lifted out of subsistence into a modicum of happiness and comfort:

> To complain of [the liberal reward of labour] is to lament over the necessary effect and cause of the greatest public prosperity. It deserves to be remarked, perhaps, that it is in the progressive state, while the society is advancing to the further acquisition, rather than when it has acquired its full complement of riches, that the condition of the laboring poor, of the great body of the people, seems to be the happiest and the most comfortable. It is hard in the stationary, and miserable in the declining state. The progressive state is in reality the cheerful and the hearty state to all the different orders of the society. The stationary is dull; the declining melancholy.[89]

Yet, however much the goal of economic policy was to promote growth, Smith believed the stationary state to be the inevitable future condition of the free market. Indeed, for all of the classical economists—Marx was not alone in this—economic growth under capitalism was unsustainable. In Smith's account, economic growth must ultimately confront the limits of what nature can provide:

> In a country which had acquired that full complement of riches which the nature of its soil and climate, and its situation with respect to other countries allowed it to acquire; which could, therefore, advance no further, and which was not going backwards, both the wages of labour and the profits of stock would probably be very low. In a country fully peopled in proportion to what either its territory could maintain or its stock employ, the competition for employment would necessarily be so great as to reduce the wages of labour to what was barely sufficient to keep up the number of labourers, and, the country being already fully peopled, that number could never be augmented.[90]

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[89] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I, 99.
[90] Ibid., I, 111.

There is a natural limit to the number of businesses that an economy can bear, and as productive capacity saturates the market, profits must inevitably decline as competitors lower prices to maintain market share:

> In a country fully stocked in proportion to all the business it had to transact, as great a quantity of stock would be employed in every particular branch as the nature and extent of the trade would admit. The competition, therefore, would everywhere be as great, and consequently the ordinary profit as low as possible.[91]

Low profits would deprive the economy of the ability to accumulate capital, and would additionally reduce the incentive to invest. Economic growth would stall into a stationary equilibrium that would minimize profits and hold wages at subsistence levels.

Ricardo also identified a process by which profits must fall, namely the marginal cost of producing more food to support an expanding population in a growing economy. As less arable land is brought into cultivation, the rising marginal cost of production rises and thus exerts a "gravitation[al] [pull] on profits." While the fall in profits can be periodically abated by improved agricultural methods and technology, the sources of innovation would ultimately be exhausted, leading to a convergence of costs and revenues. While the non-productive landlords would make out well, the capitalist's profits would be squeezed, and investment capital and rates of return would fall toward zero:

> As soon as wages should be equal… to the whole receipts of the farmer, there must be an end to accumulation; for no capital can then yield any profit whatever, and no additional labour can be demanded, and consequently population will have reached its highest point. Long indeed before this period, the very low rate of profits will have arrested all accumulation, and almost the whole produce of the

[91] Ibid.

> country, after paying the labourers, will be the property of the owners of land and the receivers of tithes and taxes.[92]

George Stigler has remarked that though Ricardo "pays little attention to this final, historical equilibrium," he believed that market mechanisms would result in a "dismal stationary state… near or far in the future."[93] Robert Heilbroner estimates a comparably open horizon for Smith, claiming that "in the very long run the growth momentum of society would come to a halt [with] two hundred years as the longest period over which a society could hope to flourish."[94] Smith and Ricardo were happy to see that eventuality pushed as far into the future as possible.

Not so Mill. While he shared Ricardo's belief that profits must ultimately decline, he could not "regard the stationary state of capital and wealth with the unaffected aversion so generally manifested towards it by political economists of the old school."[95] In the two chapters preceding his discussion of the stationary state, Mill considered the problem of declining profits. While he disputed Smith's analysis, he largely accepted Ricardo's model:

> When a country has long possessed a large production, and a large net income to make savings from, and when, therefore, the means have long existed of making a great annual addition to capital; (the country not having, like America, a large reserve of fertile land still unused;) it is one of the characteristics of such a country, that the rate of profit is habitually within, as it were, a hand's breadth of the minimum, and the country therefore on the very verge of the stationary state.[96]

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[92] David Ricardo, *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 71-2.
[93] George Stigler, "Ricardian Value and Distribution," *Essays in the History of Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 193.
[94] Robert Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*, 7th edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 67. It should be noted that Heilbroner offers no rationale or citation to justify this estimate.
[95] *Principles*, *CW*, III, 753-4.
[96] Ibid., 738. For Mill's critique of Smith's analysis of falling profits, see ibid., 733-5.

Yet even while accepting the Ricardian scenario, Mill is careful to note that the stationary state is not "likely in any of the great countries of Europe to be soon actually reached," and he explains in considerable detail why "the boundary of capital [will] continually open and leave more space."[97] Indeed, his elaboration of the theoretical and empirical conditions that could push out the boundary appears to diminish its actual likelihood:

> To fulfil the conditions of the hypothesis, we must suppose an entire cessation of the exportation of capital for foreign investment. No more capital sent abroad for railways or loans; no more emigrants taking capital with them, to the colonies, or to other countries; no fresh advances made, or credits given, by bankers or merchants to their foreign correspondents. We must also assume that there are no fresh loans for unproductive expenditure, by the government, or on mortgage, or otherwise; and none of the waste of capital which now takes place by the failure of undertakings which people are tempted to engage in by the hope of a better income than can be obtained in safe paths at the present habitually low rate of profit. We must suppose the entire savings of the community to be annually invested in really productive employment within the country itself; and no new channels opened by industrial inventions, or by a more extensive substitution of the best known processes for inferior ones.[98]

The breadth of this list leads one to wonder whether the stationary state is more chimerical than actually imminent: Mill predicates the stationary state on the cessation of foreign investment and trade; on the success and efficiency of *all* current investments; on the inability to open new markets through the invention of new products; and on an end to reinvestment to improve existing industrial practices. In short, all possible fields of investment would have to be saturated.

Moreover, Mill acknowledges that profits would remain above the minimum as a result of periodic "commercial revulsions" which would drive marginal businesses out of

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[97] Ibid., 739.
[98] Ibid.

the market, leaving not only greater profit opportunities for those that survived, but more importantly, openings for new investment:

> This, doubtless, is one considerable cause which arrests profits in their descent to the minimum, by sweeping away from time to time a part of the accumulated mass by which they are forced down. But this is not, as might be inferred from the language of some writers, the principal cause. If it were, the capital of the country would not increase; but in England it does increase greatly and rapidly. This is shown by the increasing productiveness of almost all taxes, by the continual growth of all the signs of national wealth, and by the rapid increase of population, while the condition of the labourers is certainly not declining, but on the whole improving. These things prove that each commercial revulsion, however disastrous, is very far from destroying all the capital which has been added to the accumulations of the country since the last revulsion preceding it, and that, invariably, room is either found or made for the profitable employment of a perpetually increasing capital, consistently with not forcing down profits to a lower rate.[99]

The business cycle, in short, flushes out the unproductive and the inefficient and makes way for new enterprises and the return of profitability, capital formation and growth.

Mill's analysis fails to offer any precision in forecasting the advent of the stationary state, and based on his own analysis, it does seem to be far off. Indeed, in the opening paragraphs of the chapter on the stationary state, he readily acknowledges that because of new productive technologies and the continuing availability of investment opportunities in underdeveloped "regions of the earth, that "we are always on the verge of it [the stationary state]...the goal itself flies before us."[100] Several commentators have overlooked the elusive nature of the stationary state, and one is left to ponder whether it is merely a theoretical possibility imposed by the finite limits of the investable world.[101]

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[99] Ibid., 742.
[100] Ibid., 752.
[101] It has been suggested that Mill's assertion that the stationary state will soon follow when profits are within a "hands breadth of the minimum" implies that the stationary state is imminent. This indeed would be true if Mill had claimed that profits were approaching that minimal level, but this fails to account for

Indeed, we are reminded that in the first section of Book II on "Distribution," Mill famously argues that unlike the distribution of wealth over which men "can do with them as they like," production is subject to laws like those governing matter, and there are "limits set by the constitution of things":

> We cannot, indeed, foresee to what extent the modes of production may be altered, or the productiveness of labour increased, by future extensions of our knowledge of the laws of nature, suggesting new processes of industry of which we have at present no conception. But howsoever we may succeed in making for ourselves more space within the limits set by the constitution of things, we know that there must be limits. We cannot alter the ultimate properties either of matter or mind, but can only employ those properties more or less successfully, to bring about the events in which we are interested.[102]

The stationary state thus appears not as a necessary outcome of historical development, or even a tendency or a looming probability, but more as a consequence dictated *a priori* by Mill's assumption that diminishing and ultimately finite resources must impose an insuperable boundary on economic growth. If those resources were confined to those in England, Mill suggests, the stationary state would indeed be imminent. Yet England "no longer depends on the fertility of her own soil to keep up her rates of profits, but on the soil of the whole world."[103]

Believing in the likely persistence of a growing free market economy, Mill's attention turned to the social and cultural consequences of unimpeded expansion, and the American example described by Tocqueville had a significant impact. Well before reading *Democracy in America*, Mill had expressed his concerns about the vulgarity of

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Mill's listing of the many factors that can keep profits above that point. See, for example, Ronald Meek's assertion of "Mill's belief that the stationary state was just around the corner," in *Smith, Marx & After* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1977), 170. Heilbroner too states that "Mill believed England (and by extension, world capitalism) to be within a 'hands breadth' of the stationary state," though Mill said nothing of the sort; see Heilbroner, *Worldly Philosophers,* 133.

[102] *Principles*, *CW,* II, 199.

[103] Ibid., III, 745.

English middle class business culture in letters to the Saint-Simonians. He was accordingly unpersuaded by Tocqueville's contention that cultural debasement in America was a consequence of a providential trend toward democracy, arguing instead that it was the rise of the commercial middle class that had displaced traditional and more elevated values. Nonetheless, Tocqueville's premonition of a tyranny of the majority attracted Mill's attention, particularly since the middle class was ascendant in both countries. In the 1835 review of the first volume, Mill had dismissed the threat as less likely in Europe than in America; he continued to believe, as he had argued in "Spirit of the Age," that mass opinion is formed by deference to the leadership of cultural and political elites, and that they continued to exert stronger influence in Europe than in the United States.[104] However, in his 1840 review of the second volume, Mill refers to unspecified "events...which have occurred since the publication of the First Part" which had made Tocqueville's case for "the shape which tyranny is most likely to assume" more compelling.[105] The shape of majority tyranny, Mill explains, was not political or legal so much as cultural, a "tyranny not over the body, but over the mind,"[106] and Mill approvingly summarizes Tocqueville's conclusions about the likely consequences:

> His fear, both in government and in intellect and morals, is not of too great liberty, but of too ready submission; not of anarchy, but of servility, not of too rapid change, but of Chinese stationariness. As democracy advances, the opinions of mankind on most subjects of general interest will become, he believes, as compared with any former period, more rooted and more difficult to change; and mankind are more and more in danger of losing the moral courage and pride of

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[104] "We can see reasons for thinking that they [causes of a tyranny of the majority] would exist in a far inferior degree in Europe... In America there is no highly instructed class; no numerous body raised sufficiently above the common level, in education, knowledge, or refinement, to inspire the rest with any reverence for distinguished mental superiority, or any salutary sense of the insufficiency of their own wisdom." "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [I]," *CW*, XVIII, 83-4.
[105] "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II]," *CW*, XVIII, 176.
[106] Ibid., 178.

> independence, which make them deviate from the beaten path, either in speculation or in conduct.[107]

Mill shared Tocqueville's fear that the range of socially-approved opinion and behavior had narrowed to a prudential morality of self-interest and an egalitarian regime in which public opinion had supplanted expertise and thoughtful judgement. Referring to Tocqueville, Mill observes that the "the turmoil and bustle of a society in which every one is striving to get on, is in itself, our author observes, not favourable to meditation."[108] On this latter point Mill elaborates with alarm that the competitive striving exhibited by the American commercial class is increasingly evident in England:

> That entire unfixedness in the social position of individuals—that treading upon the heels of one another—that habitual dissatisfaction of each with the position he occupies, and eager desire to push himself into the next above it—has not this become, and is it not becoming more and more, an English characteristic? In England, as well as in America, it appears to foreigners, and even to Englishmen recently returned from a foreign country, as if everybody had but one wish—to improve his condition, never to enjoy it, as if no Englishman cared to cultivate either the pleasures or the virtues corresponding to his station in society, but solely to get out of it as quickly as possible, or if that cannot be done, and until it is done, to seem to have got out of it. "The hypocrisy of luxury," as M. de Tocqueville calls the maintaining an appearance beyond one's real expenditure, he considers as a democratic peculiarity. It is surely an English one. [109]

Tocqueville's portrait of the American character seems to have implanted an almost desperate fear that England would follow the same direction toward a ruinous tyranny of a dominant middle class whose values reflect the "habits and instincts of the commercial community":

> The American Many are not essentially a different class from our ten-pound householders; and if the middle class are left to the mere habits and instincts of a

[107] Ibid., 188.
[108] Ibid., 181.
[109] Ibid., 193.

> commercial community, we shall have a "tyranny of the majority," not the less irksome because most of the tyrants may not be manual labourers. For it is a chimerical hope to overbear or outnumber the middle class.[110]

Mill's most forceful statement on the cultural dominance of commercial values and the insidious effects of conformism was provided in his chapter, "Of Individuality" in *On Liberty*. While published over twenty years after "Civilization" and the reviews of Tocqueville, there is little that was not anticipated by these earlier works, but here they are distilled in a powerful polemic: The entire world is drifting toward mediocrity as the individual is "lost in the crowd": "In ancient history, in the middle ages, and in a diminishing degree through the long transition from feudality to the present time, the individual was a power in himself... Public opinion now rules the world." In America, the source of public opinion is the "whole white population," in England, it is "chiefly the middle class." Whereas in the past, "great energies [were] guided by vigorous reason, and strong feelings strongly controlled by a conscientious will," public opinion now congratulates weak energy and feelings, and "there is now scarcely any outlet for energy in this country except business." The prospective result of this transition from the individual to the collective is decline, and the danger is that public opinion will harden into a "despotism of custom": "The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called, according to circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of progress or improvement." Mill argues that while "we flatter ourselves that we are the most progressive people who ever lived," this self-

[110] Ibid., 200.

congratulation is a mirage concealing a decline into the cultural uniformity of China and threatening to crush individuality and intellectual freedom:

> The modern *régime* of public opinion is, in an unorganized form, what the Chinese educational and political systems are in an organized; and unless individuality shall be able successfully to assert itself against this yoke, Europe, notwithstanding its noble antecedents and its professed Christianity, will tend to become another China. [111]

Referring to Asia, Mill asserts that "the greater part of the world has, properly speaking, no history." With the universal despotism of custom, Mill suggests that history will come to an end.

Mill's sense of urgency was dictated by his belief in the imminent prospect of a stationary culture suffocated by middle class values, and that the no-growth stationary state which might constrain the culture of wealth was too remote. If history were to advance to a fifth stage in which individuality could flourish within a culture accepting a diversity of ideas and values, then a condition of economic stasis would have to be accelerated rather than awaited. Mill's discussion of the stationary state thus becomes less a matter of analysis than of advocacy. Mill had come to recognize that economic growth was an obstacle—even the enemy—of the kind of human progress that he cherished. The continual effort to, as Smith had put it, "better our condition," was crowding out the possibility of bettering ourselves. Mill thus rejected the Smithian argument that prosperity required a continually growing economy based on ever higher profits, claiming that prosperity could consist merely of "a large production and a good distribution of wealth." Prosperity thus understood suggests the sacrifice of great wealth and luxury for a reasonable level of comfort throughout the economy. As such, economic

[111] *On Liberty*, *CW*, XVIII, 268, 272, 273, 274.

stasis, Mill suggests, "would be, on the whole, a very considerable improvement on our current condition."[112]

Mill believed that the advent of the stationary state would enable a new direction away from the "course stimuli" of the pursuit of wealth toward the possibility of a renewal of moral and intellectual accomplishment. In an oft-cited passage in the *Principles*, Mill states his disaffection with the prevailing competitive culture of commercial society:

> I confess I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind, or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress.[113]

Despite his distaste for commercial culture, Mill returns to the stadial vocabulary to note that commercial progress was a "necessary stage in the progress of civilization." Further, while Mill clearly advocates a break from the progressive state to the stationary as a "means of improving and elevating the universal lot," he nonetheless recognizes that the ethos of the progressive state "is not necessarily destructive of the higher aspirations and the heroic virtues." Mill acknowledged that the energy unleashed by the commercial spirit was superior to the unproductive torpor of the landed aristocracy and rentier class. Nonetheless, even if not "necessarily destructive," Mill clearly thought that the priorities of the spirit of commerce were misdirected, and believed that the pursuit of riches had become a distraction from higher values. He failed to understand why the "mere increase of production and accumulation" should "excite the congratulations of ordinary

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[112] *Principles*, *CW*, III, 752, 754.
[113] Ibid., 754.

politician," or the pursuit of luxury for the sake of display and status. Perhaps recognizing that the ideal of a class of idle rich had not been totally wiped out by the ethic of striving, Mill also pointedly condemns the ambition of the "numbers of individuals [who] should pass over, every year, from the middle classes into a richer class, or from the class of the occupied rich to that of the unoccupied."[114] Not only was the pursuit of wealth achieving a cultural hegemony within the middle class, but even worse, it was doing so with the ultimate objective of affirming the worst quality of the landed gentry and aristocracy, their indolence.

While Mill uses the language of stadialism and makes a caveat-laced case for the economic conditions that would introduce the stationary stage of history, he offers scarcely any explanation of the projected transition from the era of commerce to the era of stationary improvement. The social dynamics of this shift appear to be of little interest to him. The best Mill can offer is that "the better minds succeed into educating the others into better things" to prevent the "energies of mankind" from "rust and stagnation." Such education would be performed by "those who do not accept the present early stage of human improvement as its ultimate type."[115] But surely these modest statements belie the radical transformation that he envisioned. Mill seems to be oddly disconnected from what would be necessary to bring about the cultural and social transition that he is calling for. The characteristics of the stationary state seem to simply happen; they are presented as if a cultural shift from values he scorned to those which would be profoundly antithetical could take place seamlessly. Rather than striving for the acquisition of greater wealth, society turns to "what is economically needed [for] a better distribution." The shift to a

[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid., 754, 755

more egalitarian society would be the "the joint effect of the prudence and frugality of individuals, and of a system of legislation favouring equality of fortunes." This would be accomplished by limiting transfers of wealth by gift or inheritance, thus providing there is no infringement of "the just claim of the individual to the fruits… of his or her own industry" (which would, of course, exclude the landed aristocracy). The stationary state would thus have a flattened class structure, with an "affluent body of labourers [and] no enormous fortunes." Because inherited wealth would be limited by legislation "to a moderate independence," what fortunes existed would have been accumulated within their holder's lifetime. The stationary state would be populated by "a much larger body of persons than at present, not only exempt from the coarser toils, but with sufficient leisure, both physical and mental, from mechanical details, to cultivate freely the graces of life, and afford examples of them to the classes less favourably circumstanced for their growth."[116]

Other stresses on well-being would disappear. The Malthusian bête noir of prosperity, population growth, would be controlled by the "determination" and "prudential restraint" of the working class, fully cognizant of the risks presented by too many children to their improved standard of living. The urge to procreate would be tempered by the recognition that "a new hand could not obtain employment but by displacing, or succeeding to, one already employed." Accordingly, "the combined influences of prudence and public opinion might in some measure be relied on for restricting the coming generation within the numbers necessary for replacing the

[116] Ibid., 755.

present."[117] With the prudential restraint of population growth, *per capita* income could be held constant. Further, in the stationary state, social advancement would "be open to all," but it would be most favorable if everyone were contented in their place: "The best state for human nature is that in which, while no one is poor, no one desires to be richer, nor has any reason to fear being thrust back, by the efforts of others to push themselves forward."[118] The development of new productive technologies would continue, but would "instead of serving no purpose but the increase of wealth… would produce their legitimate effect, that of abridging labour." Instead of creating fortunes and "increase[ing] the comforts of the middle classes," improvements in the industrial arts would enable "a greater population to [escape] the same life of drudgery and imprisonment" by "lighten[ing] the day's toil." Indeed, Mill goes further by suggesting the desirability of "just institutions" and "judicious foresight" to assure that "the conquests made from the powers of nature by the intellect and energy of scientific discoverers, become the common property of the species, and the means of improving and elevating the universal lot."[119] One is left to conclude that "scientific discoverers" would pursue their calling for the pure love of it—and perhaps for the love of humanity—since they would apparently forego any rights of ownership.

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[117] Ibid., 753.

[118] Ibid., 754. The idea that no one would suffer from another's advancement seems an especially egregious suspension of economic reality. The stationary state would present a zero-sum game, which, precisely because of the absence of growth, would require a loss commensurate with someone else's gain. Mill actually implies as much in Book I when he notes that "In the stationary state, though capital does not on the whole increase, some persons grow richer and others poorer" (*Principles*, *CW*, II, 169). While absolute social wealth is stationary, the relative wealth of individuals can and will change. Mill should have recognized with Lewis Carroll's Duchess, a master of zero-sum economics, that "The more there is of mine, the less there is of yours." For a more recent (and nuanced) explanation of the distribution of wealth in a no-growth economy, see Kenneth E. Boulding, *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 191-2; and "The Shadow of the Stationary State," *Daedalus* 102, No. 4 (Fall 1973): 89-101.

[119] *Principles*, *CW*, III, 757.

Mill foresees a transformation in the relationship between man and nature in the stationary state. Reflecting his attraction to Wordsworth during the period of his personal crisis, Mill rejects Benthamite instrumentalism. Nature would no longer be regarded as a source of exploitation and wealth; it would be an escape from the rigors of the quotidian world of work, a source of beauty, and a stimulus for contemplation:

> Solitude, in the sense of being often alone, is essential to any depth of meditation or of character; and solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur, is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without.

Mill even suggests in a passage with remarkable current resonance that nature is threatened by the pressures of population and extraction, and that efforts must be applied to sustain resources lest we exhaust them:

> If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger, but not a better or a happier population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it.[120]

The statement is admirably prescient in its anticipation of environmental depredation. But it should remind us that the fall of profits that was projected to cause the stationary state was ultimately predicated on the assumption of natural limits to a growing economy. The passage reinforces Mill's argument that the stationary state can (and should) be a social choice. If we ultimately face the prospect of economic stagnation, why not redirect our priorities away from the growth of wealth and conscientiously build toward a better society and a more elevated culture?

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[120] Ibid., 756.

As Mill had stressed in the *Autobiography*, his goal was to "regenerate society," and the chapter on the stationary state surely conforms to that objective, even if it takes the form of a utopian reverie. Though the chapter departs from the economic theory that comprises the vast bulk of the *Principles*, its inclusion suggests that Mill was intent on placing his alternative social vision in front of the middle class readers who would be its most likely audience. Indeed, that intent seems transparent in the final paragraph of the chapter, which turns to how the life of the individual person might change in the new world of the stationary state:

> It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on.[121]

Mill's ambition for a transformation to an Art of Living—indeed, his entire doctrine –has been castigated by Maurice Cowling as the wish for a society made of "seekers after Truth" in Mill's own image.[122] The assessment of Mill as a "man of sneers and smears and pervading certainty" seems, at the very least, excessive and mean-spirited. It is also an egregious misreading, for if *On Liberty* conveys any meaning, it is surely that individuals should seek their own way, undaunted by the opinion of others, presumably Mill's among them.[123] Except as a liberation from the "art of getting on," the "Art of

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[121] Ibid., 756.
[122] Maurice Cowling, "Mill and Liberalism," in Schneewind, *Critical Essays*, 329-53.
[123] Cowling's accusation, though coming from the right, mirrors the leftist claim that Mill was an elitist. There is ample foundation for the latter claim, particularly his advocacy of plural voting, but Mill himself, when confronted with this charge, denied it strenuously. In a letter to Alexander Bain after the publication of *On Liberty*, Mill addressed the claim: "The 'Liberty' has produced an effect on you which it was never intended to produce if it has made you think that we ought not to attempt to convert the world. I meant nothing of the kind, & hold that we ought to convert all we can. We *must* be satisfied with keeping alive the sacred fire in a few minds when we are unable to do more—but the notion of an intellectual aristocracy of *lumières* while the rest of the world remains in darkness fulfils none of my aspirations—& the effect I aim

Living" was proposed without definition, but seems entirely consistent with Mill's frequent advocacy of self-culture and political engagement. Nadia Urbinati has proposed that Mill's mention of the art of living is suggestive of the classical Greek emphasis on virtue ethics and an attempt to recover the idea of a good life in the modern world. She specifically cites Aristotle's ethics as a model for Mill, and argues that "happiness, for Mill as for Aristotle (and for Marx), pertains to a form of acting (thus of being); it consists in individuals' direct exercise of all their mental faculties."[124] The stationary state was Mill's attempt to construct a social context in which economic life is redirected from obsessive accumulation to the more confined instrumental role of creating time for sufficient leisure to attempt "different experiments of living," to appreciate nature and the arts, to participate in improving the lives of others, and to engage in the "cultivation of [one's] higher nature." The stationary state was Mill's answer to the question posed in *On Liberty*, "For what more or better can be said of any condition of human affairs, than that it brings human beings themselves nearer to the best thing they can be?"[125]

That Mill was using the stationary state as a vehicle to advocate for a change in cultural and individual priorities has been ignored by a surprising number of interpreters. For historians of economic theory, the issues raised by the stationary state have been

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at by the book is, on the contrary, to make the many more accessible to all truth by making them more open minded." (6 August 1859; *CW*, XV, 631).

[124] Nadia Urbinati, "An Alternative Modernity: Mill on Capitalism and the Quality of Life," in Eggleston, Miller and Weinstein, *Mill and the Art of Life*, 236-63. Urbinati's inclusion of Marx is entirely appropriate, particularly in consideration of the well-known passage in the *German Ideology* in which Marx refers to the escape from the division of labor in post-capitalist society, thus enabling man to fish, hunt and criticize at their own determination. Mill, who knew nothing of Marx, might well have agreed that "This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now." *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Robert Tucker (New York, Norton, 1978), 160.

[125] *On Liberty*, *CW*, XVIII, 261, 270, 267. In the *Autobiography*, Mill refers to the "right and duty of self-development." *CW*, I, 260.

treated strictly within the framework of classical economics. Samuel Hollander, for example, states that "Mill's interest in the 'Stationary State' can in fact only be fully appreciated in terms of his concern for a high average income with special reference to the masses." He continues, "The essence of Mill's perspective...is that whether or not capital is growing, and at whatever rate, living standards of the masses will be high or low depending upon the relative growth of population."[126] Lord Robbins has a similarly blinkered approach.[127] Other analysts, whether approaching Mill as an economist or social theorist, dwell on whether the stationary state was, as Pedro Schwartz puts it, "realistic...viable in practice."[128] On this score, Mill is seen to come up short for failing to acknowledge social conflict (Schwartz), or the potential for generational division as the stifling of the "aggressive energies [of the young] might turn inward, toward self-destruction" (Feuer). Many have pointed out that Mill grossly underestimated the "dynamism of the capitalist system" (Schwartz) and the potential of new technologies and service industries.

Interpreters have also disagreed on the status of the stationary state within Mill's philosophy. Leslie Stephen, one of Mill's earliest critics, dismisses it as "a theory which represents rather a temporary protest than settled conviction."[129] Feuer credits the stationary state as his "most original sociological theorem," but then states that it is the

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[126] Samuel Hollander, *The Economics of John Stuart Mill,* 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), II, 886.
[127] Lord Lionel Robbins, *The Theory of Economic Development in the History of Economic Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 167-170.
[128] Pedro Schwartz, *New Political Economy*, 231. See also L.S. Feuer, "John Stuart Mill as a Sociologist," in Robson and Laine, *Papers of the Centenary Conference*, 99.
[129] Leslie Stephen, *The English Utilitarians,* 3 vols. (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1950), III, 201.

product of his "sociological Manicheanism,"[130] a claim that in itself is hard to comprehend or credit. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Alan Ryan claims that "his account of the stationary state...is quintessential Mill,"[131] enabling him to speculate on the possibilities of a post-capitalist society in which there is a more egalitarian distribution of wealth and more leisure for "self-culture." Jonathan Riley situates the stationary state at the threshold where "economic rights associated with the interest in abundance come into conflict with superior types of rights, [e.g.] rights to breathe clean air and drink clean water...as well as rights to contemplate unspoiled natural beauty in solitude, rights to engage freely and exclusively with other consensual adults in intimate activities of no legitimate concern to anyone else."[132] While Riley's juxtaposition of desires conveys the flavor of Mill's thinking, one cannot help but puzzle over his non-Millian characterization of sources of pleasure as "rights."

Michael Levy has written the most comprehensive analysis of Mill's stationary state, and concludes that it is his "*deus ex machina*, a final device for resolving irresolvable conflicts," that it represents his "dogged faith in a determined, progressive telos emerging from the 'invisible hand' of the marketplace." The conflicts resolved by the stationary state include the familiar polarities that characterize classical liberalism, "tensions between equality and liberal social structure, equality and liberty, and finally

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[130] Feuer, "Mill as a Sociologist," 100. Noting that James Mill's Presbyterian background had left him agnostic about the Manichaean, theory, Feuer makes the jaw-dropping (and inscrutable) claim that "the son now felt that such an inarticulate premise was adumbrated in his experience; the sociologist's inverse deductive method, the laws of mind, and the empirical sociological laws, required the intervening meta-sociological principle of a Limited God." (97-8).
[131] Ryan, *J. S. Mill*, 180.
[132] Jonathan Riley, "Mill's Political Economy: Ricardian Science and Liberal Utilitarian Art," in Skorupski, *Cambridge Companion to Mill*, 297.

between individualism and republican participation."[133] This claim relies heavily on Levy's argument that Mill was a "determinist and materialist" who "predicted and welcomed...the withering away of the capitalist altogether"; the stationary state was accordingly a transitional phase to a form of cooperative socialism. While it is certainly possible to claim an association between the Millian stationary state and the syndicalism described in his posthumous "Chapters on Socialism," Mill himself never states that the stationary state would be socialist, or, for that matter, that his socialist economy would be stationary. Indeed, one of the frustrating aspects of the chapter is that Mill offers scarcely any vision of its social, political or economic structure. The resolutions that Levy proposes seem to be more a product of Mill's later excursion into socialism than of the stationary state *per se*, and Levy's argument often conflates them by suggesting, for example, that the stationary state would end class conflict.[134] Such a claim is nowhere to be found in Mill's text.

Levy is alone in considering the historical context of Mill's stationary state, but he completely misreads Mill's philosophy of history. The claim that Mill envisioned history as driven by a materialist teleological determinism is a garbled effort to bring Mill and Marx into the same orbit. Though stadial theory was materialist and deterministic, we have seen that it had a secondary position in Mill's historical and political thinking. Mill never discounted the power of concerted human effort to change the course of events, nor the crucial role of ideas in shaping the future. It was not a materialist determinism that

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[133] Michael Levy, "Mill's Stationary State and the Transcendence of Liberalism," *Polity* 14, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 291-2.

[134] An example of this conflation: "The egalitarian resolution provided by the stationary state now becomes apparent. Since the stationary state would lead rational capitalists and laborers to establish producer and consumer cooperatives, it supplied the perfect conditions in which labor could have capital without capitalists. Workers could avoid sharing the distributive pie with a nonproducing, undeserving class and would suffer no loss of utility." Ibid., 281-2.

would provide a force to counter the influence of the commercial spirit, but the conviction of those who saw its dangers and defended alternative values:

> But human affairs are not entirely governed by mechanical laws, nor men's characters wholly and irrevocably formed by their situation in life. Economical and social changes, though among the greatest, are not the only forces which shape the course of our species; ideas are not always the mere signs and effects of social circumstances, they are themselves a power in history. Let the idea take hold of the more generous and cultivated minds, that the most serious danger to the future prospects of mankind is in the unbalanced influence of the commercial spirit. Let the wiser and better-hearted politicians and public teachers look upon it as their most pressing duty, to protect and strengthen whatever, in the heart of man or in his outward life, can form a salutary check to the exclusive tendencies of that spirit.[135]

Most importantly, while seeking to demonstrate Mill's use of the stationary state to resolve liberal antinomies, Levy overlooks the historical paradox that Mill was actually addressing: how the energy, creativity and individualism at the foundation of the age of commerce had curdled within a mass society that stifled his dual objectives of the "internal culture of the individual" and the "improvement of mankind." With the specter of the stationary states of India and China looming, and the stationary state of classical economics "flying before us," Mill advocated the restorative possibilities of the latter to assure the "permanent interests of man as a progressive being."

[135] "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II]," *CW*, XVIII, 197-8.

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Mill's published writings, letters, and much miscellany has been assembled in a thirty-three volume set by a group of Mill scholars under the direction of John Robson:

> *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Edited by John Robson, *et al*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-91.

The *Collected Works* unfortunately do not include his official writings as an employee of the East India Company, which are only available in the archives of the British Museum. It does not provide English translations of his French correspondence, though his exchanges with Comte are available:

> *The Correspondence of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte.* Translated and edited by Oscar Haac. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995.

It is also noted that the entire *Collected Works* is available on the internet as part of the Liberty Fund's Online Library of Liberty:

> http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/mill-collected-works-of-john-stuart-mill-in-33-vols

This remarkable resource also contains James Mill's *History of British India*, as well as other works that are contained within the primary sources, as noted.

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