The Utilitarian Imagination

An Inquiry into the Relationship between Character Formation, Moral Freedom and Social Reform in John Stuart Mill’s Moral Science

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Of all the difficulties which impede the progress of thought, and the formation of well-grounded opinions on life and social arrangements, the greatest is now the unspeakable ignorance and inattention of mankind in respect to the influences which form human character.


Almost all the projects of social reformers in these days are really liberticide….

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This thesis examines John Stuart Mill’s conception of moral character and his views on the possibility and importance of moral self-development. The purpose and substance of Mill’s project were conceived and developed within a dense intellectual nexus of romantic, liberal, utilitarian, naturalist and Kantian insights. These must be disentangled if we are to comprehend his paradigm of moral character. Mill’s attempts to incorporate these ideas into a systematic Moral Science—including psychology, ethics and sociology—required a trenchant critique of certain types of social and political reform. The evolution of Mill’s critique is contextualised by an analysis of his engagement with four thinkers he came to consider inimical to his moral and political goals: Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, Robert Owen and Auguste Comte.

This thesis offers detailed analyses of Mill’s critique of religion and his doctrine of international non-intervention, two themes that remain controversial and misunderstood in scholarly literature. An examination of these themes illuminates Mill’s thinking in two important ways. First, it demonstrates that Mill’s ideas of freedom and character formation utilise moralised ideas about the importance of moral and emotional development to political philosophy. Second, it reveals that although he defined freedom in explicitly moralised terms, Mill’s final position is that it is not permissible to force people to live in the conditions that maximise moral freedom and are most conducive to the development of moral character.
DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library catalogue, the Australasian Digital Theses Program (ADTP) and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time. The author acknowledges that copyright of published works contained within this thesis (as listed below*) resides with the copyright holder(s) of those works.

Alan Goldstone

* Parts of this thesis have appeared in the following publications:


NOTE ON SOURCES

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INTRODUCTION

THE BLOCKHEAD AND THE BASILISK

J.S. Mill would make a hard, dry, dismal world of it. …Mill's head is, I dare say, very good, but I feel disposed to scorn his heart.

Charlotte Brontë, 1859.¹

Reflecting on the early period in his intellectual development from a later vantage point, John Stuart Mill described his philosophy as an attempt to come to terms with “the reaction of the nineteenth-century against the eighteenth.”² Immersed in the currents of reformist thinking that marked the philosophical and political landscape of Victorian Britain, the young Mill suddenly felt “the influences of European, that is to say, Continental thought…streaming in upon [him].”³ These influences reached Mill through the romanticism of British writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle and William Wordsworth, who denounced utilitarianism as a barren and materialistic philosophy. In contrast to utilitarians such as James Mill and Jeremy Bentham, who focused solely on “the ordering of outward circumstances,” the romantic writers glorified qualities such as “internal culture” and stressed the importance of the individual’s “inner world.”⁴ These romantic insights permeated Mill’s thinking. In particular, he accepted the view that utilitarian philosophy had an impoverished conception of what human happiness and well-being consisted in. Although the greatest happiness was their ultimate criterion of morality, the utilitarians underestimated the complexity of human development and behaviour. Mill concluded that while utilitarianism

¹ See Mill’s two letters to Brontë’s biographer Elizabeth Gaskell, July 1859, CW: XV, pp. 628–629.
³ Ibid.
had established sound methodological principles for ethics, political economy and epistemology, it took no account of the “inward domain of consciousness” in which the individual became a “living thing.” Mill’s aim was to incorporate utilitarian and romantic “half-truths” into a coherent science of human nature and society.

Charlotte Brontë’s unfavourable juxtaposition of “head” and “heart” with reference to Mill is emblematic of a long-standing hostility to Mill’s intellectual project. A common critical opinion is that Mill’s interest in romanticism resulted in a failure either to jettison entirely his residual utilitarianism or to commit it wholeheartedly, leaving him in a conceptual muddle. Exemplifying this interpretation, Mill’s contemporary, the logician and Radical political economist W.S. Jevons, complained that Mill was most emphatically a philosopher, but then he read Wordsworth and that muddled him, and he has been in a strange confusion ever since. In indulging in a foggy, half-hearted romanticism, Mill’s mind was essentially illogical…. [I]n one way or another Mill’s intellect was wrecked.

Conversely, others, like Brontë, criticised Mill for his allegedly impassive and abstract approach. This view painted Mill as a destructive philosopher whose empirical philosophy exposed all established moral and political doctrines to the cold blast of analysis.

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5 Mill, On Liberty, p. 263.
7 Mill’s major works exhibit all his defects as a thinker, his lack of clarity, his inconsistency, and his inability either to accept wholeheartedly or to reject the principles inherited from his father and from Bentham…. Mill seems to lose control of his arguments at every turn.” John Plamenatz, The English Utilitarians (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 123. This view has remained popular. Fred Wilson wrote in 1998 that “Mill came out of his mental crisis recognizing the limitations of the social thought of his father, but as we now see he could never quite escape those limitations.” Wilson, Mill on psychology and the moral sciences,” in John Skorupski (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Mill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 245.
and criticism” without erecting any meaningful philosophy of life in their place.\textsuperscript{10} While Jevons lamented the wrecking of Mill’s intellect by romantic metaphysics, Mill’s former friend Caroline Fox criticised \textit{On Liberty} as the product of a cold and relentlessly logical mind:

I am reading that terrible book of John Mill’s on Liberty, so clear and calm and cold…. He looks through you like a basilisk, relentless as fate. We knew him well at one time, and owe him very much; I fear his remorseless logic has led him far since then…. He is in many senses isolated, and must sometimes shiver with the cold…but Mill makes me shiver, his blade is so keen and so unhesitating.\textsuperscript{11}

Contemporary scholars have argued that the two Mills identified by Brontë, Fox and Jevons—the remorseless logician and the muddled romantic—symbolise the apparent contradictions in Mill’s “many-sided” approach to political philosophy.\textsuperscript{12} Those who admire the romantic or humanist “spirit”\textsuperscript{13} or “voice”\textsuperscript{14} or “faith”\textsuperscript{15} of Mill’s thought—specifically his commitment to individuality and individual human flourishing—argue that it has no foundation in the mechanical utilitarianism with which Mill was indoctrinated in his early years.\textsuperscript{16} According to this view, the architecture of Mill’s thought is constructed on a shaky


\textsuperscript{12} The idea of “many-sidedness” is from Mill, \textit{Autobiography}, pp. 169–171. The classic statement of the view that Mill is incoherent is Gertrude Himmelfarb’s \textit{On Liberty and Liberalism: The Case of John Stuart Mill} (New York: Knopf, 1974). She alleges that there are “two Mills,” one an absolutist utilitarian, the other a libertarian individualist. For a critique of this interpretation see John Rees, “The Thesis of the Two Mills,” \textit{Political Studies}, Vol. 25, No. 4, 1977, pp. 369–382.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 229.

\textsuperscript{16} According to Plamenatz, “Mill’s good qualities serve to accentuate his defects.” Plamenatz, \textit{The English Utilitarians}, p. 123. Robert Wolff argues that Mill’s “ablest and most inspiring thoughts are invariably those which cohere least well with his professed utilitarianism.” They “cannot successfully be supported by appeals to utility.” Robert Wolff, \textit{The Poverty of Liberalism} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 18–19. Isaiah Berlin came to a similar conclusion: “He [Mill] is officially committed to the exclusive pursuit of happiness. He believes deeply in justice, but his voice is most his own when he describes the glories of individual freedom, or denounces whatever seeks to curtail or extinguish it.” Berlin, “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,” p. 223. Others, such as John Gray, argue that Mill’s attempt to reconcile the opposing normative requirements of utilitarianism and liberalism is incoherent in principle. According to Gray, “the project undertaken in \textit{On
foundation of discordant normative commitments—those of the "head" such as ethical naturalism, the inductive scientific method and utilitarian reformism, and those of the "heart" such as the glories of individuality, eccentricity and self-development. Isaiah Berlin concluded that Mill's eclectic approach was "not...of the highest intellectual quality: most of his arguments can be turned against him; certainly none is conclusive, or such as would convince a determined or unsympathetic opponent." Similarly, Iris Murdoch found that Mill was a passionate but inconsistent thinker:

John Stuart Mill...is an interesting case of a philosopher who adopted, or was indoctrinated into by his father and Bentham, a "progressive rational" philosophical system, and then passionately and inconsistently tried to lodge therein traditional values which the system seemed to have excluded: a case of faith.18

Other proponents of the interpretation that Mill's utilitarianism does not cohere with romantic insights about individuality and self-development have been less sympathetic. Marx considered Mill an exemplar of the "insipid, brainless syncretism" of nineteenth-century philosophy.19 John Plamenatz criticised Mill for "his lack of clarity...[and] his inconsistency" and described him as "a sick man in his premature old age."20 Nietzsche simply referred to Mill as "that blockhead."21

Liberty— the project of grounding one very simple principle for the protection of liberty on a utilitarian foundation—was not, and could never have been, successful. Mill’s project flounders there, partly because of crippling disabilities in the Principle of Liberty itself, and partly because no account of justice can be theorized in entirely consequentialist terms." Gray also considers Mill’s utilitarian justification for liberty an affront to human dignity. Mill’s "fundamental rights," he argues, "must be more than shadows cast by calculations of utility....[They] must do more for their bearers than secure a place in the calculus of utilities. For, if individuals have fundamental rights, they must be able to stand upon them or invoke them to resist the claims of general welfare." John Gray, Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 121, p. 218.

Moral Science

Chastised by heroes of the counter-enlightenment and dismissed as incoherent by those sympathetic to his own cause, Mill’s philosophical programme has been subjected to intense scrutiny. Mill was aware of the complexities involved in furnishing empiricism and utilitarianism with romantic insights, although he did not think these approaches were incompatible.\textsuperscript{22} In fact, Mill considered himself to be a philosopher of \textit{methodology}. He wrote that his contribution to political philosophy was articulating and systematising the correct methods by which political maxims could be deduced from higher psychological principles.\textsuperscript{23} His goal was to construct a holistic \textit{Moral Science} that systematised and integrated epistemology, psychology, sociology, ethics and politics. These aims animated Mill’s intellectual project from its earliest stages. He articulated these ambitions in a letter to John Sterling, a \textit{Coleridgian} friend, in 1831:

The only thing which I can usefully do at present, \\& which I am doing more \\& more every day, is to work out principles: which are of use for all times, though to be applied cautiously \\& circumspectly to any: principles of morals, government, law, education, above all self-education. I am here much more in my element: 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. …[A]lmost all differences of opinion when analysed, were differences of method. …[H]e who can throw most light upon the subject of method, will do most to forward that alliance among the most advanced intellects \\& characters of the age, which is the only definite object I ever have in literature or philosophy so far as I have any general object at all. …I have put down upon paper a great many of my ideas on logic, \\& shall in time bring forth a treatise.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, Mill criticised the simplistic manner in which the debate was conducted and denounced the absolutism of both sides: \textit{“The fight between the nineteenth century and the eighteenth always reminded me of the battle about the shield, one side of which was white and the other black. I marvelled at the blind rage with which the combatants rushed against one another.”} Mill, \textit{Autobiography}, pp. 169–171.

\textsuperscript{23} The \textit{“proper office [of political philosophy]”} was to supply, not a set of model institutions, but principles from which the institutions suitable to any given circumstances might be deduced.” Mill, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 169.

\textsuperscript{24} Mill, \textit{“To John Sterling,”} 20 October, 1831, CW: XII, pp. 78–79.
The treatise which sets out these aims and methods is Mill's two-volume epistemological tome: *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation* (1843/1872, eight editions). This text aimed to supersede the intuitionist theories of knowledge that prevailed in nineteenth-century philosophy through a rigorous application of empiricism and the inductive method to all departments of knowledge.\(^{25}\) In the last Book of the *System of Logic*, "The Logic of the Moral Sciences," Mill outlines the methods for psychology and social science, including the sub-disciplines of ethics, politics and sociology.

The central discipline of Moral Science through which the Arts of morality and policy would be connected to the Science of moral psychology—enunciating immutable Laws of Mind—would be a science of "character formation," or Ethology. This would be a comprehensive empirical science of the formation of behavioural traits, habits, personal ideals, tastes and values. Ethology would involve romantic notions like "self-culture," the cultivation of the emotions, "moral character," moral striving and "self-formation." Mill's goal was to extract these ideas from "a haze of poetry and German metaphysics" and give them an inductive, utilitarian grounding.\(^{26}\) A core feature of this science would be the idea of moral self-development. According to this idea, "moral freedom" involves the successful

\(^{25}\) Mill, *Autobiography*, pp. 229–234. Mill criticised the "inveterate...prejudices" of intuitionism, or the "German, or à priori view of human knowledge." Mill argued that "the unsatisfactory state of those enquiries is owing to a wrong choice of methods." See also Mill, *Logic*, p. 835. Epistemological enquiries had overtly political implications for Mill. This is most evident in his repudiation of William Whewell's intuitionism, which Mill explicitly linked to conservatism and intolerance. The notion that truths external to the mind may be known by intuition or consciousness, independently of observation and experience, is...the great intellectual support of false doctrines and bad institutions. ...By the aid of this theory, every inveterate belief and every intense feeling, of which the origin is not remembered, is enabled to dispense with the obligation of justifying itself by reason, and is erected into its own all-sufficient voucher and justification. There never was such an instrument designed for consecrating all deep seated prejudices." Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 233, pp. 269–270. Mill's full estimation of the intuitionist source of Whewell's conservatism was uncompromising: "His [Whewell's] *Elements of Morality*...[is] an apparatus for converting those prevailing opinions, on matters of morality, into reasons for themselves.... [T]he book is so mere a catalogue of received opinions, containing nothing to correct any of them, and little which can work with any potency even to confirm them,—that it can scarcely be counted as anything more than one of the thousand waves on the dead sea of commonplace, affording nothing to invite or to reward a separate examination." Mill, *Whewell on Moral Philosophy*, p. 169, p. 194.

utilisation of the power of self-formation." The morally free individual transcends powerful psychological and environmental forces and becomes the author of his or her character. Here again, scholars struggled to make sense of Mill’s views, finding logical flexibility and conceptual confusion at the heart of Mill’s Ethology:

Now Mill was first of all a humanist, who carried the stern standard of utilitarianism into philosophy itself. If logic brought him to conclusions repugnant to the interests of mankind, he had no hesitation in using his great powers to bend the logic. …The will of man was free, he said, and yet at the same time it was not free. …Mill’s argument does not stand up…. [H]e represented character as the cause of will and will as the cause of character.…. 

The Argument of the Thesis

The contrast scholars make between the values of Mill’s _head_ and those of his _heart_ often alludes to the problems in Mill’s attempt to reconcile a scientific, empiricist approach to human nature with romantic ideas about the importance of moral character and moral culture to individual life. Despite the obvious tensions in Mill’s conciliatory project, these views arise largely from a misunderstanding of the problems that Mill saw himself solving, and a failure to appreciate the intellectual currents within which he worked. In particular, Mill’s science of character formation (Ethology) has been undervalued—indeed, almost entirely ignored—in the scholarly literature. The idea of _moral character_ has thus been removed as an integral component of the two contemporary disciplines to which Mill could claim paternity: utilitarianism and liberalism. While making no claims to the legitimacy of ideas about _character_ in modern political science, this thesis seeks to resolve some lingering tensions in Mill’s thinking. Three central arguments will be advanced:

1. The idea of _moral character_ is central to Mill’s wider moral and political project.

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27 Mill, _Logic_, p. 842.
2. Mill’s theory of character formation relies on moralised ideas about what constitutes moral freedom,” self-development and an ideal standard of character.”

3. Mill’s attitude to social and political reform shifted over time in line with developments in his idea of character formation. His final position is that it is impermissible to force people to live under the conditions which maximise moral freedom and encourage character self-development.

Owing to Mill’s lifelong engagement in moral, social and political debates, and the sheer breadth and volume of his published works, any study of his thought must be selective. This thesis, rather than dwelling on the well-tilled ground of On Liberty-studies, focuses on areas of Mill’s thought that have not received the attention they deserve. The ideas of character formation and moral freedom are brought into sharper relief by considering three major themes:

1. Mill’s critical engagement with the environmental determinism of Robert Owen and the psychological determinism of Bentham and the British empiricist tradition;

2. Mill’s critique of religion and his views on Auguste Comte’s Religion of Humanity;

3. Mill’s cumulative scepticism towards the British Empire and his contributions to international debates over intervention.

It is hoped that this agenda will serve a dual purpose. First, repositioning Mill’s idea of character formation at the centre of his liberalism illuminates aspects of his thought that have

29 The “volume problem” is often acknowledged by Mill scholars. For example, see Nicholas Capaldi, John Stuart Mill: A Biography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. xv.
been chronically misunderstood. Second, elucidating Mill’s thinking in these areas casts light into the fissures in his theories of moral freedom and character self-development. Chapters One through Four provide the methodological basis for Mill’s belief that self-development is possible and that it is therefore worthwhile to theorise (and recommend) the proper conditions for its achievement. These chapters explore the subtleties in Mill’s views on causation and moral psychology. In them it is argued that Mill’s ideas of moral character and self-development are ensconced in his epistemological and psychological views. To establish this claim requires an examination of Mill’s views on the causation of human actions, and the problems of reconciling ethical naturalism and universal causation with a commitment to self-development and moral freedom.

Chapter Five completes the exegesis of the place of self-development and character formation in Mill’s moral psychology, and gives a detailed examination of his ideal standard of character.”30 This chapter examines a vexing problem in Mill scholarship: what constitutes moral freedom”? It argues that Mill identifies moral freedom with the achievement of a particular standard of moral character, involving moralised notions such as self-culture,” and the cultivation of the individual’s rational, emotional and aesthetic faculties. Mill’s notions of self-development and moral freedom rely on an explicitly moralised foundation.

Chapter Six uses Mill’s critique of religion and his increasingly critical view of Comte’s Religion of Humanity to illuminate his notion of ideal character development. In particular, it elucidates the importance of the emotions in Mill’s ideas of self-culture and moral development. Studying the changes in Mill’s attitude to Comte’s political philosophy serves two purposes. First, it further emphasises the importance of emotional self-development in Mill’s idea of moral character. Second, it shows that the increasingly illiberal

implications in the development of Comte’s political thought contributed to a shift in Mill’s views on the scope and limits of social reform. While Mill continued to articulate a moralised theory of character self-development, his views on the potentially beneficial effects of religion and his eventual rejection of Comtean social engineering culminated in a sceptical attitude towards the prospects for installing the political and social conditions that fostered his —ideal standard of character.”

Chapter Seven complements the second theme of Chapter Six. It examines Mill’s final views on whether it is permissible to force people to live in the conditions that maximise the cultivation of an ideal moral character. This chapter engages with an emerging interpretation that Mill’s political thought is inherently interventionist and coercive. Its key theme is Mill’s theory of non-intervention. It argues that Mill’s moralised theories of character formation and self-development do not authorise coercion to promote his —ideal standard of character.” Like his views on the place of religion in progressive societies and his critique of the illiberal implications of Comtean reformism, Mill’s views on the spreading of liberal institutions and the civilising influences of the British Empire evolved into a position marked by political scepticism and the belief that compulsion in the name of moral ideals is impermissible, even if it promotes the cultivation of free and progressive moral characters. This argument runs contrary to a large body of literature that sees Mill as pro-imperialist.

Traditions and Problems

In addition to the arguments outlined in the review of chapters above, this thesis grapples with two important methodological problems that arise in properly contextualising Mill’s voluminous body of work, and clarifying its influence and critical reception in contemporary political theory. These issues need to be highlighted because of their importance to the aims of this thesis.
Moral Science and Liberal Neutrality

The first problem arises from Mill’s widely-posited status as “the paradigm liberal thinker,”31 and “the godfather of English liberalism.”32 Despite Mill’s influence on the liberal tradition, ideas about moral character and Moral Science—enterprises central to his political philosophy—are either absent or rejected in contemporary liberal thinking. There is thus a fundamental discrepancy between Mill’s views on the scope and aims of political philosophy, and those of contemporary liberals. Before Mill’s ideas of character development and moral freedom can be understood, it is important to acknowledge the problems in interpreting Mill that arise from the shifts in liberal opinions regarding the nature, purpose and limits of political theory.

Two of the most pervasive preoccupations of twentieth-century liberalism have been the separation of politics, ethics, psychology and natural science into discrete disciplines, and the focus on political and moral neutrality. In the second half of the twentieth-century, it appeared that the full application of naturalism and empiricism to ethics and social science would not lead to the establishment of a unified Moral Science (as Mill had envisioned), but to its disintegration. Logical positivists such as A.J. Ayer, who described himself as a political liberal,33 argued that ethical and value statements are meaningless. Echoing the ‘head’ and ‘heart’ dichotomy exhibited in Brontë’s reading of Mill, Ayer held that ethical views are “emotive,” evincing subjective preferences and aesthetic ideals, not empirical or

32 Maurice Cowling, Mill and Liberalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. xii. It is worth noting that these monikers sit awkwardly with Mill’s final self-descriptions as a utilitarian in ethics and socialist in politics.
33 Ayer had also been an exponent of Cold War liberalism and had given a political dimension to his epistemological and moral views at forums such as the CIA funded Congress for Cultural Freedom in the 1950s and 1960s.
objective "facts" about the world.\textsuperscript{34} Similarly, by 1977 the philosopher J.L. Mackie had articulated a position of "moral scepticism," according to which "there are no objective values."\textsuperscript{35}

These views have far-reaching implications for the way in which ethics and politics are studied. Mackie argued that ethics must be "invented," and could not be studied empirically like the natural sciences:

If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Consequently, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.\textsuperscript{36}

Similarly, Ayer's seminal text \textit{Language, Truth and Logic} made a clear distinction between "value" and "fact" and denied that there could be a naturalist science of "values." In rejecting the idea that value-statements could be given an empirical grounding, Ayer provides a striking and elegant example of the hostility to unified Moral Science, and indeed to the viability of a naturalist science of ethics or politics, that became characteristic to liberal moral and political philosophy in the second half of the twentieth-century:

The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content…. [I]f I say, "Stealing money is wrong," I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning—that is, expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written "Stealing money!!"…For in saying that a certain type of action is wrong, I am not making any factual statement…I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments…. [I]n every case in which one would commonly be said to be making an ethical judgement, the function of the relevant


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 38.
ethical word is purely *emotive.* It is used to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them.37

Influenced by the efforts of Ayer, Berlin and later thinkers such as John Rawls, it became a common cry that liberalism had to learn to “abstract”38 itself from debates about controversial moral ideals. This was coupled with scepticism towards any political outlook that claimed sanction from psychology or the natural sciences.39 In contrast to Mill’s holistic approach, contemporary liberals argue that “the political,” “the ethical” and “the scientific” must be distinguished as separate modes of investigation.40 Charles Larmore terms this approach “the liberal separation of realms.”41 According to Larmore, “by its very nature liberalism must be a philosophy of politics, not a philosophy of man.”42 In this view, liberalism is purely political philosophy that is neutral towards moral ideals.43 As Ayer wrote in “The Claims of Philosophy,” neither the “scientist” nor the “philosopher” is specifically privileged to lay down the rules of conduct, or to prescribe an ideal form of life.” Ayer continues:

For in morals, and in politics at the stage where politics becomes a matter of morals, there is no repository of truth to which only the learned few have access.

37 Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, pp. 107–109. Thus Ayer sanguinely thought he had written the postscript to moral-political philosophy; there was nothing there to analyse. Indeed, ethical claims are “unanalysable.”

38 Charles Larmore contrasts this with the utilitarian view held by Mill. “The sensible strategy for achieving neutrality is not to assume that the conflicting views will themselves share some common denominator (that was the classical utilitarians’ conviction). Instead, the strategy is to abstract from what is in dispute.” Also, “The fundamental liberal insight is the inescapable controversiality of ideals of the good life and thus the need to find political principles that abstract from them.” Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 50, pp. 129–130. Emphasis in original.


The question [of] how men ought to live is one to which there is no authoritative answer. It has to be decided by each man for himself.\textsuperscript{44}

On the surface this seems to accord with the \textit{ethos} of Mill\textquotesingle s \textit{On Liberty}; what is wanted, Mill argues, is a social and mental space in which people can develop their own unique individuality. Yet in Mill\textquotesingle s thought, when politics becomes a matter of morals, morality quickly becomes a matter of psychology and physical science.\textsuperscript{45} In contrast to contemporary views on a \textit{liberal separation of realms,}” Mill is clear that “politics must be a deductive science” that shares its methods with the more complex physical sciences.”\textsuperscript{46} Like the physical sciences, the Moral Sciences are inquiries into the course of nature,” and thus require sound naturalist and empiricist foundations. Indeed, Mill regarded the methods of physical science as the proper models for politics.”\textsuperscript{47} There is thus a direct link between \textit{political} and \textit{scientific} issues in Mill\textquotesingle s thought that is not reflected in contemporary liberal thinking. Furthermore, whereas many exponents of contemporary political liberalism aim to provide negative justifications for formal goods such as equality, opportunity, tolerance and fairness, Mill was concerned with romantic ideas such as “spiritual perfection” and “perfecting and beautifying…man himself.”\textsuperscript{48} Mill\textquotesingle s profound belief—that political philosophy is founded on a teleological view of “man as a progressive being” and a holistic Moral Science of human nature—is not reflected in the current orthodoxy on the purpose and limits of a “liberalism come of age.”\textsuperscript{49}

\textit{Contextualisation: Combating Determinism}

The stark contrast between the professed purpose of Mill\textquotesingle s Moral Science and his idea of
moral character, and current liberal thinking on the scope and limits of political philosophy presents a second problem. Given this discrepancy in assumptions about the proper aims and functions of political philosophy, attempts to view Mill as the paradigmatic liberal thinker, or to interpret his thought through a twenty-first-century methodological lens, must be approached with caution. Mill’s thought must be situated within the intellectual climate in which it was developed. Quentin Skinner suggests that to understand the meaning of an historical text one must first reconstruct the “mental world” of its author. The problem facing all political theorists and historians of ideas is most acute when, like in Mill’s case, such a “world” is significantly distant:

The issue here is one that cannot be evaded by anyone interested in understanding the beliefs of alien cultures or earlier societies. When we examine such beliefs, we often find that they are not merely unfamiliar but appear in many cases to be obviously false. What role should our sense of their truth or falsity play in our attempts to explain them?50

Skinner asks us to consider not just the textual content, but also what historical figures thought they were doing. As far as it is possible, the intellectual historian must take care not to read history through a contemporary lens. Constructing a two-way analytical dialogue with past thinkers risks imputing to them goals and intentions that they would have found entirely foreign. Neglecting their intentions thus obscures and distorts their arguments. As Skinner warns:

If we are too importunate about wanting our forebears to speak directly to us, we run the risk of pulling their arguments out of shape and thus of losing contact with what they actually thought…. [E]ven if we manage to avoid that danger, we must not confuse the project of mounting such a dialogue with the project of gaining a historical understanding of our forebears’ thought. To understand someone else’s beliefs, you need to attend not merely to what they say; you also need to find some

means of discovering what they saw themselves as doing in saying what they said. If we merely seek a dialogue with the past, we leave ourselves no space to engage in this further hermeneutic enterprise.\textsuperscript{51}

This contextual approach can be particularly valuable to a study of Mill’s thought because the cultural and intellectual climate in which Mill worked involved assumptions that are foreign to, or rejected in, contemporary scholarship. First, Victorian liberalism, as typified by Mill, was infused with positive ideas about moral character.” Indeed, according to Stefan Collini, "[t]he idea of character…enjoyed a prominence in the political thought of the Victorian period that it had certainly not known before and that it has, arguably, not experienced since."\textsuperscript{52} Second, the separation of science, ethics and politics as discrete disciplines is characteristic of contemporary liberal thinking, but was uncommon in the nineteenth-century. Conservative intuitionists such as William Whewell and radical empiricists such as Mill were united by a belief in the possibility of a unified Moral Science. Third, whereas contemporary political philosophy is conducted within an intellectual atmosphere in which doctrines of freedom, rights and liberties are implicitly, or indeed legally, established (enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as in statutory or constitutional charters), Mill was immersed in a scientific and philosophic culture that was implicitly antagonistic to liberty and moral freedom.” Mill considered hostility to moral freedom and political liberty to be a core feature of nineteenth-century philosophy and culture.\textsuperscript{53} He argued that “[t]he despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to…the spirit of liberty, or that of

\textsuperscript{51} This quote is taken from an interview with Skinner in Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrjämäki, "Quentin Skinner on Encountering the Past," Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought, Vol. 6, 2002, pp. 55–56.
\textsuperscript{53} While romantic insights about individuality were generally conceived by Mill to temper the illiberal implications in utilitarian thinking, some romantics, namely Carlyle, propounded a thoroughgoing conservatism that was hostile to Mill’s idea of moral freedom.
progress or improvement.” Creating the conditions for moral freedom and character self-development would first require emancipation from that yoke.\textsuperscript{54}

The despotic yoke Mill was working against had philosophical as well as political dimensions. Mill argued that enlightenment empiricism had taken a battering ram to dogmatism and superstition, but it propounded determinist theories of mind that rejected the idea of self-development and took no account of the individual’s moral character.\textsuperscript{55} Without perhaps intending to, Hobbes, Bentham and James Mill created philosophic and political systems antagonistic to moral freedom, self-development and liberty. Socialist thinkers such as Robert Owen and Auguste Comte also based their political philosophies on determinist moral psychologies. Here determinism had more obviously illiberal implications; their political visions called for the total centralisation of political, moral and spiritual power in the hands of an elite managerial class. The absence of individual liberty in the political thought of Comte and Owen was based upon an assumption that self-development is impossible. Hobbes, Bentham, James Mill, Owen and Comte held that moral character is determined by factors beyond the agent’s control; they therefore denied the existence of what Mill termed a power of self-formation.\textsuperscript{56} This had illiberal political implications. On the other hand, Mill argued that the nineteenth-century theoretical perspectives that promoted or valued freedom as moral self-development did so either by consecrating conservative, intuitionist prejudices or by introducing unscientific metaphysical human qualities such as free-willing.

\textsuperscript{55} Mill, \textit{Autin on Jurisprudence,”} p. 168. In this context, Mill is damning with faint praise Bentham’s contributions to philosophy. The battering ram was of more importance, in Bentham’s time, than the builders’ trowel.” Mill explains that Bentham’s failures as a moral philosopher and psychologist are, in part, explained by his focus on conquer[ing] the inveterate superstition prevailing in eighteenth-century discourses on law, politics and science.
\textsuperscript{56} Mill, \textit{Logic}, p. 842.
Within this context, Mill sought to conceive of and defend moral freedom and self-development from within a tradition of empiricism that had placed virtually no emphasis on what Mill calls “internal culture” and “moral character.”\(^{57}\) An adequate understanding of Mill’s theories of moral character and self-development must begin by considering the ideas Mill saw himself working against. Before Mill can defend the importance of “character” to political philosophy and Moral Science, he must establish the possibility of self-development.

1

ANTAGONISTS

DETERMINISM AND POLITICS IN OWEN, HOBBES AND BENTHAM

The aim of this chapter is to contextualise Mill’s conceptions of moral freedom and moral character by considering three thinkers whose views he regarded as antagonistic to the possibility of moral self-development: Robert Owen, Thomas Hobbes and Jeremy Bentham. While this seems an unlikely group, its members are united by a denial of the possibility of self-forming and self-governing behaviour, and a general hostility towards socio-political liberties. This hostility, Mill argues, arises due to an ignorance of the laws of the formation of character, and a failure to appreciate the value of “internal culture” to the well-being of the individual and society. The chapter is divided into three sections, each detailing the relationship between forms of psychological determinism and the liberticidal tendencies that, in Mill’s view, they tend to encourage.

Mill, Owen and the Science of Character Formation

Mill and Owen engage in a critical debate over the formation of moral character. Their political views—informed by their observations of human character—are diametrically opposed. At the risk of oversimplification, Owen wants to harness the power of the state to form the characters of its citizens, while Mill wants to limit state and social interference so that they can develop for themselves.¹ As a testament to this marked opposition of political

views, Owen and Mill hold deeply conflicting ideas about processes affecting the formation of character—the forces responsible for the inculcation of tastes, dispositions, values, desires and moral qualities. Owen held that the individual is not responsible for these traits, which are in fact an indelible product of environment and circumstance. A person’s ‘character,’ he argues, is the sum of his or her values, dispositions and behavioural tendencies as inculcated from infancy through pervasive heteronomous influences:

The character of man is, without a single exception, always formed for him…. It may be, and is chiefly, created by his predecessors…[who] give him, or may give him, his ideas and habits, which are the powers that govern and direct his conduct. Man, therefore, never did, nor is it possible he ever can, form his own character.2

While admitting the strong influence of antecedent circumstances,3 Mill affirms the possibility for the self-formation of moral character. In diametrical opposition to Owen, Mill states that ‘we are exactly as capable of making our own character, if we will, as others are of making it for us.’4 Mill attempts to refute Owen’s idea of character development by showing that we can achieve a modest degree of ‘moral freedom’ over the formation and reformation of our own characters.5

Despite these differences, both Owen and Mill sanguinely envisioned an empirical science of character formation that could guide social organisation and, in Owen’s imagery, underlie the transition from vice, misery and poverty to wealth, happiness and virtue. In Owen’s words, ‘there is certainly a science of society as there is of mathematics.’6 A sound

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3 Mill, Logic, p. 859. External environmental forces make up ‘by far the greatest portion of character.’
5 Ibid., pp. 839–843.
science of human nature would install "the reign of reason, intelligence, and happiness." It is therefore not the case, as Janice Carlisle asserts in *John Stuart Mill and the Writing of Character*—one of the only focused treatments of Mill's theory of character formation—that "[t]he only 'System of Character' current in the mid-Victorian period was phrenology." It is important not to dismiss Owen's maxims as specious platitudes, and his politics as mere pragmatism. While perhaps not matching the philosophical rigour of Hobbes, Bentham or Mill, Owen's determinist theory of character formation represents a direct attack on Mill's conception of the highest good: the self-formation and perpetual self-development of the individual's moral character. An examination of Mill's engagement with Owen can illuminate Mill's ideas of moral freedom and character formation.

*The Utilitarian–Owenite Debates*

As with his other philosophic nemeses, William Hamilton and William Whewell, Mill never met Owen. However, he did debate Owen's followers, who were organised under the banner of The Cooperative Society. In 1822 Mill formed a discussion group—The Utilitarian Society—which analysed the works of prominent philosophers, logicians, psychologists and political economists such as James Mill, Bentham, David Ricardo, Samuel Bailey, Richard Watley and David Hartley. The group was not solely focussed on nineteenth-century thinkers, however; it also studied canonical texts such Hobbes's *Computatio sive Logica*. In 1825 a

7 Owen, *A New View of Society*, p. 94.
8 Janice Carlisle, *John Stuart Mill and the Writing of Character* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1991), p. 4. Phrenology was not the only nineteenth century attempt to derive psychological traits from biological characteristics. Carlisle also fails to acknowledge prominent nineteenth century proponents of crainometry—the study of the relationship between traits such as intelligence and industriousness, and the size of the skull and brain—such as the French physician Paul Broca (1824–1880). For an enlightening and detailed history of nineteenth-century crainometry, and a critique of Broca's work, see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1996).
9 Harrison bluntly describes Owen's "Science of Society": "in an unsophisticated form, and without the conceptual tools of later social psychology, Owen had hit upon the crucial role of character structure in the social process." Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World*, p. 79.
10 Mill allows Wilhelm von Humboldt to articulate the ultimate end of action: "the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole." As quoted in Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 261.
series of debates was organised between the Utilitarian Society and the Owenite Cooperative Society. The topics for discussion included political economy, the population question, education, trade, political liberty and the merits of socialism. On the utilitarian side were J.S. Mill, J.A. Roebuck (Radical MP), Charles Austin (the brother of the legal philosopher John Austin) and T.B. Macaulay (Whig MP). Among the notable Owenite representatives were the Irish socialist William Thompson \(^\text{12}\) and the historian Connop Thirlwall. Later, the exercise evolved into The London Debating Society, which opened its doors to conservatives and liberals as well as members of the Cambridge Union and the Oxford United Debating Society. Their number included Samuel Wilberforce, son of the prominent abolitionist William Wilberforce, and future participant in an infamous debate over evolution with Thomas Huxley. Mill was a regular participant until 1829.

There is some indirect evidence which suggests Mill and Owen might have corresponded, although no letters have been located. Writing to the French Saint-Simonian Gustave d’Eichthal in 1831, Mill remarks, ―I was told some time ago by Mr. Owen that some of his friends were translating your works [into English].‖\(^\text{13}\) No other record of a meeting or of any correspondence between Mill and Owen has been located. Nevertheless, while there is no reference to Mill in Owen’s writings, we know that Mill paid close attention to Owen’s work.\(^\text{14}\) Defending his friend Charles Austin during one of the utilitarian-Owenite debates at the Cooperative Society, Mill precociously complained that ―those who attempted to answer him [Austin], not only did not refute his arguments, but did not venture even to look them in


\(^{13}\) This reference is ambiguous on two counts. Mill could be referring to a personal acquaintance or a correspondent. The wording of the letter―told‖ is ambiguous. It is also unclear from the text whether ―Mr. Owen‖ is Robert Owen. Mill, ―To Gustave D’Eichthal,‖ 27 August 1831, CW:XII, pp. 72–3.

the face…. It was objected to my Honourable friend…that he did not understand Mr. Owen’s system. That objection will not apply to me. I flatter myself that I do understand Mr. Owen’s system; if not in its details yet in its general principles.”

Furthermore, it is certain that Owen was well acquainted with Mill’s immediate intellectual circle. In his autobiography, Owen reports his “cordial friendship” with “my friends of the political economists.” He writes that “among those who were very friendly, but were opposed to me on some points of political economy or politics, were the Rev. Mr. Malthus, [and] James Mill, of the India House, and the friend of Jeremy Bentham, my partner in the New Lanark Establishment.” With all these,” and with Bentham’s literary executor, John Bowring, Owen was intimate and upon friendly terms.” Indeed, it is argued that Bentham himself achieved financial independence” by investing in Owen’s New Lanark venture after the failure of the Panopticon. Although Owen says his political economist “friends” were “men of great practical knowledge who were much interested in my views,” he alleges they suffered from “want of a comprehensive knowledge of human nature and society.” Rather grandly, Owen considered himself a more subtle and thorough philosopher of human nature, remarking that “my knowledge of the formation of character enabled me to know how their characters were formed, and therefore enabled me to differ from them in opinion and yet to do justice to their good intentions.”

17 Others named by Owen include Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo and Francis Place. Owen apparently shared two important presuppositions with James Mill, Bentham and the early utilitarians. The first two — universally revealed facts” enshrined as “doctrines taught in the New Institution” at New Lanark affirm that man is born with a desire to obtain happiness” and that “desire is the primary cause of all his actions.” Owen, A New View of Society, pp. 109ff.
18 Owen, The Life of Robert Owen, p. 129.
Despite the gaps in the documentary record, by collating the evidence from Mill’s correspondence, the *System of Logic, Autobiography* and the utilitarian–Owenite debating speeches, it is clear that Mill closely studied Owen’s ethical and political texts. It is also clear that Owen saw his science of character formation as a point of departure from Mill’s intellectual predecessors, whom Owen, much like Mill, considered ignorant of the laws of character formation. Owen’s superior knowledge of the formative influences on the moral development of Victorian Britain, he avers, would be the keystone in his project for practical reform.\(^{21}\) This contextual perspective provides a position from which to explore that science and its relation to Owen’s politics in greater detail.

**Owen, Character and Politics**

Though of course the utilitarian–Owenite debates covered many topics, Owen’s determinism is the most relevant to Mill. Owen’s moral psychology and his plan for social reform are set out in detail in works such as *A New View of Society* (1813) and the later text *Revolution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race* (1849). It mattered greatly to Mill that, on the question of autonomy and free-will, the Owenites were determinists and declared their views in the boldest possible terms.\(^{22}\) Owen’s moral psychology is comparable to the Lockean *Tabula-Rasa*, in which the mind is conceptualised as a “blank slate.” In this view, all behaviour, virtuous or vicious, is produced exclusively by external environmental influences. The development and entrenchment of character traits is a heteronomous process. In Owen’s words, “character is not made *by*, but *for* the individual.”\(^{23}\) The “Great Truth” of metaphysical investigation—the sublime, pure, and charitable principle—is that *man is*

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\(^{22}\) Mill describes Owenism as “Modified Fatalism.” Mill, *Hamilton*, p. 465. For terminological clarification on this theme see Chapter 2, especially Figure 2, p. 56.

not a free agent, and does not create his own qualities, his will, or his conduct."\(^{24}\) He ever had been, was, and ever must be, the creature of the circumstances made to exist around him before his birth."\(^{25}\) These determinist dictums often receive resoundingly rhetorical expression:

Yes, my deluded fellow-men, believe me, for your future happiness, that the facts around us, when you shall observe them aright, will make it evident even to demonstration, that all such doctrines [of free-will and moral redemption] must be erroneous, because THE WILL OF MAN HAS NO POWER WHATEVER OVER HIS OPINIONS; HE MUST, AND EVER DID, AND EVER WILL, BELIEVE WHAT HAS BEEN, IS, OR MAY BE IMPRESSED ON HIS MIND BY HIS PREDECESSORS, AND THE CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH SURROUND HIM.\(^{26}\)

In a later work entitled *Book of the New Moral World* (1836–44), Owen reiterat[ed] dogmatically his psychological and sociological propositions.\(^{27}\) As J.F.C. Harrison notes, these precepts were now propounded as "Five Fundamental Facts" derived from twenty "Fundamental Laws of Human Nature."\(^{28}\) These determinist laws of character formation inform and support Owen's reformist agenda. They are emblematically propounded on the cover of the 1832 edition of the Owenite periodical, *The Crisis*: "It is of all truths the most important, that the character of man is formed FOR—not BY himself."\(^{29}\)

Owen's determinist views on the formation of character had political implications. "The time is now arrived," he proclaimed, "when the public mind of this country and the general state of the world call imperatively for the introduction of this all-pervading principle,

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\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 9. For an investigation into the extent to which Owen can be considered an absolute determinist, and for a reading more subtle and sympathetic to Owen's writings on free-will than Mill provides see Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World*, pp. 81–82. Given the boldness with which Owen presents his doctrines in the passages quoted above, it seems understandable that one might interpret Owen as a fatalist.


\(^{27}\) Ibid.

\(^{28}\) Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World*, p. 79.

not only in *theory*, but into *practice.*”\(^3\) Owen argued that the poverty, vice and “ignorance” with which he thought Victorian society was plagued could not be remedied by revolution or enfranchisement, but only by the gradual institutionalisation of his principles of character and “reason.”\(^3\) If social and economic processes wholly determine moral character, the state, if it can control them, would have “no difficulty in giving a good and wise character to every one, and permanent, useful, and pleasant occupation to all.”\(^3\) He concludes that “there can be but one practicable, and therefore one rational reform…. That plan is a national, well-digested, unexclusive system for the formation of character.”\(^3\) Through Owenite social engineering, a noble, prosperous and altruistic character can be pedagogically “given” to the community:

Any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by the application of proper means; which means are to a great extent at the command and under the control of those who have influence in the affairs of men.\(^3\)

The role of the state is therefore to form the moral characters of its citizens through direct moral education and tight control of life within the *polis*. This requires “rational plans for the education and general formation of the characters of their subjects.” These plans were aimed at children, who received moral education “from their earliest infancy.”\(^3\)

Owen is unique among nineteenth-century reformers. As a wealthy entrepreneur he

\(^3\) Owen, *A New View of Society*, p. 21.
\(^3\) For the extent to which Owen’s politics can be considered conservative see Miliband, “The Politics of Robert Owen,” pp. 234–236. See also John Saville, “Introduction,” in Owen, *A New View of Society*, p. vii. For the view that Owen’s politics are “elitist” see Chushichi Tsuzuki, “Robert Owen and Revolutionary Politics,” in Pollard and Salt (eds), *Robert Owen, Prophet of the Poor*, p. 14, p. 21, p. 34. Tsuzuki dismisses Owen’s reformism as an elitist tweaking of established social order that would be carried out by “middle-class leaders and their working class lieutenants.” Rather than revolution or radical transformation, Owen advocated “permeation of the existing governments with his views.” In the end, Tsuzuki gives a lukewarm assessment of Owenite reformism: “Owen’s socialism, as Engels pointed out, was largely a bourgeois affair fraught with the prejudices of his own class, though his observation on the classes contained valuable grains of truth.”
\(^3\) Owen, *The Revolution in the Mind*, p. xxxii.
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 19. Upper-case in original.
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 27. Emphasis removed. “These plans must be devised to train children in good habits of every description (which will of course prevent them from acquiring those of falsehood and deception). They must afterwards be rationally educated, and their labour be usefully directed.”
had the means to implement his vision, and he used his money in efforts to do so. Industrial
settlements founded upon Owenite moral psychology and social philosophy were constructed
with Owen’s financial backing in Orbiston, Scotland, and Queenwood (later renamed
“Harmony Hall”), England. Owen purchased a site in Indiana in the United States in 1825
with the intention of constructing a more ambitious settlement from scratch, but the venture
collapsed before construction began.36 In addition to the communities in which Owen was
financially involved, there were at least sixteen communities, either avowedly Owenite or
influenced considerably by Owenite ideas” in the USA and seven in Britain.37

The focus of Owen’s efforts and first testing-ground for his determinist science of
caracter formation principles of social engineering was a textile and cotton mill and its
surrounding settlements near the small town of Lanark, approximately 40 kilometres
southeast of Glasgow. Owen bought the New Lanark mill from his father-in-law David Dale
in 1799.38 In 1800 he began “the groundwork on which to try an experiment long wished
for.”39 The experiment would be based on his most fundamental conviction: character is
formed for the individual by antecedents over which he or she has no power. New Lanark
was already a working community by this time. Its population of 1,334 in 1793 grew during
Owen’s tenure to over 3,000 by 1814. Aside from, but not independent of, financial
considerations,40 Owen sought to construct a productive and progressive society at New
Lanark free from the degradations and inequalities which he thought rapid industrialisation

36 An artistic blueprint for this utopian settlement, renamed “New Harmony” by Owen, appears on the
aforementioned cover of The Crisis, 1832. The authors ostentatiously describe the “Design of a community of
2,000 persons founded upon a principle, commended by Plato, Lord Bacon, Sir T. More, & R. Owen.” Harrison,
Quest for the New Moral World, facing p. 85.
37 Harrison, Quest for the New Moral World, p. 163. For more detail on the Owenite communities at Orbiston,
Ralhine and Queenwood see Garnett, Robert Owen and the Community Experiments,” and Ian Donnachie,
Spinners, pp. 135–167.
38 For the history of Owen's procurement of the site see Donnachie, Owen of New Lanark, pp. 73–81. For
Owen's account, see Owen, A New View of Society, pp. 41–58; and Owen, The Revolution in the Mind, p. 4ff.
39 Owen, as quoted in Donnachie, Owen of New Lanark, p. 77.
40 Donnachie, Owen of New Lanark, p. 77. Harrison bluntly describes Owen as “a successful industrialist who
made a fortune in cotton spinning.” J.F.C. Harrison, The Early Victorians: 1832–1851 (London: Weidenfeld and
had wrought on Britain’s cities and industrial towns. In addition to his entrepreneurial interests, New Lanark was an experimental trial for Owen’s moral psychology.

The Politics of Control at New Lanark

The relevance of Owen’s determinism and reformist agenda\(^{41}\) to Mill’s moral science is illuminated by a brief overview of the relationship between Owen’s determinist moral psychology and the structure of control and governance at New Lanark. Owen’s determinist moral psychology provided the theoretical support for the creation of a coercive *polis*. In contrast to Mill’s goal to allow individuality and self-development to flourish, Owen’s New Lanark community was predicated on the psychological belief that the possibility of moral self-improvement is an illusion. Owen’s rejection of what Mill terms the “power of self-formation” contributed to the establishment of an oppressive regime at New Lanark.\(^{42}\)

There was much to be reformed in New Lanark before Owen’s “principle” of character determination could be successfully applied. Owen develops the practical aspects of his plan for an ideal society in great detail, perhaps even equalling the comprehensiveness of Auguste Comte’s positivist utopia or, indeed, of Plato’s *Republic*.\(^{43}\) Owen’s first impressions record a “wretched society” where poverty, crime, vice and immorality prevailed to a monstrous extent.” The previous owner had used child labour. Around 500 children had been procured [between the ages of six and eight] chiefly from workhouses and charities in Edinburgh.\(^{44}\) Factory conditions and industrial relations had been loosely regulated until the

\(^{41}\) This study cannot present a comprehensive survey of Owen’s economic reforms. For more detail see Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World*, pp. 11–25, pp. 63–77, and passim.


\(^{43}\) As with Plato’s Guardian class, there would be an Owenite “Directing Class” to administer and operate the industrial communities. See Garnett, “Robert Owen and the Community Experiments,” pp. 53–4.

Factory Act of 1802, which enacted a range of provisions, mostly regarding child labour and education. Considering the lax legal restraint, Owen's total control of social and educational arrangements, and the extent of child labour, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to describe Owen as the patriarch of New Lanark. Indeed Owen appeared to embrace the role: “These people were slaves at my mercy; liable at any time to be dismissed; and knowing that, in that case, they must go into misery, compared with such limited happiness as they now enjoyed” (see Figure 1).

However, according to Ian Donnachie, life was bleak for the Lanark workers during the first years of Owen’s tenure:

[The settlement was] reached by a steep and winding road. The entry way was guarded by two symmetrical gatehouses and where the river or steep valley sides did not intervene between the mill lands and the outside world, adjoining gentlemen’s estates were walled against trespass…. After the long working hours there was nowhere for folk to go apart from their dwellings and therein apart from each other’s company, resort might be made for solace to the bottle…. Between the tenements and the factory ran the mill lade, like the river beyond, an ever present danger of drowning for young children. In the mills themselves, cotton choked the lungs, open machinery threatened life and limb, and, since so much of it was constructed of timber, and candles or lamps were needed morning and night, there was a constant risk of fire. Finally, pilfering was widespread in the early factory system. 

According to a report from a visitor to the site in 1833, Owen’s social vision was implemented and policed by a constant system of beatings.” There were random searches of workers,” summary dismissals for unauthorised absence from work, fines for drunkenness, a 10:30pm curfew, and periodical inspections of the lodgings by Owen’s military police.”

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46 Donnachie, Owen of New Lanark, pp. 80–82. For more details see Harrison, Quest for the New Moral World, pp. 151–157.
47 As quoted in Donnachie, Owen of New Lanark, pp. 80–82.
Figure 1. Statue of Robert Owen at the Cooperative Bank on the corner of Corporation St. and Balloon St., Manchester City. The statue was erected in 1994 and was unveiled by Hughie Todner, President of the Co-op Congress. Photograph taken by the author, April 2009.
The average worker laboured almost eleven hours every day except Sunday. Children were removed from their parents' care and had no contact with them except at meal-times.\textsuperscript{48}

However, life at New Lanark was not entirely nasty and brutish. Owen alleges that conditions were so much better at New Lanark than in other factory settlements that it became known colloquially as ‘The Happy Valley.’\textsuperscript{49} There was a ‘degree of equality’ among the workers, and Owen set up a savings fund and a ‘sick fund,’ which, by 1818, amounted to £3,000, a considerable sum at the time.\textsuperscript{50} In accordance with Owen’s prescription for the direct formation of the citizens’ moral character, provisions made for children’s education were substantial. According to the account left by an earlier visitor in 1800, Owen assigned time after working hours where the children were given ‘1½ hour’s schooling,’ including instruction in reading and writing, and also singing, sewing and dancing lessons.\textsuperscript{51}

In fact, the system of education was much more comprehensive than this.\textsuperscript{52} Moral education, a central pillar in Owen’s reformist project, amounted to heteronomous character formation. At New Lanark Owen’s determinist moral psychology was pedagogically institutionalised:

> Children are, without exception, passive and wonderfully contrived compounds; which, by an accurate previous and subsequent attention, founded on a correct knowledge of the subject, may be formed collectively to have any human character. And although these compounds, like all the other works of nature, possess endless varieties, yet they partake of that plastic quality, which, by

\textsuperscript{48} Owen, \textit{A New View of Society}, p. 87, p. 83.
\textsuperscript{49} Owen, \textit{The Revolution in the Mind}, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{50} Donnachie, \textit{Owen of New Lanark}, pp. 80–84.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., See also Owen, \textit{A New View of Society}, pp. 96–97.
\textsuperscript{52} For a more detailed account of Owen’s educational theory and the arrangements at New Lanark see Harrison, \textit{Quest for the New Moral World}, pp. 139–147; and Owen, \textit{A New View of Society}, p. 94ff.
perseverance under judicious management, may be ultimately moulded into the very image of rational wishes and desires.\textsuperscript{53}

Such are the impressions these principles will make on the mind of every child so taught; and instead of generating anger or displeasure, they will produce commiseration and pity for those individuals who possess either habits or sentiments which appear to him to be destructive of their own comfort, pleasure, or happiness; and will produce on his part a desire to remove those causes of distress, that his own feelings of commiseration and pity may also be removed. The pleasure which he cannot avoid experiencing by this mode of conduct will likewise stimulate him to the most active endeavours to withdraw those circumstances which surround any part of mankind with causes of misery, and to replace them with others which have a tendency to increase happiness.\textsuperscript{54}

It reflects his intentions that Owen named the New Lanark school The Institute for the Formation of Character. Owen describes this “Infant-School” as “the first practical step towards forming an intelligent, kind, charitable, and rational character for the infants of the human race.” Its goal was to prepare them for an entirely new state of society—a state based solely on truth, emanating from an accurate practical knowledge of human nature, and of the only practical mode by which the human character can ever be well formed.\textsuperscript{55} As Owen further explains, “[T]he uppermost story of the Institution is arranged to serve for a School, Lecture-room, and Church. And these are intended to have a direct influence in forming the character of the villagers.”\textsuperscript{56} Through education, Owenite insights into moral psychology would be instilled into each new generation in order to create rational, productive and socially-minded individuals. The object of Owenite education was to create, cultivate, and establish those habits and sentiments which tend to the welfare of the individual and of the

\textsuperscript{53} Owen, \textit{A New View of Society}, p. 34. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., pp. 35–36. Mill’s position is that he is a “child so taught” and that this simply does not work. As will be explained in chapters 3 and 5, the cause of his depression was that his education had repressed and almost eliminated his emotional capacities, leading to a painful feeling of un-freedom.
\textsuperscript{55} Owen, \textit{The Revolution in the Mind}, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{56} Owen, \textit{A New View of Society}, pp. 94–95.
community.”\textsuperscript{57} In Owen’s memorable phrase, the workers at New Lanark would become “living machinery.”\textsuperscript{58} He believed that direct character formation would produce virtuous and industrious citizens. To achieve this, Owen argued that the distinction between individual and social welfare must be obliterated. From the earliest moment (6 months of age), children would be taught to conceive of themselves as components of a social whole:

As soon as the young mind shall be duly prepared for such instruction [by learning Owen’s “facts” of human nature], the master should not allow any opportunity to escape, that would enable him to enforce the clear and inseparable connection which exists between the interest and happiness of each individual, and the interest and happiness of every other individual. This should be the beginning and end of all his instruction.\textsuperscript{59}

In addition to the direct efforts to form the characters of his employees, Owen sought to control character development through the indirect means of public approbation and sanction. For example, Owen and his managers recorded the behaviour and productivity of each worker in “books of character.” Owen describes this as “the supposed recording angel marking the good and bad deeds of poor human nature.”\textsuperscript{60} The content of these books was publicly displayed: coloured “blocks of wood were suspended over the workplace of each employee and rotated according to performance, such that each knew how the others were graded.”\textsuperscript{61} Owen’s intention was to provide a form of self-regulation, where public opinion would be a “silent monitor” of the individual.\textsuperscript{62} Public opinion would be used indirectly as a formative influence on the education and moral development of the citizenry.

At New Lanark Owen imposed a compulsory regime that Mill and others such as

\textsuperscript{57} Owen, \textit{A New View of Society}, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{58} As quoted in A.J. Robertson, “Robert Owen, Cotton Spinner: New Lanark, 1800–1825,” in Pollard and Salt (eds) \textit{Robert Owen, Prophet of the Poor}, p. 149. The high commercial productivity of these proposed communities was a major selling point in Owen’s attempts to attract investors.
\textsuperscript{59} Owen, \textit{A New View of Society}, p. 80, pp. 97–99.
\textsuperscript{60} Owen, as quoted in Donnachie, \textit{Owen of New Lanark}, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{62} See also Donnachie, \textit{Owen of New Lanark}, pp. 81–2.
Alexis de Tocqueville would later condemn. Owen’s ideal citizen neither values individuality, nor develops the capability for autonomous deliberation. Self-formation has no place. Owenite schooling would instil the necessary facts," and cultivate the attitudes and tendencies considered conducive to social harmony and a rational, productive community. A virtuous and productive character would be given” to the citizenry through the Institute for the Formation of Character and through the influence of public opinion. The characters created in this community, Owen hoped, would be durable,” rather than malleable, as in Mill’s vision.63 There would certainly be no need for the kind of experiments in living” Mill passionately advocates in On Liberty.64 Rather than encourage free-thinking and diversity of character, Owen’s aim was to believe the human mind from useless and superstitious restraints, [and] train it on those principles which facts…demonstrate to be the only principles which are true.” Achieve this, Owen thought, and intemperance and licentiousness will not exist.”65

The key point to be drawn from the preceding discussion is that Owen’s determinism had illiberal political implications. Where Mill’s objective is a moral and intellectual” liberation of the mind, Owen’s is to train” it.66 Almost every aspect of life in New Lanark was monitored and controlled, and Owen’s vision was meticulously enforced. Owen’s determinist theory of character formation underlies an oppressive and obviously illiberal political regime. If character is made for and not by the individual, then centralised, omnipotent and benevolent control of the polis might be necessary in order to regulate welfare and correct gross socio-economic inequality.67 Heteronomous moral education, communitarianism and benevolent paternalism would be the political means, and, according

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63 Owen, A New View of Society, p. 82.
64 E.g., Mill, On Liberty, p. 281.
65 Owen, A New View of Society, p. 85
67 There is no doubt that Owen considered the success of New Lanark as a vindication of his science of character. See Owen, A New View of Society, p. 29; and Harrison, Quest for the New Moral World, p. 153.
to Owen, wealth, happiness and virtue the ends. This vision is encapsulated in the following Owenite “Social Hymn” of the 1840s:

Community! the joyful sound
That cheers the social band,
And spreads a holy zeal around
To dwell upon the land.

Community is labour bless’d,
Redemption form the fall;
The good of all by each possess’d
The good of each by all.

Community is friendship’s throne,
With kindred minds around:
’Tis in community alone
That friendship can abound.

Community doth wealth increase,
Extends the years of life,
 Begins on earth the reign of peace,
And ends the reign of strife

Community does all possess
That can to man be given;
Community is happiness,
Community is heaven.68

Liberty, Necessity and Moral Freedom in Hobbes

In addition to the environmental determinism of Robert Owen, Mill perceives himself as beset by forms of psychological determinism from within his own naturalist intellectual tradition. The moral difficulties arising from the idea that human actions are amenable to the law of uniform causation in nature—a central pillar of Mill’s epistemological and psychological outlook—have been endemic to the British empirical tradition. If the

68 As quoted in Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World*, p. 137.
development of moral character and mental states is as causally explicable as an avalanche or
an amoeba, how can our volitions, beliefs and desires—in short, the development of moral
character—be meaningfully free? How can we be held morally accountable for our actions if,
as Owen holds, our modes of behaviour are mere reflections of environmental imprinting?

This problem is especially prominent in the thought of those within this tradition who,
unlike Owen, profess to be both naturalists and _self-determinists._ According to one historian
of ideas who questions the coherency of naturalist conceptions of self-formation, the tradition
of naturalist self-determinists _stretch[es] in an unbroken line_ from classical Greece to the
twentieth-century. The British membership of this group—all avowedly empiricist—including

It is therefore no coincidence that Mill’s chapter on the determinism problem in the _System of Logic—Of
Liberty and Necessity_—shares its title with Section VIII of Hume’s _An Enquiry Concerning
Human Understanding_, and, perhaps more significantly, with Hobbes’s 1654 response to
Bishop Bramhall’s theological defence of free-will.  

Mill does not mention Hume in the discussion, but the moral dilemma within which the British empiricist tradition found itself by accepting the naturalist conception of human nature permeates Mill’s text. The canonical and most frequent response—the one affirmed by Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Mill—is, in
Hobbes’s words, that _liberty and necessity are Consistent._ In other words, while human
actions are subject to the law of the uniformity of causation, these actions can also be _free._

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This position is commonly described as compatibilism, or, perhaps less charitably, soft determinism.\textsuperscript{72}

However, it is important to note a significant distinction, and not to overstate the conceptual continuity, between Mill and his empiricist forebears on the issue of human freedom. In Hobbes—whose absence from Isaiah Berlin’s list of naturalist self-determinists is conspicuous—we find the most radically naturalist, non-moral concept of freedom. A brief exegesis of Hobbes’s conception of freedom and his answer to the determinist challenge can bring into sharper relief the purpose and importance to Mill’s moral-political thought of repudiating, or at least mitigating, doctrines of determinism such as Owen’s. While Hobbes and Mill are both described as compatibilists, their conceptions of the kind of freedom said to be compatible with universal causation are very different.

It has been suggested that Hobbes "was primarily interested in political liberty."\textsuperscript{73} In contrast to Mill,\textsuperscript{74} Hobbes contends that freedom is a purely external concept, as applicable to a stone as to a person. This view is supported by textual evidence from Leviathan: "Liberty, or Freedome, signifieth (properly) the absence of Opposition; (by Opposition, I mean externall Impediments of motion); and may be applyed no lesse to Irrationall, and to Inanimate creatures, than to Rationall."\textsuperscript{75} Accordingly, Hobbes defines freedom as unobstructed motion: "A FREE-MAN, is he, that in those things, which by his strength and


\textsuperscript{75} Hobbes, Leviathan, II, XXI, p. 261.
Hobbes deals with the determinist dilemma by articulating a naturalist account of freedom according to which “that which is not subject to Motion, is not subject to Impediment.” Only bodies capable of motion can be restricted; therefore, only bodies can be free or impeded.

To illustrate the point Hobbes gives an elegant analogy. Consider a body of water flowing downhill. Although a river is governed by the law of gravity, it is free to the extent that its path, and subsequently its motion, is unobstructed. Were it to be dammed, its motion would be obstructed and it would be unfree. Similarly, Hobbes states, while our desires and volitions are governed by inexorable laws—the law of universal causation and the law of nature to seek self-preservation—we are free to the extent that our attempts to realise these desires and goals are unimpeded. Freedom is doing what you desire or “endeavour” to do. Actions and bodies can be free, but volitions and desires cannot. The physiological processes by which we decide what to do are not amenable to a measure of freedom. The liberty to pursue goals through action is compatible, Hobbes argues, with the causal determination of originating volitions. In the language common to Hobbes, Hume and Mill, liberty, thus understood, is compatible with causal necessity:

As in the water, that hath not only liberty, but a necessity of descending by the Channel: so likewise in the Actions which men voluntarily doe; which (because they proceed from their will) proceed from liberty; and yet because every act of man’s will, and every desire, and inclination proceedeth from some cause, and that from another cause, which causes in a continuall chaine (whose first link in the hand of God the first of all causes) proceed from necessity.

Although the will is linked to antecedent phenomena by a causal chain, the actions it

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77 Ibid.
78 In Neely’s view, “A man is free, according to Hobbes, to the extent that he is able to do what he wants to do, and this is taken to mean that he is free to the extent that external conditions do not prevent him from doing as he pleases.” Neely, “Freedom and Desire,” p. 37. C.f., John Skorupski, *John Stuart Mill* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 355.
motivates can be restricted by other bodies, or performed without such hindrance. So long as they are not subjugated to external impediments, they are considered free. That of which the motion is unobstructed is free; liberty is the absence of impediments to motion." Herein, argues Hobbes, lies our freedom.

Mental capacities or Millian states of character, in this view, cannot be measured in degrees of freedom or autonomy. Hobbes explicitly argues that “freedom” and “liberty” have no place in metaphysical thinking. Volitions, desires, appetites and aversions cannot be “free”: “[F]rom the use of the word Freewill, no liberty can be inferred to the will, desire, or inclination, but the liberty of the man; which consisteth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to doe.” Hobbes is clear that there can be a freedom of doing, but not of deciding.

**Vital and Animal Motion**

While the body, as matter in motion, can achieve freedom, it is Hobbes’s account of the causes of volitions that presents a determinist challenge to Mill. The process by which these volitions and motives are formed is technically a subject of motion, albeit “invisible” and “insensible” motion; it cannot be otherwise from Hobbes’s ultra-naturalistic perspective. But these psychological machinations are not motion in themselves, they are “the first internall beginning of all Voluntary Motion.” It seems that, for Hobbes, “motion” encapsulates both processes: the production of appetites and aversions (the motivational causes of action) and the subsequent bodily “endeavour” itself (the action). Given his

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82 Hobbes holds that the production of volitions that result in action is in fact the “small beginnings of motion, within the body of Man.” However, these initial stages of bodily motion are governed, as will be explained below, by egotistic impulses. It is consistent with Hobbes’ naturalism that Hobbes defines the process of volition as technically a process of *movement*, while adding that such movement is necessarily governed by the law of nature. In contradistinction to Mill, Hobbes conceives of all motives as flowing from the same source, the desire for self-preservation. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, VI, p. 119.
repudiation of the idea of free volition and his statement that freedom is applicable only in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to doe,” it seems that Hobbes intends that volitions, being physical properties in the brain, must be matter in motion. Indeed, Hobbes’s radically naturalist conception of human nature cannot accommodate the kind of mind/body duality which would be produced by conceiving of mental processes as motionless or metaphysical properties. However, for Hobbes volitions and desires are not themselves subject to impediment. Fully to appreciate the determinism of Hobbes requires a closer examination of his moral psychology.

As is roundly affirmed by Richard Tuck, C.B. Macphearson and Nicholas Jackson, Hobbes conceives the human mind and body as matter in motion. He does not affirm, however, that all matter moves in the same way. Desiring something—having an appetite” for it—is not the same as doing something. There is a distinction between desire” and endeavour.” Hobbes states that there are two forms of human motion.” Vitall” motion involves cognitive processes and involuntary functions such as respiration and circulation. Animal motion involves acts such as speaking and walking. Animal motion is therefore Voluntary motion; as to go, to speak, to move our limbs, in such a manner as is first fancied in our minds.”

This distinction makes it clear that Hobbes conceived of mental processes and outward behaviour as different kinds of motion. Only Animal motion is voluntary. Psychological motives—desires, appetites and aversions—are Vital, or involuntary forms of motion; they cannot be measured in degrees of freedom. As Hobbes, says, no liberty can be inferred to the will, desire, or inclination.” Only voluntary motion, therefore, can be free or impeded.

84 Hobbes, Leviathan, I, VI, p. 118.
85 Ibid., pp. 121–122. “[M]otion, which is called Appetite, and for the appearance of it Delight and Pleasure, seemeth to be, a corroboration of Vitall motion, and a help thereunto.”
86 Ibid., II, XXI, p. 263.
In Hobbes's moral psychology, then, freedom relates only to "doing, or omitting, according to our own appetite or aversion." From this psychological matrix, volition or "will" is defined as the involuntary "Vitall motion" immediately preceding the "Animall motion" by which it is expressed. The act of "willing" refers to the actions produced by motives, not to the actual production of motives. Indeed, the act of "deliberating" is the process by which motives produce actions. Will is not a "rational appetite" or even an appetite resulting from a precedent deliberation." Appetite is deliberation: In deliberation, the last appetite, or aversion, immediately adhering to the action, or to the omission thereof, is that we call the will; the act, not the faculty, of willing.... Will, therefore, is the last Appetite in Deliberating." If it is a Law of Human Nature that we are always and inexorably self-interested and desirous of self-preservation, as Hobbes affirms, then the formulation of such a desire must be impervious to obstruction. If it were obstructed, then the egoism of human nature cannot be a universal precept. Even here, Hobbes complicates the matter by considering, in another context, the case of "the epilepsie," in which appetites and volitions are produced independently of self-preservation and self-interest. In those afflicted by this disease, there is an unnaturall spirit or wind in the head that obstructeth the roots of the Nerves and moving them violently, taketh the motion which naturally they should have from the power of the Soule in the Brain; thereby causeeth violent and irregular motions (which men call Convulsions) in the parts; insomuch as he that is seized therewith falleth down sometimes into the water, and sometimes into the fire, as a man deprived of his senses." Hobbes, Leviathan, II, XXIX, p. 371.
Egoism

Hobbes probes farther into the internal processes that form and produce volitions in the well-known passages of *Leviathan* dealing with Human Nature. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that individuals in the state of nature are governed by a law of nature. This law dictates that each will always desire self-preservation. To justify this Hobbes advances a quasi-utilitarian moral psychology regarding the motives for action in which the individual always aims, with varying degrees of success, to avoid the hurtful and attain what is considered good. As injury and death are the most hurtful of all, self-preservation is rational and desirable. Hobbes concludes that our “fundamental nature” is programmed to avoid pain and death.

Indeed, in his essay *Of Liberty and Necessity* (1654), Hobbes propounds an unequivocal egoism: “I conceive, that when a man deliberates whether he shall do a thing or not do it, he does nothing else but consider whether it be better for himself to do it or not to do it.” Like all other animals, humans are creatures of appetite and aversion. These desires are collected under the general concept of self-interest (or self-preservation), which motivates all action. According to Hobbes’s general theory of action,” Tuck surmises, “we always

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89 As such, for Hobbes there exists a single natural right: the right to self-preservation.


91 Hobbes, as cited in Jackson, *Hobbes, Bramhall and the Politics of Liberty and Necessity*, p. 299, pp. 297–300. Jackson further emphasises Hobbes’s denial of internal autonomy by referring to him not as a compatibilist, but as a determinist.” Jackson seems to assert that determinism is a product of Hobbes’s naturalism: “Hobbes was advancing an anthropological view which presupposes that the species *homo sapiens* is a subject matter of biology, does not possess a ‘freedom’ or ‘dignity’ or any other such element that would exempt it from the kind of analysis routinely applied to other animals. Hobbes, like perhaps most twenty-first century biologists, regarded man as just another animal whose behaviour was determined in fundamentally the same way as that of other organisms.” Jackson also emphasises Hobbes’s egoism by considering him a sixteenth-century precursor to the behavioural psychology of B.F. Skinner.

act in such a way as to secure what we take to be good for us.” Macpherson concurs with Tuck’s interpretation of a materialist, interest-driven individual, arguing that, for Hobbes, “man is very much like an automated machine.” Hobbesian psychology posits a rationalising “self-moving” organism that has certain predilections “built into it” at the most fundamental psychological level. It is a natural “machine” whose constitution, in utilising the senses, the passions and the intellect, propels it rationally to pursue its conceived self-interest. As for the general direction or goal that is built in to the machine,” Macpherson concisely summarises Hobbes’s egoism, neatly capturing the verve of its mechanistic and internally deterministic naturalism:

The machine seeks to continue its own motion. It does this by moving towards things which it calculates are conducive to its continued motion and away from things not conducive. Motion towards is called appetite or desire, motion away is called aversion…. Whatever is the object of any machine’s appetite it registers as good, and the objects of its aversion, evil. Each therefore seeks its own good and shuns its own evil. All the states of mind and general dispositions of men…can be reduced to the action of the appetite for one’s own good…. Every man’s actions are determined by his appetites and aversions, or rather by his calculation of the probable effects on the satisfaction of his appetites, of any action he might take…. All voluntary actions are determined by this process of deliberation.

According to the egoistic outlook, the desires and aversions which cause action are inherent to the human condition. The individual is physiologically programmed to pursue self-interest. While efforts to achieve such interests can be free or impeded, the desire to pursue them is psychologically determined. Where Owen can be said to represent

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93 Tuck, *Hobbes*, p. 60. Tuck warns against the assumption that Hobbes means —th whatever we do [because it must be in pursuit of our conception of self-interest], we must have the right to do it.” Tuck rightly observes that Hobbes was aware of common behaviour that is obviously not in the interests of self-preservation, such as drunkenness and cruelty. The distinction shows that we always act in a way we think is good for us (egoism), but not that our conception of what is good for us relates to an objective good. Hobbes argues that we are often unsuccessful egotists. Our motive is to preserve ourselves and further our own interests, but, as in the case of drunkenness, our actions do not necessarily effect the desired end.

95 Ibid., pp. 32–33. Emphasis added.
environmental determinism, Hobbes represents a form of psychological determinism. The theory of character formation Mill articulates in *A System of Logic* is an attempt to refute both of these determinist positions, and both Hobbes and Owen feature in Mill’s discussion. Indeed, Mill’s idea that the individual can become a morally self-determining agent depends upon a rejection of Hobbes’s and Owen’s positions.

**Bentham’s Governance of Pleasure**

Before Mill’s repudiation of these forms of determinism can be fully comprehended, another interlocutor in the debate over self-development and human freedom must be introduced. A fuller appreciation of Mill’s idea of character formation is illuminated by understanding his objections to Bentham’s psychology and, in particular, his argument that Bentham was fatally ignorant of the laws of the formation of character.96

Bentham’s psychology presents a significant hurdle that Mill must overcome if he is to show that actions and character are **not** inexorably determined by all-powerful environmental or mental antecedents, as is respectively held by Owen and Hobbes. By arguing that the human mind is “governed” by the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain, Bentham, like Hobbes, presents a forceful and influential moral psychology which, perhaps unintentionally, diminishes and in the end denies the kind of power for self-formation that Mill wants to affirm. If we are programmed to desire a particular value, and if that desire

96 Mill, “Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy,” pp. 7–8; Mill, “Bentham,” pp. 111–112. This critique proved devastating and was repeated almost verbatim by Mill’s contemporaries and successors. Indeed, Mill’s contemporaries documented the obvious differences in scope and purpose between Mill and Bentham on the issue of moral psychology and the formation of character. Edward Lytton Bulwer boldly declares in his book *England and the English* that “Mr Mill is eminently a metaphysician; Bentham as little of a metaphysician as any one can be who ever attained to equal success in the science of philosophy.” See e.g., Edward Lytton Bulwer, *England and the English*, —Appendix C,” reprinted as —A Few Observations on Mr Mill,” (1833) in Mill, CW: I, p. 590: “Of human nature indeed in its rarer or more hidden part, Bentham knew but little.” See also Mill, “Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy,” p. 17.
unerringly governs our actions, we cannot be free in Mill’s sense of a self-determining individual with a “power” for self-mastery.”

In the striking opening paragraph of his *Introduction to the Principles of Method and of Legislation* (1789), Bentham articulates a form of psychological determinism in which all actions are driven by an inherent desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain:

> Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. *They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think*: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality *he will remain subject to it all the while*. The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.

These sentiments are affirmed throughout Bentham’s oeuvre. In *A Comment on the Commentaries* Bentham is even more direct: “My notion of man is, that, successfully or unsuccessfully, he aims at happiness, and so will continue to aim as long as he continues to be man, in every thing he does.” Bentham goes on to identify the pursuit of happiness with self-interest.” He is adamant that every action and every mode of behaviour is an attempt to attain a self-interested goal:

> In the general tenor of life, in every human breast, self-regarding interest is predominant over all other interests put together…. By the principle of self-preference, understand that propensity in human nature, by which, on the occasion

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of every act he exercises, every human being is led to pursue that line of conduct which, according to his view of the case, taken by him at the moment, will be in the highest degree contributory to his own greatest happiness, whatsoever be the effect of it, in relation to the happiness of other similar beings, any or all of them taken together. For the satisfaction of those who may doubt, reference may be made to the existence of the species as being of itself a proof, and that a conclusive one.\footnote{100}

Bentham states this egoistic thesis in the starkest possible terms: Of action the sole efficient cause is interest.\footnote{101} Interest is aligned with pleasure, thereby giving egoism a hedonistic spin:

A man is said to have an interest in any subject, in so far as that subject is considered as more or less likely to be to him a source of pleasure or exemption…. A Man is said to have an interest in the performance if this or that act, by himself or any other…in so far as, upon and in consequence of its having place, this or that good (i.e., pleasure or exemption) is considered as being more or less likely to be possessed by him. …It is only by a sense of interest, by the eventual expectation of pain or pleasure, that human conduct can, in any case, be influenced.\footnote{102}

Bentham’s position, as contained in these passages, can be broken down into three steps. First, all actions are caused by self-interested motives. Every action is an attempt to attain a self-interested goal. Second, interests are hedonically defined. An interest is an anticipation of pleasure or exemption from pain. To have an interest in something is to conceive of it as pleasurable. These two premises lead to the conclusion that all action is governed by a desire to attain pleasure and avoid pain. Bentham’s position is therefore a blend of psychological hedonism and psychological egoism. There is a direct link from the formation of a desire (to seek self-interest) over which we have no control to the pursuit of its satisfaction through action. As with Hobbes, there is no liberty of desire formation, nor of deliberation, if conceived as a process of rationalising desires.

\footnote{100}{Bentham, “The Psychology of Economic Man,” p. 421. Emphasis in original.}
\footnote{101}{Ibid., p. 424.}
\footnote{102}{Ibid., p. 422, p. 424. Italics removed. Other examples abound. See also sections XIX, XX, XXI, V.}
It is important not to dismiss the cogency of such a position outright, as is often the case in Bentham studies.\textsuperscript{103} Even if \textit{interest} is no longer defined strictly in terms of pain and pleasure, as it is in Bentham’s matrix, the idea that behaviour is best explained in terms of self-interest remains a popular and influential doctrine in contemporary moral psychology, economics, evolutionary biology, sociobiology and some disciplines of political science, such as rational choice theory. Paul Krugman, who received the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2008 and was recently rated the most influential economist writing in the English language, argues that "[s]elf-interest is still the best motivator we know."\textsuperscript{104} Also, it is a foundational presupposition of evolutionary biology that behaviours which increase the reproductive and survival fitness of the individual are transmitted through sexual and environmental selection. Behaviours which damage fitness are ‘selected against’ and eventually eradicated. Thus all observed behaviour becomes, by definition, self-preserving in effect, if not always in intention. It is argued that this selection process occurs at the most fundamental pre-cognitive level: genetic influences, by the fact of their survival, are ‘selfish.’\textsuperscript{105} Twenty-first-century biology assumes that ‘humans are just survival machines for our genes.’\textsuperscript{106}

**Conclusion**

The three thinkers examined above represent views incompatible with Mill’s conception of the highest good—the perpetual self-formation of moral character—in three ways. First, without overemphasising the psychological commonalities within the very different theories expounded by these thinkers, there is nevertheless a similarly restrictive implication for the scope of autonomous, self-forming action. Hobbes explicitly holds that freedom applies only

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\textsuperscript{106} Stanovich, \textit{The Robot’s Rebellion}, p. xii, \textit{passim}.
\end{flushright}
to objects or bodies,” not to desires or volitions. Further, he states that action is explicable in
terms of a universal desire for self-preservation and personal security. Bentham argues that
action is "governed" by the desire for pleasure and the aversion to pain. Like Bentham, there
is for Hobbes a single motive behind all human action. Therefore, despite their divergent
psychological conceptions, and despite Hobbes's important distinction between Vital and
Animal motion, freedom is a purely external concept for Hobbes and Bentham: unimpeded
motion in Hobbes, and unimpeded pursuit of desire in Bentham. The individual can be free in
body—in movement—but not in mind. For Owen, freedom of the mind in the development of
character is simply a dangerous illusion. Owen holds that all behaviour is determined by
environmental imprinting. Hobbes and Bentham propound a form of egoism in which the
individual is always motivated by self-interest.  

Second, all three thinkers envision the individual as a rationalising "machine," programmed either by environmental or physiological antecedents to carry out predetermined
functions. As Lisa Hill notes, this view became increasingly influential. Indeed, "by the
middle of the nineteenth-century such an approach to the study of living organisms was the
norm.” There were also the French Materialists like Montesquieu, whose "Scientific
Materialism" consisted in the attempt to describe living organisms and their processes strictly
as machines and in terms of physical and chemical events.” Others such as Julien de La
Mettrie argued that humans were machine-like both physically and mentally.  

107 This does not imply that every action advances self-interest, or that no other end is effected, only that the
advancement of the agent's self-interest is the intention behind every action. The agent can be unsuccessful or
incompetent in action, but is always self-interested in intent.

108 Owen and Bentham both use this word. See Owen, as quoted in A.J. Robertson, "Robert Owen, Cotton
University College London. URL: http://cartome.org/panopticon2.htm (consulted 1/4/2010). While Hobbes does
not use this specific word, accounts of his psychology often appeal to mechanistic metaphors. For an example,
see Macpherson, Possessive Individualism, p. 31–33.

109 Lisa Hill, The Passionate Society: The Social, Political and Moral Thought of Adam Ferguson (Dordrecht:

110 Hill, The Passionate Society, p. 76. The metaphor of the human body as a "machine" is arguably even more
Third, there is a common restriction of individuality and socio-political liberty in Hobbes and Bentham, which reaches its nadir in Owen. Hobbes infamously resolves the problem of the universal pursuit of self-preservation in the state of nature with a leviathan state which governs by forbidding us to be our own judges, and our own carvers.” Will” and judgement” must be abdicated to the state in the interests of social stability and basic security. In Hobbes’s political philosophy, this foregoing of independence and individual judgement makes civil and political life possible. In the Owenite communities, every aspect of life from education to the family is prescribed and tightly controlled, requiring and entrenching the moral coercion of public opinion” that Mill is keen to extirpate. These determinist political visions, based upon moral psychologies in which the self-development of character has no place, are constitutionally antithetical to Mill’s conceptions of moral character and moral freedom, and to his wider moral project as a reformer of the world.”


111 Taken from Hobbes, Elements of Law; and Hobbes, Leviathan. As cited in Tuck, Hobbes, p. 65.
113 Mill, Autobiography, p. 137.
PROBABILITY AND NECESSITY

SELF-DEVELOPMENT IN MILL’S IDEA OF CAUSALITY

In contrast to the determinist theories of mind discussed in Chapter One, an implicit assumption that humans are autonomous deliberators is commonplace in contemporary ethical-political discourse. Inherent in the political liberalism of paradigm-shaping thinkers such as Isaiah Berlin, Charles Beitz, Michael Walzer and John Rawls is a presupposition that individuals are capable of making rational, deliberative choices about personal ideals and matters regarding the system of government under which they live. The presupposition that we are not physiologically programmed pleasure-seekers underlies much modern liberal thinking. Individuals blinded by Rawls’s veil of ignorance, for example, are required to make choices about social organisation. Their rationality and autonomy are presupposed. Should they be unable to make free choices, there would presumably be no need to shroud them from

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5 As are several other key moral and psychological conceptions. For a summary of the moral assumptions built into the apparatus of the [Rawl’s] original position, particularly its thick veil of ignorance” see Charles E. Larmore, “Behind the Veil,” *The New Republic*, February 27, 2008. Larmore asserts that Rawls “defines in advance” the terms of the agreement the shrouded individuals would make and presupposes key concepts such as their autonomy, rationality, “reasonableness” and sense of fairness. Consulted 9/11/2009. URL: http://www.tnr.com/print/article/books/behind-the-veil. Gerald Dworkin concurs with Larmore’s reading of Rawls, stating that “rational autonomy” is an “assumption” which Rawls simply embeds into his political outlook. Endorsing Rawls’s valuing of autonomy at the expense of other goods such as security and equality, Dworkin argues that “Rawls is building into the foundation of his theory a particular value, namely, that of autonomy....” Gerald Dworkin, “Authority,” in Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit (eds), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 361–2.
their prejudices to extract their preferences. Autonomy in this sense is usually defined as the consciousness of an ability to have acted other than one did.⁶

This presupposition, underlying much contemporary thinking in politics and legal philosophy, has a long history and is roughly attributable to the Kantian idea that moral action requires freedom—inversely, that we cannot be held morally accountable for acts we did not freely choose to perform. Kant excludes the emotions from moral evaluation because he thinks they are visceral rather than rational. Emotions, he argues, are “beyond the will,” and it is only the “will expressed in action” for which we are morally culpable.⁷ If the emotions are not amenable to choice, they are beyond moral scrutiny. This assumption is common to Mill's epistemological and political enemies. William Hamilton, one of Mill’s primary philosophical opponents, argues that the very possibility of ethics presupposes the idea that moral agents are autonomous choosers: “The possibility of morality thus depends on the possibility of liberty; for if man be not a free agent, he is not the author of his actions, and has, therefore, no responsibility,—no moral personality at all.”⁸ Although he denies what Kant and Hamilton term the freedom of the will, Robert Owen makes the same connection between moral freedom and the legitimacy of moral scrutiny.⁹ According to these viewpoints,
the idea that we are morally culpable for our actions requires that action is autonomous—freely chosen rather than coerced, compelled or, at worst, pre-determined.

While the philosophical problem of moral choices often takes a back seat to more overtly political themes in contemporary debates over the vitality of political liberalism,\(^\text{10}\) the free-will/determinism puzzle was central to moral and political debate for reformers like Mill and Owen. For them, finding a moral or metaphysical underpinning was essential to reformist politics, rather than an obtuse and practically unimportant excursus into controversial ontological territory. In an age that precociously sought to synthesise all knowledge about human nature and society into a single unified theory—the age of systematisers of the capability and influence of Mill, Comte, Marx and Darwin—identifying errors and misapprehensions in determinist or free-will presuppositions was to attack the normative doctrines of one’s political enemies at their foundations.\(^\text{11}\)

Mill’s aim was to focus on the alternate moral, psychological and political implications of free-will and determinist theories of character formation. This required a critical engagement with Hobbes, Kant, Hamilton, William Whewell, Thomas Reid, Bentham and, most importantly, Owen. To understand the context and origins of Mill’s notions of self-development and moral freedom we must first examine his theory of causation as applied to human actions. The first foundations of Mill’s conception of freedom as character self-development—his riposte to the determinist thinkers discussed in Chapter One—are


\(^{11}\) This is especially evident in Mill’s engagement with the intuitionism of William Whewell. “[T]he 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 differences of practical opinion in an age of progress.” Mill, *Autobiography*, pp. 269–270.
contained in his concept of “probabilistic” causality, namely that induction—the science of causation—reveals and discovers causal tendencies, not necessities.\(^ {12}\)

This chapter is divided into four parts. It is intended to provide the epistemological context for chapters three, four and five, which critically examine the theory and place of character development in Mill’s moral psychology. Drawing on the exegeses of Owen, Hobbes and Bentham in the previous chapter, the first section systematises the moral psychologies and theories of character in Mill’s intellectual world into four sub-groups: fatalism, determinism, indeterminism and free-will. The second section introduces Mill’s theory of causality, which he termed “Philosophical Necessity.” The third and fourth sections explicate the important distinction between “necessity”—a word Mill considered chronically misunderstood—and “tendency” in the Law of Universal Causation. Such a division reveals how the moral problems evoked by theories of determinism permeate the core of Mill’s epistemology. By arguing that there is no “mystical tie” between a cause and its effect, and holding instead that causes tend to produce their known effects, rather than necessitating them, Mill incorporates a provision for freedom as self-formation into the deepest levels of his theories of knowledge and human nature.\(^ {13}\)

**Three Variants of Determinism and Fatalism**

In the *System of Logic*, Mill pitches the debate between “Necessitarians” such as Owen, who denies self-determination, and “Free-will metaphysicians” such as Thomas Reid, Kant, and William Hamilton, who hold that volitions are non-contingent.\(^ {14}\) Necessitarians hold that

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volitions are produced by environmental or biological forces over which the agent has no control.\textsuperscript{15} Free-will metaphysicians argue that, unlike natural phenomena, the will determines itself—that is, it has no cause or uniformity to which it conforms.\textsuperscript{16} Turning first to the position Mill describes as \textit{\textemdash}Necessitarian,\textit{\textemdash} Alan Ryan introduces additional terminology, describing Mill as struggling against two kinds of \textit{\textemdash}fatalism\textit{\textemdash}—\textit{\textemdash}Asiatic\textit{\textemdash} or theological fatalism and Owenite \textit{\textemdash}modified\textit{\textemdash} fatalism.\textsuperscript{17} \textit{\textemdash}Asiatic fatalism,\textit{\textemdash} the most extreme denial of freedom, \textit{\textemdash}holds\textit{\textemdash} that our actions do not depend upon our desires. Whatever our wishes may be, a superior power, or an abstract destiny, will overrule them, and compel us to act, not as we desire, but in the manner predestined.\textsuperscript{18} Owenite, or modified, fatalism holds that \textit{\textemdash}our\textit{\textemdash} actions are determined by our will, our will by our desires, and our desires by the joint influence of the motives presented to us and of our individual character; but that, our character having been made for us and not by us, we are not responsible for it, nor for the actions it leads to, and should in vain attempt to alter them.\textsuperscript{19}

A third \textit{\textemdash}fatalism\textit{\textemdash} as discussed in Chapter One, may be added to the doctrines Mill sets out to destroy, namely the psychological or internal determinism represented by Hobbes and Bentham.

Mill uses classificatory terms such as \textit{\textemdash}necessitarianism,\textit{\textemdash} \textit{\textemdash}fatalism\textit{\textemdash} and \textit{\textemdash}determinism\textit{\textemdash} almost interchangeably over the several texts which have been used to construct this matrix, which is therefore neither as simple nor as sharply defined as Ryan suggests. A clearer terminological framework appears in Figure 2 below. While Mill describes Owen as both a necessitarian and a fatalist, this thesis shall use \textit{\textemdash}fatalism\textit{\textemdash} only to signify theological predestination and other theories of pre-determined compulsion such as

\textsuperscript{16} The mainstay of free-will metaphysics is \textit{\textemdash}the denial that the law of invariable Causation holds true of human volitions.\textit{\textemdash} Mill, \textit{Logic}, p. 931.
\textsuperscript{18} Mil\textit{\textemdash} Logic, p. 465; also quoted by Ryan, \textit{Introduction}, in Mill, \textit{Hamilton}, p. lxii.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
the Oedipus prophecy (in Mill’s words, these theories are –Asiatic” or –pure” fatalism, representing the most extreme rejection of free-will). The term _fatalism_ is in fact largely rhetorical. Thinkers who are described by others as fatalists never use it themselves and its attribution often signifies a range of disparate positions. In this thesis, theories belonging to two of the three kinds of _fatalism_ described above will be called _determinist_. The two variants of determinism are, in order of severity, _environmental determinism_ (Mill’s –Modifie” or Owenite fatalism) and _psychological determinism_ (the egoism of Bentham and Hobbes, and the physiology of Comte). As Mill does not seriously engage with doctrines of –pure” or –Asiatic” fatalism, these positions are of contextual, not substantive, importance. At the other end of the spectrum, –free-will” signifies theories denying the causation of volitions. Theories such as Mill’s, which rejects both determinist and free-will accounts, will be termed –indeterminist” (see Figure 2).

These four broad positions distinguish at the most general level between those who think volition has a causal explanation (indeterminists, determinists, fatalists) and those who think it is uncaused (free-will theorists). Those affirming the causation of volitions can be separated again into those who locate the cause in a Divine or supernatural being (theological –Mahomedans”), those who, like Oedipus, imagine a –superior” compelling power independent of desires and circumstances, and, finally, those who envision a phenomenological cause (Bentham, Hobbes, Comte, Owen, Mill).

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20 Neither of these fatalisms is of particular concern to Mill. He dismisses them briefly in An Examination of William Hamilton’s Philosophy, p. 465. By describing Owen as a –modified” fatalist, Mill makes the same distinction between him and the other –Pure” fatalists as is made by calling –modified” fatalists –determinists,” as in Figure 2 below.

21 For example, Mill describes Owen as a fatalist and Henry Mansel, one of Mill’s Kantian opponents, describes Mill as a fatalist. Mill, Hamilton, p. 465.

22 Mill himself makes this distinction between coercive factors in An Examination of William Hamilton’s Philosophy. For Mill’s comments on the distinction between –external inducements” and –internal inducements” see Mill, Hamilton, p. 451.

23 Mill, Hamilton, p. 469.
Figure 2. Fatalist, Determinist, Indeterminist and Free-will Moral Psychologies in Mill’s *System of Logic* and other texts, showing the progression of Mill’s close conceptual relationship to determinism.
The phenomenalist group can be divided into two sub-groups: those for whom action is determined \textit{directly} by simple physiological processes, such as the drive for self-interest (Bentham, Hobbes and Comte), and those who think action is the product of ʻmental statesʻ or ʻcharacterʻ (Mill and Owen). Finally, Mill and Owen diverge on the causes of character. For Owen, character is formed exclusively by external environmental factors; while Mill argues that it is formed by external factors such as education, gender and socio-economic circumstances, but also by psychological factors such as desire, ʻhabits of willingʻ and moral aspirations.

It will be apparent from this reductive description that, tracing the commonalities backwards, Mill is united with determinists at each conceptual level, but never links up with the free-will theorists, who deny the causation of volitions altogether. Figure 2 illustrates why Mill is sometimes referred to as a ʻsoft-determinist.ʻ

\textbf{Liberty and Philosophical Necessity}

Mill was aware of the terminological confusion that might arise out these analyses. Indeed, his first attacks on determinism are attacks on its mode of discourse. He argues that the philosophically imprecise language of the sub-branches of determinism described above has pervaded and infected philosophical discourse. As Mill complains, ʻ[t]he application of so improper a term as Necessity to the doctrine of cause and effect in the matter of human character, seems to me one of the most signal instances in philosophy of the abuse of terms, and its practical consequences one of the most striking examples of the power of language over our associations.ʻ That word is so misunderstood in philosophical discourse that Mill

\footnote{24 Remarks made to the author by Tony Burns at the 59th Political Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Manchester, UK, 7–9 April, 2009.}

\footnote{25 Mill, \textit{Logic}, p. 841, and Book VI, Chapter ii, Section 3, ʻinappropriateness and pernicious effect of the term Necessity,ʻ \textit{passim}.}
recommended ¬discarding altogether the misleading word Necessity.”

The word "necessity," Mill alleges, is "so extremely inappropriate a term" because it evokes a much stronger relationship between cause and effect than really exists. "Necessity," Mill explains, has always been understood to hold that ¬volitions and actions...[are] necessary and inevitable.”

The ¬misleading associations[s]” evoked by the word ¬necessity” have subsequently led philosophers into a dangerous misconception.” A necessary event is one that must happen. In this sense (which Mill considers ¬in common use”), necessity ¬implies irresistibleness.” But this is due merely to ¬an effect of the associations with a word.” As Mill makes clear, causation does not tell us what must happen. This ¬is a mere illusion.” It uses explanations of what has happened to make predictions about what will tend to happen in the future.

Mill articulates a different theory of causality as applied to human actions, which he terms ¬Philosophical Necessity.” By this is meant ¬uniformity of order, and capability of being predicted.” While ¬whatever is about to happen, will be the infallible result of the causes which produce it,” Philosophical Necessity merely asserts causal tendencies and the predictability of uniform sequences.” In a self-professedly ¬anti-ontological" work, Mill indeed makes no grand ontological claims:

The Law of Causation, the recognition of which is the main pillar of inductive science, is but the familiar truth, that invariability of succession is found by observation to obtain between every fact in nature and some other fact which has

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 838.
32 This is the "true necessitarian doctrine.” Mill, Logic, p. 840.
preceded it; independently of all considerations respecting the ultimate mode of
production of phenomena, and of every other question regarding the nature of
‗Things in themselves.‘

Correctly conceived, the doctrine called Philosophical Necessity is simply this:
that, given the motives which are present to an individual‘s mind, and given
likewise the character and disposition of the individual, the manner in which he
will act might be unerringly inferred; that if we knew the person thoroughly, and
knew all the inducements which are acting upon him, we could foretell his conduct
with as much certainty as we can predict any physical event.

If necessity means more than this abstract possibility of being foreseen; if it means
any mysterious compulsion, apart from simple invariability of sequence, I deny it
as strenuously as any one in the case of human volitions, but I deny it just as much
of all other phenomena.

Laura Snyder usefully summarises Mill‘s position: ‘experience can show us what
does happen, but not what must happen.’ Prediction and foretelling do not amount to a
necessary compulsion of effects by causes because ‘there is nothing in causation but
invariable, certain, and unconditional sequence,…[and] mere constancy of succession.’

In the theory of Philosophical Necessity—which wrestles with the empirico-naturalist
problem of admitting the causation of human nature—we detect the germ of Mill‘s theory of

34 Mill, Logic, pp. 326–327. Mill elaborates this point: ‘when in the course of this inquiry I speak of the cause of
any phenomenon, I do not mean a cause which is not itself a phenomenon; I make no research into the ultimate
or ontological cause of anything…the causes with which I concern myself are not efficient, but physical causes.
They are causes in that sense alone, in which one physical fact is said to be the cause of another.’
(Chicago: Open Court, 2004/1748), p. 131: ‘and it seems certain, that, however we may imagine we feel a
liberty within ourselves, a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even
where he cannot, he concludes in general, that he might, were he perfectly acquainted with every circumstance
of our situation and temper, and the most secret springs of our complexion and disposition. Now this is the very
essence of Necessity, according to the foregoing doctrine.’
36 Mill, Hamilton, p. 467. As will be explained below, Mill saw that this distinction was ‘of supreme importance
in a practical aspect.’ Emphasis added.
37 Snyder, Reforming Philosophy, p. 111, p. 115: ‘Mill claimed that the law of causation does not involve any
type of necessity.’
38 Mill, Logic, p. 837.
self-formation. In the passage below, he uses the theory of causality to support the idea, contra Owen, that the individual is both a causal product and a causal force:

[T]he doctrine of the Causation of human actions, improperly called the doctrine of Necessity, affirms no mysterious nexus, or overruling fatality: it asserts only that 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.  

**Causation as Tendency**

Mill wants to construct an empiricist-naturalist theory of causality that does not conflict with what he terms our “feeling of freedom.” As Ted Honderich has noted, this is hardly an original enterprise. Before we reach the problem of how desires are formed and subsequently cause actions, it is important to consider Mill’s argument that the very idea of causation itself is chronically misunderstood in determinist discourse.

Hume provides the starting point for Mill’s position. While Hobbes affirms the necessity of every act of “will” in a causal chain, Hume asserts only the probability. Hume’s eloquent and concise elucidation of ‘probabilistic’ causation so closely resembles Mill’s that it is worth quoting at length to clarify the concept:

> When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in

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40 Ibid., pp. 837–839. See also Snyder, *Reforming Philosophy*, p. 115ff.
fact, follow the other. The impulse of one billiard-ball is attended with motion in the second. This is the whole that appears to the outward senses. The mind feels no sentiment or inward impression from this succession of objects: Consequently, there is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, any thing which can suggest the idea of power or necessary connection.42

Hume’s theory of causality is concisely summarised by J.L. Mackie:

1. Causation in the objects, so far as we know, is only regular succession.
2. Necessity is in the mind, not in objects.
3. The simple view of objects gives us no idea of power or necessary connection, i.e., no knowledge of one object on its own allows causal inference to another object.43

While Hume expresses liberty as a “power” rather than an absence of restraint, he holds, as Hobbes did a century before him, that human freedom does not apply to the processes forming motives, desires or volitions—only to actions. In An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Hume articulates this position. “By liberty, then, we can only mean a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will; that is if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may.”44 Similarly to Hobbes, then, for Hume the will is already determined before freedom becomes an applicable category. Mill must move beyond Hume if he is to repudiate the determinism of Hobbes, Bentham and Owen.

The complexities of Mill’s overall conception of causation need not be fully explored to appreciate his debt to Hume.45 Mill’s theory of causality makes at least three important claims of relevance to the place of humans in the natural world:

42 Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, VII, Part I, p. 103
44 Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, p. 131. As in Hobbes’s model, there can be liberty of action, but not of volition, in the sense that volition, like any physical event, must have a cause.
1. Effects never come but through antecedent causes.

2. A cause never inexorably necessitates its effect.

3. Effects are rarely the result of a single causal phenomenon.

Echoing, but not acknowledging, Hume in the *System of Logic* Mill argues that causation, applied to Ethology in this case, is a theory of tendencies, not necessities:

It is, however, (as in all cases of complex phenomena) necessary to the exactness of the propositions, that they should be hypothetical only, and affirm tendencies, not facts. They must not assert that something will always, or certainly, happen; but only that such and such will be the effect of a given cause, so far as it operates uncounteracted. It is a scientific proposition, that bodily strength tends to make men courageous, not that it always makes them so; that an interest on one side of a question tends to bias the judgment; not that it invariably does so; that experience tends to give wisdom; not that such is always its effect. These propositions, being assertive only of tendencies, are not the less universally true because the tendencies may be frustrated.  

*Causal Countenance*

Here, Mill introduces the idea of counteracting causes. Mill argues that a given cause will produce its effect only "if nothing prevents,” that is, if no other causal force interferes. He wants to show that our scientific explanations reveal tendencies from which reliable predictions can be inferred, but not necessities that must eventuate. Properly understood,” Philosophical Necessity asserts simply that everything that happens, happens causally. However, again criticising the endemic misuse of the term “necessity,” Mill argues that this amounts to nothing more than the view that all events have causes, and that causes tend to produce their known effects insofar as they are not counteracted by other causal factors. In the case of human actions this has important ramifications:

47 Ibid., p. 839.
48 We are led into absurdity if the reverse were true; if induction reveals causal necessity (rather than causal tendency) its predictions would be infallible.
When we say that all human actions take place of necessity, we only mean that they will certainly happen if nothing prevents… The causes, therefore, on which action depends, are never uncontrollable; and any given effect is only necessary provided that the causes tending to produce it are not controlled. That whatever happens, could not have happened otherwise unless something had taken place which was capable of preventing it, no one surely needs hesitate to admit. But to call this by the name necessity is to use the term in a sense so different from its primitive and familiar meaning, from that which it bears in the common occasions of life, as to amount almost to a play upon words.49

Mill’s theory of causation, Ryan suggests, is better understood as a theory of -tendencies,” which seeks to incorporate the complexity of causal interaction:

[A]ll causal propositions have an implicit clause to the effect that A will only be followed by B if there are no intervening causes. Thus _the cause of Jones‘ death was his being stabbed‘ may well be accepted as true, even though we should certainly not subscribe to any such general statement as _stabbing invariably precedes death._50

To say that Jones‘ death was caused by stabbing is to say that Jones probably would not have died had he not been stabbed. Stabbing is merely the event without the occurrence of which Jones would probably not have died. Thus, according to Mackie, when we say _X caused Y_ we mean →X occurred and Y occurred and in the circumstances, Y would not have occurred if X had not._51

To say that one event caused another event, therefore, is simply to say that the subsequent event can be explained, in full or in part, by the occurrence of the previous event.

However, in the misleading way in which it is popularly employed, _necessity_ implies a much stronger connection between cause and effect. It asserts that causes compel or

49 Mill, _Logic_, p. 839.
50 Alan Ryan, _J.S. Mill_ (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 78. Skorupski provides a similar example to highlight Mill’s argument that there can never be an inexorable (necessary) connection between a cause and an effect because no two cases are exactly the same. -say that the tyre punctured because I drove over a broken bottle, or that the prime minister’s resignation caused the government’s collapse. There is no _phenomenon_ which is _invariably_ followed by that puncture: since no other puncture is _that_ puncture.” Skorupski, _John Stuart Mill_, p. 177.
51 Mackie, _The Cement of the Universe_, p. 37. See also Mill, _Logic_, pp. 327–328: _if a person eats of a particular dish, and dies in consequence, that is, would not have died if he had not eaten of it, people would be apt to say that eating of that dish was the cause of his death_.

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necessitate their effects, so that where a given cause is present, its effect invariably must follow. Mill contends that as the human condition is so irrevocably complex, there is always an interruption to the causal sequence, such as a new desire or a new environmental antecedent. The exact conditions present in the observed case _event A caused event B_ might not be precisely the same the next time A occurs, therefore there is insufficient evidence for the stronger inductive generalisation _A always produces B_. The correct formulation in Mill’s model is _A tends to produce B_. The complexity of the causal field—especially in moral psychology, _that most complex of all studies_—rules out any claim to certainty. In Mackie’s view, _we do not always require that an individual cause should be sufficient as well as necessary in the circumstances for its effect._

Relating to the causation of human actions, Mill’s theory of tendencies systematises the gamut of experienced sequential effects but does not absolutely delineate the precise conditions for the structure of future causal sequences. Instead, Mill highlights the likelihood of intervening and counteracting causes. Mill’s theory of causation involves a collection of data and subsequent inferences demonstrating that when A was previously observed B always followed. This does not entail the stronger proposition, based upon the observation of the unerringly uniform sequence A→B, that we know the precise conditions under which that sequence must always and necessarily occur. In other words, it is possible that there may be a more complex sequence in which A occurs but, due to causal interaction or countenance, B does not. Or perhaps we have not yet ascertained all the prevailing causal influences of which A might be a necessary, but not a sufficient component in producing B.

53 _It would indeed be vain to expect (however completely the laws of the formation of character might be ascertained) that we could know so accurately the circumstances of any given case as to be able positively to predict the character that would be produced in that case.”* See Mill, *Logic*, pp. 863–895.
55 This is not to equate causation with uniformity of sequence. This important distinction is explained in note 68, p. 68 of this thesis.
Mill emphasises the inherent difficulties in achieving cognizance of all counteracting and causally significant phenomena. John Skorupski perceptively observes this provision for interaction and countenance in Mill’s distinction between tendency and necessity and its relevance to Mill’s moral psychology:

A tendency law states that one phenomenon is causally dependent on others, but only under certain boundary conditions, which are not precisely spelt out. They are left in the form of a *ceteris paribus* clause. The law may specify exactly the functional dependence of one variable on others, but it does not specify exactly the conditions under which that function holds. So the effect expected when only the tendency law is taken into account may be nullified by the operation of another law which governs variations in the boundary conditions of the first.56

For these reasons, ―axioms‘ about human motives are only tendency laws.”57 In Mill’s words, there is no ―mysterious compulsion” exerted by a cause on its effect, as Owen, Hobbes and Bentham mistakenly believed.58

The error, Mill thinks, is to introduce an irresistible, inexorable compelling force to causal tendencies. In excoriating the proclivity for free-will metaphysicians to ascend into the ontological to locate the highest ―efficient” cause for existence itself,59 Mill writes that ―[t]he notion of causation is deemed, by the schools of metaphysics most in vogue at the present moment, to imply a mysterious and most powerful tie, such as cannot, or at least does not, exist between any physical fact and that other physical fact on which it is invariably consequent, and which is properly termed its cause.”60

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56 Skorupski, *John Stuart Mill*, p. 266.
57 Ibid., p. 270.
59 Ibid., p. 836, pp. 326–327.
60 Ibid., pp. 326–327. Mill is resolutely not prepared to ascend to that higher realm—incorporating fuzzy ideas about “the inherent constitution of things.” Instead he reaffirms that by cause he means physical cause, and by effect, he means physical effect. “The only notion of a cause, which the theory of Induction requires, is such a notion as can be gained from experience.” Mill asserts that “when… I speak of the cause of any phenomenon, I do not mean a cause which is not itself a phenomenon.”
Modern social science terminology perhaps captures this distinction even more accurately. In contemporary sociology, this distinction is expressed as a difference between "deterministic" and "probabilistic" perspectives. As Harvard Professor of Sociology Stanley Lieberson explains, the deterministic outlook on causation "posits that a given factor, when present, will lead to a specified outcome." The "probabilistic perspective," however, "is more modest in its causal claim, positing that a given factor, when present, will increase the likelihood of a specified outcome."\(^{61}\) Mill can be understood as advocating a "probabilistic" conception of causality.

Emphasising "Tendencies"

Mill came to emphasise the significance of this important distinction in later editions of the *System of Logic*. The first two editions of the *Logic* (and final pre-publication MSS), expound a subtly different theory: "To certain facts, certain facts always do, and as we believe, always will, succeed."\(^{62}\) However, in the 1851 third edition of the *System of Logic* Mill makes a subtle yet significant amendment, which is retained in all subsequent editions: "To certain facts, certain facts always do, and, as we believe, will continue to, succeed."

Here Mill is seen refining the theory of universal causation to emphasise the distinction between tendency and necessity, between does and always will. Claims asserting a causal tendency are generalisations based upon the observed record of phenomenon *A* (the cause) uniformly and unerringly producing phenomenon *B* (the effect). This is a generalisation from experience, a simple induction. But in the first two editions of the *Logic* (1843 and 1846) and in the complete extant MSS (1843), Mill’s claim is much stronger: if *B* is observed unerringly to follow *A*, we can infer that *B* always will follow *A*.

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\(^{61}\) Emphasis added. Lieberson elaborates: "When we say ‘If *X*₁, then *Y*,’ we are making a deterministic statement. When we say ‘The presence of *X*₁ increases the likelihood or frequency of *Y*,’ we are making a probabilistic statement." Stanley Lieberson, "Small N's and Big Conclusions: An Examination of the Reasoning in Comparative Studies Based on a Small Number of Cases," *Social Forces*, Vol. 70, No. 2, 1991, pp. 307–320, p. 309.

In 1851 Mill makes a revision showing that the groundwork for his theory of character self-development is in fact ensconced within his idea of causation. To assert the uniformity of causation—as Mill does in every edition of the *Logic*—is to claim that there must be a physical cause for every physical event. *Whatever happens will be the effect of causes.* However, in the 1851 edition of the *Logic* Mill explicitly argues that this does not entail that every cause *necessitates* an effect. The law of the uniformity of causation is a basic presumption that enables an inductive explanation of phenomena from which scientific theories of nature and society can be deduced. But the grounding for predictive thinking is not absolute or unerringly accurate. However invariable the causal sequence $A \rightarrow B$, the presence of $A$ never necessarily entails the subsequent presence of $B$. There is a good chance that, based upon past observations, $A$ really will produce $B$. Mill asserts that this is highly probable and is thus a reliable predictor, even if $A$ does not *necessitate* $B$.

Here we can detect more evidence of a possible development in Mill’s thinking. In the 1851 edition of the *Logic* (and in all subsequent editions) Mill states:

> For every event there exists some combination of objects or events, some given occurrence of circumstances, positive and negative, the occurrence of which is always followed by that phenomenon.

As Mackie, Ryan and Skorupski explain, this is a retrospective statement; it simply says that when $A$ was detected, $B$ always followed. Mill thinks that this is a sufficient empirical

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64 “[T]here is a principle implied in the very statement of what Induction is; an assumption with regard to the course of nature and the order of the universe; namely, that there are such things in nature as parallel cases; that what happens once, will, under a sufficient degree of similarity of circumstances, happen again, and not only again, but as often as the same circumstances recur. This, I say, is an assumption, involved in every case of induction. …The universe, so far as known to us, is so constituted, that whatever is true in any one case, is true in all cases of a certain description; the only difficulty is, to find what description…. [T]he proposition that the course of nature is uniform, is the fundamental principle, or general axiom, of Induction.” Mill, *Logic*, pp. 306–307.
65 Nor is observed uniformity of sequence *precisely* the same as “cause.” Mill, *Logic*, p. 338ff. See also Ryan, *J.S. Mill*, p. 78; Skorupski, *John Stuart Mill*, p. 177, p. 270.
observation from which we can induce the generalisation, \( A \) tends to produce \( B \). However, the original MSS and first two published editions of the Logic read differently:

For every event there exists some combination of objects or events, some given occurrence of circumstances, positive and negative, the occurrence of which will always be followed by that phenomenon.\(^{67}\)

These are substantive, and not merely lexical, changes. To say that one phenomenon is always followed by another phenomenon is to say that when observed, the antecedent phenomenon always produced a consequent phenomenon. To say that phenomenon \( A \) will always be followed by phenomenon \( B \) is to go beyond the realm of experience altogether.\(^{68}\)

Doing so, Mill states in the later authoritative editions of the Logic, invites a tendency falsely to ascribe some mystical tie between the causal and resultant phenomena.

\(^{67}\) Mill, Logic, p. 327. See textual note \( k \rightarrow k \).

\(^{68}\) This would be akin to generalising from the case of a fatal stabbing the inductive proposition stabbing always precedes death, or stabbing always causes death. Both statements are obviously false; death requires additional phenomena, such as damage to vital organs or blood loss. See Ryan, J.S. Mill, pp. 77–79. It is critical to note that Mill is not claiming that observed uniformity of sequence alone constitutes causation; in fact, he explicitly rejects this position. In the System of Logic Mill considers Thomas Reid’s objection that the observation night invariably follows day entails the false proposition that day causes night. Mill states that irreversible sequence...is not synonymous with causation, unless the sequence, besides being invariable, is unconditional, that is, that the process would be invariable under all changes in circumstances. (Alternatively, a conditional phenomena follows only if certain other antecedents exist.) Mill insists that for an event to be considered a cause it must produce its known effect regardless of other causal influences. This does not entail the view that causes have a compelling force on their effects, nor that the sequence itself will always exist. To elevate observed uniformity of sequence to causal status requires that the sequence is unconditional—that the antecedent (which can be a confluence of events and absences) is sufficient to produce its known cause regardless of, or without recourse to, other causal phenomena. The existence of the sun...and there being no opaque medium in a straight line between that body and the part of the earth where we are situated, are the sole conditions; and the union of these, without the addition of any superfluous circumstance, constitutes the cause. This is what writers mean when they say that the notion of cause involves the idea of necessity. If there be any meaning which confessedly belongs to the term necessity, it is unconditionalness. That which is necessary, that which must be, means that which will be, whatever supposition we may make in regard to all other things. The succession of day and night evidently is not necessary in this sense. It is conditional on the occurrence of other antecedents. That which will be followed by a given consequent when, and only when, some third circumstance also exists, is not the cause, even though no case should ever have occurred in which the phenomenon took place without it. In other words, taken together the sun, the position and rotation of the earth, and the absence of various phenomena are sufficient in themselves to produce the phenomena day. Therefore although Ryan’s stabbing—death example and Mill’s night—day example are certainly both insufficient causal pictures, they are also logically distinct: in Mill’s terminology, stabbing conditionally causes death; night is superfluous (irrelevant) in the production of day. The idea of necessity, then, is reduced in Mill’s analysis to sufficiency for producing a known cause, but not for compelling it. In any case, as Mill consistently avers, the development of human character is so complex that we can never accurately observe or tally the entire causal sequence and therefore can never assume that a particular set of circumstances will always produce a particular mode of character development (no matter how uniform the sequence appears). Put simply, we could never deduce with confidence that we have observed the complex sum of causes affecting and shaping the development of character. Mill, Logic, pp. 338–342, p. 334.
Mill argues that this is a fallacious inference. It attributes a dubious metaphysical power to the observed causal relationship and does not take into account the complexity of observed phenomena, or the concurrent, interactive and counteracting influences operating within the causal web. The causal processes of the laboratory do not always reflect intricate and nebulous real-life conditions. In reality, "all causes are liable to be counteracted in their effects by one another," and we can never be sure that we have ascertained the sum of every causal force at a given instance.\footnote{Mill, Logic, p. 334. See also Mill, Logic, Book III, chapter X, —Of the Plurality of Causes; and of the Intermixture of Effects,” pp. 434–453.} If \( A \) always does produce \( B \) when observed we cannot infer that \( A \) always will produce \( B \) in the future.\footnote{Ibid., p. 338. This is true only "as long as the present constitution of things endures.” As will be explained, Mill thinks it is impossible to be sure that the two cases are identical. The complexity of causation is explained in Mill, Logic, p. 334ff.} There may be a causal interaction in which event \( A \) is counteracted by event \( C \) and expected event \( B \) never happens. Causal phenomena are not isolated; they interact with, combine, overpower and are subsumed within other causal structures.

This problem of prediction and counteraction is endemic to inductive theorising. Can we infer what will happen from what has happened? Suppose an experiment were devised in which one-hundred crystal vases were dropped onto a concrete block from a height of ten metres. It would surely be a reasonable prediction that the vases will smash. This proposition can be falsified by experience: the proposition is falsified if a single vase fails to shatter. However, supposing one-hundred vases are dropped and they all break, this does not necessarily mean the 101\textsuperscript{st} vase will also shatter.\footnote{In Mill’s terminology, dropping a crystal vase onto a concrete block from a significant height is a "conditional” antecedent to the vase breaking. One imagines a myriad of contributing factors, such as the fragility and thickness of the vase, the angle of the concrete surface, the precise part of the vase that impacts the ground, the density of the concrete, and the velocity of the wind at the particular time the vase is dropped.} But this is largely a moot point. Mill is not claiming that induction cannot guide prediction. While we cannot know with certainty that every vase will break when dropped (causes do not necessitate their effects), empirical evidence suggests that the proposition _the vase will break_ is a much stronger prediction than
_the vase will not break._ The former proposition is supported by the evidence of one-hundred confirmed tests; the proposition that it will not break is not supported by any (assuming the vases break every time). Predictive claims can be evidentially strong without implying causal necessity. The strictly correct position is that the glass _always does_ break, not that is _always will._

**Explanation and Prediction**

To press Mill on this point it is useful to go beyond the account of Philosophical Necessity in the Logic. In An Examination of William Hamilton’s Philosophy (1865) Mill elaborates his position. Mill wants to show that there is a significant distinction between an explanatory and a predictive theory—even if the predictive theory is based upon the explanatory.

In *Hamilton*, Mill suggests a strict distinction between these two classes of theory, conveying the discrepancy in certainty between explanation and prediction. Predictive theories are always less reliable than explanatory theories. Moreover, the explanatory theory upon which the inductive predictive theory is based, by virtue of its being explanatory, is retrospective. In elaborating this distinction Mill directly addresses the problem of volition and causation, affirming a naturalistic and probabilistic conception of causality:

> 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 phenomenon moral or physical; and I condemn, accordingly, the word Necessity as applied to either case. All I know is, that it always _does._

As Mill directly attacks Owen, William Hamilton and determinist psychologies generally in the same texts on which the above exegesis is based, we can infer that Mill is attempting to

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72 The third claim Mill would allow is that _the vase always will break, ceteris paribus—all other circumstances being the same._ This is largely a re-wording of the first claim, that vase _always does_ break.
73 For a cogent and detailed treatment of Mill’s views on prediction, and his engagement with the intuitionist William Whewell on this issue see Snyder, *Reforming Philosophy*, pp. 167–183.
provide a methodological justification for his idea of character self-development. Necessity —correctly conceived,” writes Mill in his *Examination of William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, admits the causal structure of the universe, of which humans are merely one component, while leaving room for meaningful choices and self-determining behaviour. Given that the veracity of induction depends upon the implicit acceptance of the law of the uniformity of causation, it is perhaps disingenuous for Mill to dilute the causal implications of the kind of explanatory foundation upon which the very possibility of Millian Moral Science depends.

The significant point, however, is that Mill wants to show that his idea of causation is *not* comparable to any of the categories of determinism and fatalism outlined in Figure 2 and in Chapter One. But neither does Mill subscribe to the idea that humans possess a capacity for volition which is beyond and impervious to natural causation, as free-will theorists such as William Hamilton contend.

**Conclusion**

Mill tries to redefine the connection between cause and effect so that universal causation is compatible with freedom as self-development. The 1851 and all subsequent editions of the *System of Logic* produce the following claims emphasised in this chapter:

1. The word “necessity” carries with it misleading associations.

2. All events are the result of causes.

3. Induction provides a powerful explanation for causal relationships. It gives reliable causal *explanations* for existing or observed phenomena.

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76 Nevertheless, for the argument that neither universal causation nor uniformity of sequence entails causal necessity, see Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 4–5. Van Inwagen also argues, against Mill and Hume, that autonomy is incompatible with determinism. This forces him to accept a free-will view of autonomy and to reject determinism altogether. See p. 223 for a concise summary of his logic.
4. These observations can be used to make accurate predictions. If phenomenon $A$ always does produce phenomenon $B$ when observed, then it is reasonable and legitimate to infer that $A$ will tend to produce $B$ in the future, with one caveat:

5. Invariance of sequence does not entail necessity (―unconditionalness‖) of sequence. While causation is indeed something stronger than mere observed uniformity, causes do not compel their effects, which, in any case, are always liable to countenance and interference from other causal phenomena.

6. There is a tendency, but not a necessity, for causes to produce their effects.

7. Moral psychology is complex; there are almost always counteracting causal processes determining human action. Yet,

8. we can still make robust claims about the importance and possibility of self-development.

While in early editions of the *Logic* Mill makes the strong claim that causes necessitate their effects, from 1851 he either subscribed to a different view, or he corrected ambiguities in the text which conflicted with the view that he held all along. Mill dilutes the causal relationship $A \rightarrow B$ from $A$ necessitates $B$ to $A$ tends to produce $B$ (or, more strictly still, $A$ has always produced $B$ when tested, so we can infer that it will tend to produce it in the future, *ceteris paribus*). To adopt Lieberson’s terminology, it appears that in 1851 Mill explicitly sought to extirpate the sections of the *Logic* which appeared erroneously to assert the necessity of causal sequences in order to emphasise the distinction between ∼deterministic” and ∼probabilistic” causation he had discovered in 1826, when, he reports in the *Autobiography*, he first saw how the determinism problem might be overcome.78

Mill utilised this theory of ∼probabilistic” causation in constructing a Moral Science, which, as the next three chapters will demonstrate, purports to show how moral character itself is a causal force and not merely a passive entity. In so doing, Mill essentially rejects the

terms on which the free-will/determinism debate is conducted. The determinist and free-will theorists Mill examines fail to understand that causation implies no necessary link between causes and effects. According to Mill, by assuming that causality involves such a *necessary* nexus, thinkers on both sides of the debate commit a common error.\(^{79}\)

In trying to reconcile self-development with causation Mill is making his first argument against the determinism of Owen, Hobbes and Bentham. Mill's probabilistic theory of causality is the locus within which his idea of self-development is based. The theory that causes *tend to produce* their previously observed effects, while not *necessitating* them has obvious implications for Owen's theory that character is inexorably determined—necessitated—by external environmental factors. Mill's probabilistic theory of causality can be interpreted, in part, as his first argument against determinism because it increases, as compared with Owen's restrictive deterministic model, the scope for moral self-development. The next chapter will show how this provides the epistemological foundation from which Mill attempts to liberate the moral agent from the environmental determinism of Owen and the psychological determinism of Bentham.

[A]dmitting human actions to be necessary, was deemed inconsistent with every one's instinctive consciousness, as well as humiliating to the pride and even degrading to the moral nature of man.


…fatalism, or in other words, submission to the pressure of circumstances.

Mill, —Colridge,” 1840.

This chapter reconsiders Mill's ideas of self-formation and character development as they are developed in his philosophical dialogue with the politics and psychology of Robert Owen and Jeremy Bentham. Mill's critical engagement with Owen's and Bentham's determinism is conducted on essentially utilitarian ground, rather than by appeals to the foggy Romantic notion of individuality with which Mill has been associated. In his critique of Owen, most thoroughly formulated in Mill's two epistemic tomes, *A System of Logic* (1843) and *An Examination of William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865), Mill makes a distinction, occasionally in an opaque way, between actual coercion and the feeling that one is coerced. Mill focuses on the psychological effects of Owenite determinism, arguing that by propagating a false psychology of environmental determinism it inculcates a feeling of futility and powerlessness, quashing the fragile, yet valuable desire for moral striving and self-improvement. Mill argues that this erroneous view of necessity has —operative force”
over our emotions, ultimately encouraging acquiescence to authority. Environmental determinism therefore leads directly into moral-political despotism. This second argument against determinism relies heavily on Mill’s conception of probabilistic causality examined in Chapter Two.

The second aim of this chapter is to recover an element of Mill’s argument against Owen and Bentham that has been neglected in the scholarly literature. In criticising Owen, Mill on several occasions remarks of the “depressing and paralysing influence” of determinist psychologies. Deterministic views on human nature impart a double oppression. First, they are a source of great anxiety and pain to its adherents. Second, Owen’s determinism—the guiding pedagogic philosophy of the Institute for the Formation of Character at New Lanark—has a paralysing effect on conduct.” By teaching that moral self-improvement is impossible, deterministic theories of human nature such as Bentham’s and Owen’s lead to a “feeling” of fatalism, thereby promoting moral stagnation and passivity. Determinism, charges Mill, is a self-fulfilling theory.

“Confounding Causation with Fatalism”

Mill reports that the questions of natural causation and determinism “weighed like an incubus on my existence” during his debilitating “mental crisis” of 1826–27. His eventual recovery was partly facilitated by the epiphany, recorded in his Autobiography, that universal causation does not equate uniformity of sequence with necessity of sequence. Mill emerged

5 Mill, *Autobiography*, pp. 175–176. The fact that Mill refers explicitly to Owen in the formulation of his own idea of autonomy is significant, for in his *Autobiography* he reports that after 1840 he has “no further mental changes to tell of.” This implies that his conceptions of autonomy and character were consolidated well before his later essays were even conceived.
from his depression realising that he was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or a stone.”

He reports that he had discovered that the individual is not a mere passive physical object, unable to exert any influence over his or her moral development. At this time he began conceptualising the *System of Logic*: these observations formed the base of his chapter on the causation of human actions, entitled “Of Liberty and Necessity.”

Mill had detected an important distinction in the theory of causality as applied to human actions. Character development was, as Owen had argued, determined wholly by environmental factors, but Mill saw that the individual’s desires, tastes and aspirations were a part of that environment: the impressions and actions of human beings are not solely the result of their present circumstances, but the joint result of those circumstances and of the characters of the individuals.”

The individual’s character, Mill reasoned, is a powerful causal force: our conduct has on the average many times more effect on the fate of such of us as are not under the control of other people, than all other circumstances put together.”

This realisation had an empowering influence on Mill’s own moral development.

These sentiments, recorded piecemeal in Mill’s *Autobiography* and correspondence, were in fact first formulated in the *System of Logic*. The troubled determinist, Mill argued in direct opposition to Owen, ought not to despair at the apparent pervasiveness of natural causation and environmental antecedents. For moral character is formed for and by the individual. The individual exerts a causal influence on his or her environment, of which the individual’s moral character is itself a constituent part. A power of self-formation,”

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8 Ibid., p. 177.
9 A consistent naturalist must make this concession.
therefore, is interwoven in the very fabric of one’s personal environment.\textsuperscript{13} Mill makes the case in his two epistemological treatises, drawing on his argument explained in Chapter Two regarding the misleading associations produced by the error of confounding Causation with Fatalism”:

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.\textsuperscript{14}

His character is formed by his circumstances (including among these his particular organization); but his own desire to mould it in a particular way, is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least influential…. We are exactly as capable of making our own character, if we will, as others are of making it for us.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{[N]ot only our conduct, but our character, is in part amenable to our will. …[W]e can, by employing the proper means, improve our character; and…if our character is such that while it remains what it is, it necessitates us to do wrong, it will be just to apply motives which will necessitate us to strive for its improvement, and so emancipate ourselves from the other necessity.}\textsuperscript{16}

Mill’s argument for the inherent possibility of self-development, based upon a probabilistic conception of causality, can be criticised on at least four fronts. First, although Mill does plausibly describe how the agent exerts \textit{some} power over moral development, he produces no reasons as to why we should accept his much stronger claim that our aspirations and long-sighted ideals are \textit{exactly} as powerful a causal force in the shaping of moral development as environmental or innate psychological influences. Second, and more problematic for Mill, the Owenites claimed that \textit{since} the will to alter our own character is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Mill, \textit{Logic}, p. 842.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 936.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 840.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Mill, \textit{Hamilton}, p. 466.
\end{itemize}
given us, not by any effort of ours, but by circumstances which we cannot help; it comes to us either from external causes, or not at all.”17 The allegedly autonomous desire of the individual to alter his or her circumstances may itself be an uncontrollable antecedent, present in some and absent in others. It must be noted that Mill never satisfactorily answers this objection in empirical terms. He even admits that the Owenite position is —most true.”18 Third, the idea of —willing” to conquer desires or amend character creates an obvious tension with Mill’s naturalist moral psychology, in which there is no room for necessary, uncaused volition. Mill appears to entertain the idea of free-willing. Finally, several critics of liberalism have argued that the idea of freedom as self-formation presupposes sufficient opportunities and primary goods, and the removal of systematic inequalities of which, it is argued, political liberalism is largely ignorant.19

Determinism and the “Depressing Effect of the Fatalist Doctrine”

Without diminishing the importance of these objections, Mill’s critics have failed to examine the core of Mill’s argument. It is apparent that in dealing with Owenite determinism, Mill is not focused solely on the truth of determinism, but also on its moral and psychological effect. In particular, Mill emphasises the morally and emotionally numbing feeling of un-freedom that determinism exacerbates. Mill considers that the kind of individual who will be

18 Ibid. —If the Owenite stops here, he is in a position from which nothing can expel him.” For the view that this admission does not necessarily conflict with Mill’s theory of freedom see G.W. Smith, —Freedom and Virtue in Politics,” pp. 126–127.
19 One example is the Marxist critique of wage labour: —all the conditions of existence of modern society have become…something over which individual proletarians have no control.” Karl Marx, as quoted in Tom Bottomore, Laurence Harris, V.G. Kiernan, and Ralph Miliband (eds), A Dictionary of Marxist Thought (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 146. Engels made a similar point: —It does not occur to any Communist…to believe that…the single Bourgeois can act otherwise…than he does act.” Cited in Michael St. John Packe, The Life of John Stuart Mill (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 267. The absence of moral freedom has been affirmed from a number of critical perspectives. According to Herbert Marcuse, —true” autonomy simply does not exist in liberal societies: —freedom is still to be created even for the freest societies.” Herbert Marcuse, —Repressive Tolerance,” in R.P. Wolff, Barrington Moore, and Herbert Marcuse, A Critique of Pure Tolerance (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 87, p. 95. In a different context, Michel Foucault more elegantly denounces what he sees as the loss of meaningful agency in modern liberal societies: —the destiny of man [is] being spun before our very eyes.” The force of —destiny” (which, by definition, implies a loss of agency) is so overwhelming that —man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.” Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 416, p. 422.
oppressed by the “fatalist” idea that “there is no use in struggling” already has a desire to alter his or her own character. Mill imagines this introspective individual reflecting on his or her moral condition. He then considers the alternate determinist and indeterminist “feelings” that manifest:

1. “To think we have no power of altering our character” (Owen).
2. “To think that we shall not use our power unless we desire to use it” (Mill).

Mill emphasises the psychological consequences of these ideas, noting that they produce “a very different effect on the mind.” Determinists are led to extreme, fatalistic attitudes towards human nature by falsely ascribing to the doctrine of necessity a deterministic, rather than a probabilistic conception of causation. For Mill, this “feeling” is a product of the abuse of the term necessity, understood to imply inexorability and irresistibility. Determinism therefore receives behavioural expression through emotional reinforcement: “The application of the same term to the agencies on which human actions depend, as is used to express those agencies of nature which are really uncontrollable, cannot fail, when habitual, to create a feeling of uncontrollableness in the former also.” This is especially pernicious because “[it] is apt to be forgotten by people’s feelings, even if remembered by their understandings...[that] they are never...ruled by one motive with absolute sway, that there is no room for the influence of any other.”

This sentiment pervades the account of freedom as character self-development mooted in response to Owen and Bentham in the Logic. In the chapter “Of Liberty and Necessity” the word “feeling” and its derivatives appear twenty-four times—almost twice per

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20 Mill, *Logic*, p. 841. Owen’s strongest objection—that the desire to alter character comes from without—therefore does not strictly apply to this discussion.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.


24 Ibid.
paragraph. Rather than providing direct evidence for the existence of an inherent power of self-formation, Mill excoriates — the practical feeling...[that] exist[s] in the minds of necessitarians.” 25 Mill observes that — Necessitarians” (i.e., determinists such as Owen and Bentham) — do really in some instances suffer from those depressing consequences, which their opponents erroneously impute to the doctrine itself.” 26 There is an autobiographical element in Mill’s argument that must be disentangled. To the claim that adherents of determinism — suffer...depressing consequences,” Mill introspectively adds, — I speak from personal experience.” 27 This statement appears in the 1843 and 1846 editions of the Logic but, for reasons not readily forthcoming, was excised from all subsequent editions. The personal experience to which Mill alludes is his depressive crisis of 1826–27. The psychology of determinism became a personal issue for Mill when he came to a realisation that he had effectively been taught to think of himself as a — slave of antecedent circumstances.” Mill felt the depressing and paralysing influence of Owen’s claims that all characters had been — formed for them by agencies beyond their control.” Moral self-development, he had been taught by Bentham and James Mill, — was wholly out of their power.” Mill’s youthful mental — erisis,” and reformist political and social aims precipitated an urgent need to overcome the determinist challenge. As Mill memorably explains:

[D]uring the later returns of my dejection, the doctrine of what is called Philosophical Necessity weighed like an incubus on my existence. I felt as if I was the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances; as if the character of all persons had been formed for them by agencies beyond their control, and was wholly out of their 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; and...I said in like

25 Mill, Logic, p. 842. In this particular case, Mill is affirming that the free-will theorists have a more beneficial — practical feeling.”
26 Ibid., p. 838–839.
27 Ibid., p. 839, textual note l.
manner that it would be a blessing if the doctrine of necessity could be believed by all in respect to the characters of others and disbelieved in respect of their own.28

In this passage Mill stresses the distinction between a belief in determinist psychology and the feeling it subsequently produces.29 The feeling of being incapable of resisting one’s desires and motivations, or the values inculcated during one’s upbringing, is, according to Mill, a great sense of pain and frustration. As he argues: “We feel, that if we wished to prove that we have the power of resisting the motive, we could do so…and it would be humiliating to our pride, and (what is of more importance) paralysing to our desire of excellence, if we thought otherwise.”30 Our feelings are “revolt[ed],” when, from false determinist assumptions, we think that our characters are unalterable and that we are unable to resist their motives.31

As explained in Chapter Two, these dispositions are the product of false conceptions of causality and human nature. Reflecting again on his mental crisis, Mill briefly describes the process by which the agent is a causal influence, as well as a causal product, while simultaneously reporting on the alternately beneficial and injurious moral influences on the sentiments imparted by free-will and determinist attitudes:

I perceived, that the word Necessity, as a name for the doctrine of Cause and Effect applied to human action, carried with it a misleading association; and that this association was the operative force in the depressing and paralysing influence which I had experienced. I saw that though our character is formed by circumstances, our own desires can do much to shape those circumstances; and that what is really inspiriting and ennobling in the doctrine of freewill, is the conviction that we have real power over the formation of our own character; that our will, by influencing some of our circumstances, can modify our future habits or capabilities of willing. All this was entirely consistent with the doctrine of circumstances, or rather, was that doctrine itself, properly understood. From that

29 This passage does not focus on the actual ‘truth’ of determinism.
31 Ibid.
time I drew, in my own mind, a clear distinction between the doctrine of circumstances, and Fatalism; discarding altogether the misleading word Necessity.32

This dense passage makes a number of arguments. First, it claims that the mistaken idea of causality as necessary compulsion was a “depressing and paralysing influence” on Mill’s youthful moral development. It led him into the debilitating belief that all his efforts for social reform and moral progress were futile, at least for producing any feelings of happiness and satisfaction. Second, Mill reiterates the argument that the individual’s desires—including those for moral emancipation and improvement—can “influence” the environmental circumstances which form and shape character development. Character is a product of environmental forces, but the individual’s desire for improvement is one of those forces. Third, free-will metaphysics, while philosophically indefensible, at least encourages moral striving by instilling a belief in the agent’s own unique powers. Finally, the idea that the individual is a causal force and a causal product, Mill asserts, is “perfectly consistent” with the System of Logic’s Law of Universal Causation—the doctrine of Philosophical Necessity outlined in Chapter Two.

Two of these arguments make important claims regarding the effect, rather than the truth, of determinist and free-will doctrines. In evaluating the markedly different “practical effect” of free-will and determinist theories of mind (both of which he rejects), Mill excoriates the stifling and degrading psychological impact of determinism. Fatalism, Mill’s catch-word for true causal determinism and Owen’s misunderstanding of Necessity, is a “paralysing influence” on the sentiments. Its doctrinal adoption invites “depressing

consequences.” In directly attacking Owen, the *Logic* echoes the language Mill used in his *Autobiography* to describe his own depression:

A fatalist believes, or half believes (for nobody is a consistent fatalist), not only that whatever is about to happen, will be the infallible result of the causes which produce it, (which is the true necessitarian doctrine), but moreover that *there is no use in struggling against it*; that it will happen however we may strive to prevent it. Now, a necessitarian, believing that our actions follow from our characters, and that our characters follow from our organization, our education, and our circumstances, *is apt to be, with more or less of consciousness on his part, a fatalist as to his own actions*, and *to believe* that his nature is such, or that his education and circumstances have so moulded his character, that nothing can now prevent him from feeling and acting in a particular way, or at least that no effort of his own can hinder it. In the words of the sect which in our own day has most perseveringly inculcated and most perversely misunderstood this great doctrine, his character is formed for him, and not by him; therefore his wishing that it had been formed differently is of no use; he has no power to alter it.

Mill does add, in keeping with his doctrine of probabilistic causality, that such fatalism is all *—a grand error.*” However, a large part of the discussion emphasises the *feeling* of paralysis and depression that theories of determinism like Owen’s impart, rather than the *—error*” of the doctrine itself.

**Determinism and Moral Paralysis**

In his *System of Logic* Mill emphasises the value of *feeling* autonomous, however coercive one’s circumstances might be. He introduces a quasi-idealist argument against Owen: by accepting the core premise of Owenite psychology that *all* character development and behavioural traits are *wholly* governed by antecedent causes one is subsequently—

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34 Snyder perhaps underestimates the role of Mill’s personal experiences in the early development of his conception of self-formation when she writes that it *may have been fuelled by this experience.*” Snyder, *Reforming Philosophy*, p. 115, n. 91. Emphasis added.
36 Ibid. *—He has, to a certain extent, a power to alter his character. Its being, in the ultimate resort, formed for him, is not inconsistent with its being, in part, formed by him as one of the intermediate agents.*”
rationally—led to submit to them. Gripped by this conviction, Mill’s fatalistic individual believes that "nothing can now prevent him from feeling and acting in a particular way, or at least that no effort of his own can hinder it [his nature]." This individual is oppressed and paralysed by the thought that every action and every mental state is inexorably predetermined. This feeling and its subsequent rationalising lead to a passive, acquiescent character, Mill argues. It is the first tragedy produced by misunderstanding Philosophical Necessity.

In his critique of William Hamilton’s free-will philosophy, Mill remarks of fatalism that "the belief in predestination has a paralysing effect on conduct." Those who fancy they can infer what God has predestined…naturally deem useless any attempt to defeat it. Because something will happen if nothing is done to prevent it, they think it will certainly happen whatever may be done to prevent it." Drawing on the idea of counteracting causes, this argument implies that characters and behaviour can be shaped by beliefs about the scope of human freedom. Those who subscribe to predestination—the most extreme form of determinism—believe that they are powerless to resist any cause or prevent any effect. As a consequence, they are less likely to struggle against circumstances they consider imperfect, unjust or morally painful.

Determinism becomes self-fulfilling by denying altogether a power of self-formation. In propagating the falsehood that human actions are wholly determined by external environmental factors, Owen’s doctrine inculcates the "depressing” belief that self-improvement is impossible. This further diminishes what limited ability we do possess to alter our character. The thrust of Mill’s argument is therefore not merely that Owenite

38 Mill, Hamilton, p. 469.
39 Ibid. This refers to "Mahomedean” fatalism. See Figure 2. Chapter Two, p. 56.
psychology is fallacious, but that it fosters a perception of futility that fundamentally changes the agent’s moral outlook.

In Mill’s view this shift in self-understanding has a deleterious impact upon the individual’s moral character, fostering an inclination towards moral stagnation. The feeling of being incapable of resisting one’s desires and motivations, or of altering the values inculcated during one’s upbringing leads, according to Mill, to an inactive and morally stationary character. Mill’s “proof” is drawn from his own experiences. He attests that we are emotionally susceptible to the paralysis wrought by determinism’s false and paralysing conception of causality that erroneously follows from the naturalist refutation of absolute free-will. Once ingrained, this powerful but misleading association—produced, in part, by the misuse of the term “necessity”—is difficult to extirpate:

Even if the reason repudiates, the imagination retains, the feeling of some more intimate connexion, of some particular tie, or mysterious constraint exercised by the antecedent over the consequent.

By positing such a “mysterious constraint” determinists such as Owen and Bentham, are fatalists in their feelings:

The associations derived from the ordinary sense of the term “necessity” will adhere to it in spite of all we can do: and though the doctrine of Necessity, as stated by most who hold it, is very remote from fatalism, it is probable that most necessitarians are fatalists, more or less, in their feelings.

Determinism is therefore a “paralysing,” as well as a “depressing” doctrine. By holding that moral character is predetermined by social structures beyond the agent’s control,

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40 Although he certainly does make that point. For example, see Mill, *Hamilton*, p. 465ff.
41 Only Devigne has come close to documenting this important argument: “When an agent comes to the realization of his own role in determining ends, the antecedent circumstances for human conduct undergo an important change. An agent’s outlook does not merely reflect but *alters* his world, so that it is the state of the individual’s mind, as part of the empirical conditions, which enables him to become a free individual.” Robert Devigne, “Cultivating the Individual and Society,” p. 95.
43 Ibid., p. 839.
determinist psychology discourages struggling against circumstances injurious to one's personal ideals or welfare. The determinist who is led into the fatalist belief—there is no use in struggling—erroneously reasons that whatever is about to happen...will happen however we strive to prevent it. This is precisely the morally paralysing influence” Mill wants to mitigate. In doing so, he casts Owen's moral psychology as both false and pernicious:

The depressing effect of the fatalist doctrine can only be felt where there is a wish to do what that doctrine represents as impossible. It is of no consequence what we think forms our character, when we have no desire of our own about forming it; but it is of great consequence that we should not be prevented from forming such a desire by thinking the attainment impracticable, and that if we have the desire, we should know that the work is not so irrevocably done as to be incapable of being altered.

Here Mill blurrs the distinction between value and fact. The last sentence (“the work is not so irrevocably done”) is a statement of fact: the individual is capable of self-altering his or her character. However, the first sentence clearly gives determinism (i.e., Owenism) a negative moral hue. Mill’s point is that to act or to think as if fatalism were true is to invite depression, anxiety and a feeling of helplessness. Ultimately, this degenerates into the worst position of all. Rational determinists become torpid and enervated moral agents because they see no use in attempting to realise their personal moral ideals. A consistent determinist is forced to accept the futility of moral struggle,” and of the desire to alter one’s circumstances and moral character.

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44 On this point Mill scholars once again underestimate the influence of Owen's moral psychology. For example, it is therefore not true that “no theory [other than James Mill's associationism] could put more stress on the importance of the environment in mental development.” William Thomas, Mill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 25.


46 Ibid., p. 841. Emphasis added, except for “is” and “feel.” This is Mill’s only real argument which might be interpreted as a refutation of Owen’s core objection to self-determination, that the desire for improvement comes from without, and is therefore externally determined. Mill’s discussion implies that the negative effects on moral striving can only wreak their damage on people who already possess a desire for self-improvement.
Bentham’s Inculcation of Fatalism

Mill’s critique is even more forcefully expressed in his attack on Bentham’s determinism. In “Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy” (1833) and “Bentham” (1838) Mill criticises the psychological effect of Bentham’s claim that all action is governed by self-interested desires to seek pleasure. As explained above, such a claim erects a serious obstacle to the possibility of autonomous, self-forming action. Without troubling to examine the deeper aspects of Bentham’s psychology, Mill turns immediately to the effect such doctrines produce on the minds and characters of those by whom it is believed. Bentham’s view of human nature posits a “vulgar” egotist who will act as the selfish interest prompts. This doctrine dulls the aspiration for personal and social development by conceiving human nature as governed by self-interest and “lower” desires. Where Owenite agents are determined by antecedent environmental circumstances, Benthamites are governed, as Bentham says, by an overweening interest in seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. In both cases, actions are conceived as compelled and determined, and therefore irresistible.

It has been well documented that Mill attacks Bentham’s view of human nature as shallow and inadequate. However, it is rarely, if ever, observed that Mill vehemently opposes its degrading and stifling influence on moral character, and that he even asserts such a conception plays a role in perverting our modes of thought. Bentham denies that the individual is a causal agent by conceiving human nature as wholly governed by a single overruling desire. Such a view produces a feeling of fatality and powerlessness in the minds

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of Bentham’s followers (here Mill is being introspective, indeed autobiographical).\textsuperscript{50} Mill strongly condemns the degrading and stunting effect wrought on our capacity for self-improvement and social progress by Bentham’s specious conception of human nature. By promulgating a determinist moral psychology, –Bentham’s writings…[are] doing very serious evil.”\textsuperscript{51}

Mill argues that romantic or intuitionist philosophers who do not accept utilitarian psychological views are therefore less affected by their degrading influences. However, utilitarian reformers like Mill are at a greater risk of imbibing Bentham’s determinism because they are sympathetic to Bentham’s political aims. To those sympathetic to utilitarianism, Bentham’s determinist moral psychology is –perverting to their whole moral nature.” \textsuperscript{52} As Mill states in –Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy” (1833), his first critical review of Bentham’s legacy, –[i]t is difficult to form the conception of a tendency more inconsistent with all rational hope of good for the human species, than that which must be impressed by such doctrines, upon any mind in which they find acceptance.”\textsuperscript{53} The possibility of self-improvement requires the repudiation of such a doctrine and the public affirmation of the capability of self-directed –moral perfection”:

[T]he power of any one to realize in himself the state of mind, without which his own enjoyment of life can be but poor and scanty, and on which all our hopes of happiness or moral perfection to the species must rest, depends entirely upon his

\textsuperscript{50} Mill, Logic, p. 839, textual note l.
\textsuperscript{51} Mill, –Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy,” p. 15.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. In the later essay –Bentham” (1838), Mill elaborated this position: –Morality consists of two parts. One of these is self-education; the training, by the human being himself, of his affections and will. That department is a blank in Bentham’s system. The other and coequal part, the regulation of his outward actions, must be altogether halting and imperfect without the first…. A moralist on Bentham’s principles may get as far as this, that he ought not to slay, burn, or steal; but what will be his qualifications for regulating the nicer shades of human behaviour, or for laying down even the greater moralities as to those facts in human life which tend to influence the depths of the character quite independently of any influence on worldly circumstances—such, for instance, as the sexual relations, or those of family in general, or any other social and sympathetic connexions of an intimate kind? The moralities of these questions depend essentially on considerations which Bentham never so much as took into the account; and when he happened to be in the right, it was always, and necessarily, on wrong or insufficient grounds.” Mill, –Bentham.” p. 98.
having faith in the actual existence of such feelings and dispositions in others, and in their possibility for himself. It is for those in whom the feelings of virtue are weak, that ethical writing is chiefly needful, and its proper office is to strengthen those feelings. But to be qualified for this task, it is necessary, first to have, and next to show, in every sentence and in every line, a firm unwavering confidence in man’s capability of virtue. It is by a sort of sympathetic contagion, or inspiration, that a noble mind assimilates other minds to itself; and no one was ever inspired by one whose own inspiration was not sufficient to give him faith in the possibility of making others feel what he feels.  

Mill argues that an individual convinced of an incapacity for free action—whether from direct physiological compulsion or external environmental antecedents—is, like the Owenite, likely to conceive of moral self-development as impossible and hopeless. The acceptance of the initial determinist premise—that the individual has no power over his character or actions—is therefore closely followed by a rationalisation into acquiescence, moral stagnation and a painful sense of helplessness. Lacking a belief in a self-directed path to virtue, the final mental state of the Benthamite psychological determinist is "despondency and gloom":

Upon those who need to be strengthened and upheld by a really inspired moralist—such a moralist as Socrates, or Plato, or (speaking humanly and not theologally) as Christ; the effect of such writings as Mr. Bentham’s, if they be read and believed and their spirit imbibed, must either be hopeless despondency and gloom, or a reckless giving themselves up to a life of that miserable self-seeking, which they are there taught to regard as inherent in their original and unalterable nature.

Self-Reflection and Moral Development

By holding human nature as inherently and unalterably pleasure-seeking and self-interested, Bentham’s philosophy directly discourages self-development and moral self-evaluation. It is

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54 Mill, Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy, pp. 15–16.
55 Of course the Owenites thought only that self-improvement was impossible; the general improvement of social and moral conditions was Owen’s explicitly declared aim. As explained in Chapter One, Owen argued that all social progress must come from without, not that progress is impossible.
revealing that Bentham himself directly advises against the kind of introspective moral interrogation that Mill advocates as fundamental to self-development and well-being. In Bentham’s view, self-reflection on such matters tends only to produce acute psychological pain, in the form of self-doubt, anxiety and lack of self-esteem. In Bentham’s memorable expression, it is thus in the individual’s own self-interest not to take in hand the probe.”

Although it might prove strategically useful to know the interests and desires of others (in order to further our own), we ought not to investigate the particular compulsions which make up the “source of actions” of our own behaviour on pain of mental distress.

In stark contrast to Mill, Bentham argues that well-being is best served by not dwelling on the fact that we are creatures of pleasure, governed by self-interest. Bentham therefore advocates a form of “ignorance is bliss” by advising against introspection and self-criticism. –Self-anatomy,” he states, is likely to be painful. Bentham’s own words express with eloquence and lucidity what a paraphrased summary cannot:

By interest, a man is continually prompted to make himself as correctly and completely acquainted as possible with the springs of action by which the minds of those are determined, on whom he is more or less dependent for the comfort of his life. But by interest he is at the same time diverted from any close examination into the springs by which his own conduct is determined. From such knowledge he has not, in any ordinary shape, anything to gain,—he finds not in it any sense of enjoyment. In any such knowledge he would be more likely to find mortification than satisfaction…. [T]he more closely he looks into the mechanism of his own mind, the less of the mass of effects produced he finds referable to any of those amiable and delightful causes [he has detected in ostensibly public-minded or


58 To be fair to Bentham it must be noted that he does regard –this sort of psychological self-anatomy” as –the study which to every man has been pronounced the proper one.” Bentham makes the point that as so few virtuous or socially-motivated individuals exist, most people will discover, upon –self-anatomy,” that they are egotistically governed and thus will presumably be pained over their comparison to the virtuous. Only the virtuous will thus be disposed, by their self-interest, to take up the probe and self-diagnose their moral state. For most, however, psychological self-diagnosis yields pain.
admirable individuals]; he finds nothing, therefore, to attract him toward this study, he finds much to repel him from it…. What in this case will he do? In investigating the source of a given action, he will in the first instance set it down, the whole of it, to the account of the amiable and conciliatory, in a word, the social motives. This, in the study of his own mental physiology, will always be his first step, and this will commonly be his last. Why should he look further? why take in hand the probe? why undeceive himself, and substitute a whole truth that would mortify him, for a half truth that flatters him?\(^{59}\)

Thus to Mill, Bentham’s philosophy is destructive to self-determination. It actively discourages the level of introspection and self-reflection required for the self-formation of character:

> It will do nothing for the conduct of the individual, beyond prescribing some of the more obvious dictates of worldly prudence, and outward probity and beneficence. There is no need to expatiate on the deficiencies of a system of ethics which does not pretend to aid individuals in the formation of their own character; which recognises no such wish as that of self-culture; we may even say no such power, as existing in human nature; and if it did recognise, could furnish little assistance to that great duty, because it overlooks the existence of about half of the whole number of mental feelings which human beings are capable of, including all those of which the direct objects are states of their own mind.\(^{60}\)

> In contrast to great historical figures like Socrates, Christ, and Marcus Aurelius, Mill interpreted Bentham, however unfairly, as a teacher of acquiescence and fatalism, much like Owen. Bernard Semmel appears to come as close as any scholar to acknowledging this: by ―proclaim[ing] the hopeless view that men were inherently and unalterably dedicated to selfishness,‖ Bentham denied them the autonomy to seek virtue and excellence ―for its own sake.‖\(^{61}\)

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\(^{60}\) Mill, "Bentham," p. 98.

Free-Will and Self-Culture

Mill’s critique of the “free-will metaphysicians” also emphasises the feelings. As opposed to the depressing and stymieing consequences of Owen's and Bentham's determinism, the “free-will doctrine,” Mill believed, had fostered, especially in the younger of its supporters, a much stronger spirit of self-culture.62 Although Mill thinks they have misunderstood the essence of causation and the pervasive power of environmental factors in the formation of character, the kernel of truth contained in the free-will doctrine strengthens the feeling of autonomy and thereby encourages self-development and facilitates moral striving. While Mill suggests that Owen's and even Bentham's psychologies are closer to the truth than free-will metaphysics,63 their determinism inspires none of the values Mill considers crucial to individual well-being and social progress. Indeed, Owen’s Institute for the Formation of Character deliberately suppresses them.

As explained in Chapter Two, Mill avers that there is no “mystical tie” connecting a motive and an action, nor connecting a cause and its effect.64 Actions are never (except in some cases of mania) ruled by any one motive with such absolute sway, that there is no room for the influence of any other. The causes, therefore, on which action depends, are never uncontrollable; and any given effect is only necessary provided that the causes tending to produce it are not controlled.65 Mill wants to show, contra Owen and Bentham, that the desire to alter one’s circumstances and character is not futile. More importantly, the apparent

62 Mill, Logic, p. 842. The phrase “especially in the younger of its supporters” was excised in the 1851 edition and all subsequent editions. The replacement phrase is “in its supporters.” It seems clear that Mill is extirpating references to personal experiences—especially to his depression—as in the case of the omitted phrase “I speak from personal experience.” Mill, Logic, p. 839, textual note l.
63 Mill and the determinists share a much closer connection. See Figure 2 Chapter Two.
64 Here Mill takes aim at the determinists who misunderstand necessity with a reductio: “Those who think that causes draw their effects after them by a mystical tie, are right in believing that the relation between volitions and their antecedents is of another nature. But they should go farther, and admit that this is also true of all other effects and their antecedents. If such a tie is considered to be involved in the word necessity, the doctrine is not true of human actions; but neither is it then true of inanimate objects. It would be more correct to say that matter is not bound by necessity, than that mind is so.” Mill, Logic, p. 838. See also p. 842, Section 4, “A motive not always the anticipation of a pleasure or pain.”
65 Ibid., p. 839.
pervasiveness of social and internal tyranny need not lead us falsely to think that we have no power over character development and, consequently, over behaviour. Mill argues that breaking the determinist spell—as he did himself—can have an inspiriting and potentially empowering effect on moral self-development. The free-will theories implicitly teach empowerment and, most importantly, the value of struggling or striving. For this reason he acknowledges the psychological benefits of free-will theories, even though he considers their metaphysical claims ultimately baseless.66

The inclination to moral striving encouraged by free-will metaphysics can be psychologically beneficial. But, more importantly, it can also be a successful strategy when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds. The contrasting beliefs in either determinism or free-will produce radically different behaviours. In the determinist’s universe moral striving is futile. Characters and actions are seen as predetermined and their motives irresistible. According to the free-will perspective, however, the rational will has absolute causal power over the body and, by implication, the progress of the social condition

This point may be usefully illustrated by considering one of Mill’s rhetorical examples. He emphasises the “feeling” of powerlessness inculcated by determinist doctrines and the moral torpor they thereby produce. In making his argument, Mill calls on the probabilistic conception of causation as applied to human actions discussed in Chapter Two.

The Fatalist Sailor: Submission to Circumstance

In the System of Logic Mill argues that ideas about one’s character and moral capacities stimulated by one’s subjective commitment to either free-will or determinism have real causal power over behaviour and self-development. Mill is therefore assessing the logical

integrity as well as measuring the utility of Owen’s and Bentham’s determinist theories of character development and moral psychology.

To illustrate his case, Mill asks us to consider a sailor on a sinking ship.\textsuperscript{67} The stricken but perceptive sailor reasons that there are invariably a certain number of ships lost and people drowned at sea every year. Furthermore, there seems to be a correlation between the number of sailors and the number of drownings each year: the number of wrecked ships remains at a relatively constant percentage of the total number of ships at sea. The sailor reasonably infers that from the given number of ships \( x \) we can predict, based upon verified historical trends, that there will be \( y \) wrecks and \( z \) sailors drowned. A determinist on a sinking ship, Mill asserts, might be fooled by his metaphysical illusions into thinking that there is a compelling force in these statistics. He might reason that people must die every year in shipwrecks, his death is inevitable and there is therefore no use trying to save himself. In Mill’s words, the determinist sailor is apt to become a ―fatalist in…feelings.‖\textsuperscript{68} In this situation, the determinist sailor’s erroneously conceived causal picture operates as reality when expressed through his defeatist, fatalist behaviour.

Mill then links this discussion with his argument that the individual’s beliefs are causal influences on behaviour, which, in turn, feeds back as a causal factor in the environment which shapes moral character. The ship-wreck analogy is significant because it displays his two central objections to Owen: first, that our wishes and desires are a part of the causal environment that shapes character formation; second, that determinism is a pernicious influence, as well as a false philosophy. Owen’s mistake was therefore not in thinking that character is the product of the causal environment—Mill’s doctrine readily accepts that whatever happens, happens causally. Rather, Owen errs in inexplicably omitting from the

\textsuperscript{67} The context is Mill’s criticism of the historical determinism of H.T. Buckle.

\textsuperscript{68} Mill, \textit{Logic}, p. 839. As explained in Chapter Two, in the Millian analysis the correct inductive proof is simply that people do drown; not that they must. See also ibid., p. 936.
causal field the individual’s moral aspirations and self-reflective desires to achieve a good and excellent life. Mill clearly states in the *Logic* that these beliefs are “predominant, and almost paramount, among the agents of social progression.” By “progression” Mill means “change” and he is clear that change could be retrograde as well as progressive. In this way, beliefs about determinism and moral development become powerful causal forces in the self-development of character. The way in which we *think* of ourselves as passive causal objects or powerful autonomous actors directly shapes our *actual status* as morally coerced or self-developing individuals. As Mill states, the deformation or development of character depends to a significant degree on “the state of the speculative faculties of mankind; including the nature of the beliefs which by any means they have arrived at, concerning themselves and the world by which they are surrounded.”

The sailor resigned to going down with the sinking ship needs a wider causal picture. He ought to know that “by avoiding, to the utmost of one’s power, all the causes of an effect, one greatly increases one’s chance of avoiding the effect. And if one desires an end, one greatly increases one’s chance of obtaining it by adopting some known means.” While it is true that every year a relatively stable proportion of sailors dies at sea, Mill asks the determinist sailor to take into account the power of individuals as environmental factors in producing the very data from which we infer trends that can be used to predict the likely amount of lost sailors. Mill wants to remind the determinist sailor that the efforts of his colleagues to save themselves are indeed some of the contributing causes to the amount of people who die each year: the doomed sailor is a part of his causal environment. If no sailors attempted to swim to safety—if they were all under a misapprehension about the nature of necessity; in short, if they too were fatalists—in their feelings”—then many more people would die at sea, and the “law” explaining the proportion who tend to die each year would

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produce a higher figure. By implication, if the fatalist sailor held another, more hopeful belief, his circumstances would be, however little, modified. By thinking himself doomed by necessity to drown, as if compelled by a "superior force," the sailor, like Oedipus, is unlikely to affect his circumstances. Fatalist "feelings" are a part of the causal environment from which causal laws such as the one explaining the amount of shipwrecks are inferred:

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. If any one in a storm at sea, because about the same number of persons in every year perish by shipwreck, should conclude that it was useless for him to attempt to save his own life, we should call him a Fatalist; and should remind him that the efforts of shipwrecked persons to save their lives are so far from being immaterial, that the average amount of those efforts is one of the causes on which the ascertained annual number of deaths by shipwreck depend.71

Rational determinists think that they can do nothing to amend such tendencies and so are led into a tragic fatalist fallacy: they see no use in resisting, so they do not resist. In relation to the development of character this is both a source of psychological pain, and a negative and stifling influence on moral improvement. In his critique of William Hamilton’s free-will philosophy, Mill boldly proclaims that "we are under a moral obligation to seek the improvement of our moral character…[but w]e shall not indeed do so unless we desire our improvement."72 Thinking causal tendencies all-powerful and moral character wholly passive within the causal chain, determinists trick themselves into thinking that the desire for self-improvement Mill wishes to instil and encourage is irrational. It seems to violate their (false) idea of causal necessity.73

Finally, Mill complements this critique of fatalism as a doctrine in his essay on "Coleridge." Here again, Mill takes up the connection between self-culture and

71 Mill, Logic, p. 936.
72 Mill, Hamilton, p. 466.
73 Whereas for Mill the desire for improvement is itself a requisite means for moral improvement.
independence, and the free-will/determinism debate. He defines fatalism as “submission to the pressure of circumstances,” in this case, to the will and omnipotence of a deity. In this essay Mill makes no distinction at all between the metaphysical theory of determinism and its psychological effects: determinism is the expression of a belief in powerlessness in the face of environmental forces. Determinism is not, in this sense, an abstract metaphysical theory: it is a way of life. A determinist, Mill bluntly charges, submits to his lot. Like the sailor on the stricken ship, or Epictetus the slave, the determinist acquiesces to causal tendencies when they are perceived to exert a pressure, and thereby tightens his bonds. Determinist psychology is both the sanction and cultivator of torpidity and subjection.

Evidence for Mill’s Depression and Paralysis Model in Modern Psychology

This chapter has stressed two major points in Mill’s second argument against determinist psychology. First, Mill argues that believing in determinism brings frustration and pain. Although Mill’s evidence relies heavily on his own personal experiences, it is worth noting that there is support for this argument from other quarters. According to Daniel Gilbert, a Harvard Professor of Psychology, beliefs about one’s ability to control one’s circumstances relate directly to well-being:

[P]eople find it gratifying to exercise control—not just for the futures it buys them, but for the exercise itself…. The fact is that human beings come into the world with a passion for control, they go out of the world the same way, and research suggests that if they lose their ability to control things at any point between their entrance and their exit, they become unhappy, helpless, hopeless and depressed.

Second, beliefs about one’s capabilities and moral character are constitutive of the agent’s moral outlook. Desires and moral aspirations are components of one’s causal

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74 Mill, —Cleridge,” p. 132.
75 Daniel Gilbert, Stumbling on Happiness (London: Harper Collins, 2007), pp. 20–21. Emphasis in original. Gilbert cites several studies which he claims support this view. In one such study, it was shown that residents of a nursing home who were given responsibility to look after a house-plant were twice as likely to outlive other residents in a similar condition who were not given a plant. Gilbert argues that this evinces a desire to control and when such a desire is frustrated, unhappiness and, in extreme cases, even death can result.
circumstances. Although Mill presents only subjective evidence to support this argument (his own depressing and morally paralysing struggle with Benthamite and Owenite determinism), there is also evidence from modern psychological studies that supports Mill’s claims. Martin Seligman, a former President of the American Psychological Association, articulates a theory arising from clinical and experimental evidence called “learned helplessness.” This theory, in several crucial aspects, mirrors Mill’s claim that a feeling of powerlessness leads to depression, which in turn leads to passivity and moral stagnation.

“Learned helplessness” is a form of “attributional analysis” which maintains that how people interpret the causes of the positive and negative events they experience is an essential element in the development and maintenance of depression.76 This theory posits, like Mill’s, that beliefs about the coercive and seemingly uncontrollable forces directing one’s behaviour play an important role in the onset and severity of clinical depression.77 Seligman describes three “deficits” which a belief in uncontrollability can produce: motivational deficit, cognitive deficit and emotional deficit. These three deficits very closely resemble an inverted account of Mill’s theory of the slide from a belief in fatalism, to depression about the perceived fatality of one’s circumstances, and finally to moral passivity and stagnation:

The first is *motivational*: the helpless person makes no effort to take the steps necessary to change the outcome. The second is *cognitive* in that helpless people fail to learn the responses that could help them avoid the adverse outcomes. The third is *emotional*: learned helplessness can produce mild or severe depression.78

It is important to note that although in this case the process is inverted—the person first sees no use in struggle, then does not struggle, and is finally depressed—Seligman posits a strong connection between thinking of one’s situation as hopeless or helpless, having negative

77 Ibid., pp. 61–63.
78 Ibid., p. 62.
emotional responses to this perception and then modifying one’s behaviour as if this perception of helplessness were true.

Fiske and Taylor build on Seligman’s theory (slightly amending his terminology), arguing that it can, in fact, work in the way Mill observed. We are asked to consider a student who fails an important exam. “Depression will occur if she believes no amount of effort on her part can change the outcome. This belief in uncontrollability will, in turn, lead to unhappiness (affective deficit), no effort to study the relevant material (motivational deficit), and no success at learning it (cognitive deficit).”\(^{79}\) In this example, Fiske and Taylor chart precisely the same progression between a belief that one’s actions cannot produce a desirable outcome (as held by Mill’s fatalist sailor), the deleterious emotional effects of such a belief (Mill’s “depressing consequences”) and finally the modification of behaviour such that the outcome, whether possible or not, is made less likely by the individual’s acquiescent behaviour, seen as a direct result, in the first instance, of a belief, in Fiske and Taylor’s terms, in “uncontrollability.” Here the modern psychological theory of “learned helplessness” directly, but unknowingly, echoes Mill’s argument against the moral paralysis of Owen’s and Bentham’s determinism, first articulated in 1843. As Fiske and Taylor argue:

> When one believes that desirable outcomes are unlikely, expects undesirable outcomes to occur, and sees no way to change this situation, helplessness and depression will occur. Like the helpless individual, the depressed person experiences both cognitive and motivational deficits as a consequence of the perceived uncontrollability of outcomes. How severe the depression is and how much of a toll it takes on self-esteem depend on the attributions for the uncontrollable events…. [T]he intensity of these deficits depends on how certain one is that one cannot control one’s outcomes.\(^{80}\)


\(^{80}\) Ibid., p. 63.
The crux of learned helplessness is that when one’s efforts at control repeatedly fail, not only does one cease trying to cause that particular outcome (helplessness), but one may also actually fail to exert control in some new situation in which control is possible. In other words, people can learn to be helpless by experiencing repeated instances of lack of control.\footnote{Fiske and Taylor, \textit{Social Cognition}, p. 62. Unlike Mill, Fiske and Taylor claim that their arguments are supported by objective empirical evidence. They cite an experiment in which three groups of subjects were put into three separate rooms. -One group was subjected to loud noise that could be terminated by pressing a button. The second group was subjected to loud noise but had no control over its termination. The third group experienced no noise. In the second session of the experiment, all subjects were then exposed to noise that, unbeknownst to them, could be terminated by moving a shuttle in front of them. Although the _controllable noise_ and the _no noise_ groups quickly learned this fact, subjects in the initial uncontrollable noise condition failed to discover it, and instead listened passively to the noise. They had learned erroneously that the noise situation was something they could not control.” A similar illustration can be found in Gilbert, \textit{Stumbling on Happiness}, p. 20ff.}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Throughout a number of major texts ranging from the 1830s to the 1870s, Mill rejects determinism as a false, pernicious and ultimately tragic philosophy of "giving up."\footnote{Mill, —\textit{Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy,”} p. 16.} The example of the fatalist sailor is an exaggerated and rhetorically illustrative expression of Mill’s argument against the effects on self-development of Owenite and Benthamite determinist doctrines. The determinist sailor is led by his fatalist sentiments into thinking himself powerless to influence his circumstances. Bentham’s and Owen’s determinism inhibit people from even wanting to engage in character self-reform, even though they could succeed if they tried.\footnote{Smith, —\textit{Freedom and Virtue in Politics,”} p. 129. Smith here refers to Owen and Tocqueville, but does not mention Bentham.} Mill’s wider, more complex argument is that ordinary individuals are more likely to strive for an ideal of moral perfection if they think that they possess, or are capable of possessing, real power over the development of their moral character. In these examples Mill is more interested in the psychological effects of believing determinism to be true, than in the actual metaphysical standing of determinism, against which, it must be said, he makes little ground. This explains his remarks that the free-will metaphysicians—while wrongheaded in their metaphysics—are more inclined to promote
Millian conceptions of self-culture, whereas determinists, such as Owen and Bentham, while closer to the metaphysical mark, are anathema to it.

Self-improvement and the unique development of one’s character are among Mill’s highest goods. He argues that the self-directed pursuit of individuality is a crucial element of social and individual well-being. By casting all characters as unalterable and predetermined by antecedent circumstances, Owen’s theory of character formation directly attacks the possibility of self-improvement. Interpreting Mill’s remarks about the “paralysing effects” and “depressing consequences” of Owen’s doctrine as genuine philosophical arguments, his point is that the “feeling of moral freedom”—the feeling of being capable of modifying and improving our character—is valuable because its absence is a source of pain and its presence is a spring to moral aspiration. The next chapter shows how Mill builds a psychology upon these normative foundations that is intended to replace Bentham’s hedonistic egoism without introducing a mysterious faculty of un-caused volition.

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THE COMPLEXITY OF MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

MILL’S ‘BUNDEd DESIRES’ APPROACH

According to Geoffrey Scarre, the conceptual gulf between the theory of freedom as self-determination and the empiricist-naturalist assumption that causation is uniform in nature is a ‘fundamental cleavage’ in Mill’s thought.¹ Indeed, a number of scholars have identified a general conceptual tension between Millian self-development and naturalistic moral psychology.² How can Mill maintain a naturalistic framework—‘our bodies move according to our desires’—while simultaneously arguing that we can, in some meaningful sense, attain ‘self-mastery’ over our desires and temptations? More importantly, how is this to be achieved without introducing the metaphysical concept of ‘free-will’ Mill explicitly rejects?³ The conceptual difficulties are immediate: Mill is trying to construe humankind ‘both as natural entities and as autonomous reasoners and doers.’⁴ Mill ‘must show how causally conditioned natural objects can also be rationally autonomous agents.’⁵

Given the history of moral determinism within the British empirical tradition—as examined in Chapter One—it is clear that Mill has a difficult task in adequately formulating and defending a sphere of freedom as self-formation within a naturalist and empiricist

⁵ Ibid., p. 251.
framework. Mill’s position has been influential, but hardly successful in convincing rivals or critics. Indeed, much scholarship has focused, quite rightly, on the defects in Mill’s position.\(^6\) This chapter examines Mill’s simultaneous attempts to refute both egoism and free-will theories. Mill constructs a moral psychology that can be described as ultimately, but not comprehensively, hedonistic. Building on Mill’s argument that causality posits tendencies (not necessities), and that determinist psychologies encourage passive and acquiescent behaviour, this chapter argues that the origins of his theory of character self-development are best understood within the context of his repudiation of the egoism displayed by Bentham and Hobbes, the environmental determinism propounded by Owen, and the free-will perspective broadly represented by William Hamilton and Kant. Mill can be interpreted as reconciling the scientific realities of British empiricism with the empowering and ennobling psychological effects of free-will and romantic metaphysics.\(^7\)

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first examines Mill’s argument that in declaring that all actions are “govern[ed]” by the physiological impulse to pursue one’s immediate pleasure, Bentham misunderstands the causality of human actions and falsely restricts the scope of freedom as self-formation. This section gives the immediate context for sections two and three—the crux of this chapter—which attempt to come to terms with an unresolved problem regarding two apparently contradictory statements on moral psychology and moral freedom from Mill’s *A System of Logic* and *An Examination of William Hamilton’s...*

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Philosophy. The chapter concludes with a reflection on how Mill’s developmental approach contrasts with what Joel Kupperman terms the “snapshot” approach to moral psychology. Mill’s refusal to assess ethical decision-making as a discreet, time-bound process ultimately renders difficult direct comparisons between him and Bentham or Hobbes.

Hedonistic Egoism and Determinism

Chapter One presented evidence that Bentham subscribed to a moral psychology that can be interpreted as a form of hedonistic egoism—the view that the agent is compelled to act in a way he or she calculates, often subconsciously, to be conducive for self-interest, understood as the agent’s own immediate pleasure. Although it is important to note that scholars such as David Lyons and Fredrick Rosen have presented thoughtful and compelling objections to this interpretation of Bentham, whether or not Bentham’s moral psychology is truly egoist need not concern us here, for Mill certainly interpreted it in this way.8

According to Mill, the idea that “men’s actions are always determined by their interests” is the foundational psychological tenet of the interest-philosophy of the Bentham school.9 As Mill proclaims in A System of Logic, “[t]hat the actions of sentient beings are wholly determined by pleasure and pain, is the fundamental principle from which he

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8 Mill, “Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy,” p. 12, p. 14. Indeed, although (in accordance with Rosen’s interpretation) Mill reports that Bentham “by no means intended by this assertion [that we are governed by self-interest] to impute universal selfishness to mankind, for he reckoned the motive of sympathy as an interest,” Mill argued that Bentham himself tended to collapse this distinction and, in practice, asserted the universal predominance of self-interest in the vulgar sense.” According to Mill, “I am persuaded, from experience, that this habit of speaking of all the feelings which govern mankind under the name of interests, is almost always in point of fact connected with a tendency to consider interest in the vulgar sense, that is, purely self-regarding interest, as exercising, by the very constitution of human nature, a far more exclusive and paramount control over human actions than it really does exercise. Such, certainly, was the tendency of Mr. Bentham’s own opinions. Habitually, and throughout his works, the moment he has shown that a man’s selfish interest would prompt him to a particular course of action, he lays it down without further parley that the man’s interest lies that way; and, by sliding insensibly from the vulgar sense of the word into the philosophical, and from the philosophical back into the vulgar, the conclusion which is always brought out is, that the man will act as the selfish interest prompts.” Mill further developed this view in the later essay “Bentham,” in which he argued that the more complex and ostensibly social or sympathetic desires were reducible to simpler likings and aversions. See Mill, “Bentham,” pp. 95–96. This study is concerned with the way in which Mill perceived threats—real or constructed—to self-formation. From these texts it is clear that Mill perceived Benthamite psychology as one of these threats.

[Bentham] starts.”\textsuperscript{10} In Mill’s summary, Bentham represents the view that the individual will act as the selfish interest prompts.”\textsuperscript{11}

Furthermore, in his early essay –Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy‖—published in 1833, five years before the more widely-read essay –Bentham‖—Mill finds in Bentham the proposition –that pleasure and pain are the sole agencies by which the conduct of mankind is in fact governed, whatever circumstances the individual may be placed in, and whether he is aware of it or not.‖\textsuperscript{12} In the essay –Bentham,‖ (1838) written and published after James Mill’s death in 1836, J.S. Mill re-affirms this view:

Man is conceived by Bentham as a being susceptible of pleasures and pains, and governed in all his conduct partly by the different modifications of self-interest, and the passions commonly classed as selfish, partly by sympathies, or occasionally antipathies, towards other beings. And here Bentham’s conception of human nature stops.\textsuperscript{13}

Any other motives or desires, such as those of duty or those inspired by religion, Mill argues, are reduced by Bentham to simple, self-serving pleasure-seeking or pain-avoiding desires, –either self-love, or love or hatred towards other sentient beings.‖\textsuperscript{14}

Although Mill does not make the connection explicitly, from Mill’s own psychological matrix it is clear that Benthamite psychology represents a threat to autonomy as self-mastery or self-determination in a similar fashion to Owenite claims that our

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 14.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 5. In Mill’s reading this is one of three –first principles‖ of Bentham’s philosophy. The other two are that –pleasure and exemption from pain, is the only thing desirable in itself‖ and that –the production…of the greatest possible happiness‖ is the object of –all morality and government.”
\textsuperscript{13} Mill, –Bentham,” p. 94.
behaviour and characters, and therefore the propensities to which they tend, are heteronomously determined.\(^{15}\) Bentham and Owen both deny the possibility of owning‘ or self-mastering the development of one‘s moral character.

Bentham evaluates actions with no regard for the character from whence they spring, which distinguishes him from Owen, who, like Mill, criticised Bentham for his alleged ignorance in these matters.\(^{16}\) Implicitly siding with Owen, Mill argues that modern psychological science needs a much deeper insight into the formation of character, and knowledge of the internal workings of human nature, than Mr. Bentham possessed.”\(^{17}\) Bentham‘s failure adequately to understand the complexity of mental states\(^{18}\) and the formation of those states into a mental and moral character\(^{19}\) was his chief deficiency as a moral philosopher.” Bentham judged specific acts by their immediate consequences. He was blind, Mill charges, to the deeper Laws of Mind that govern the development of successive mental states and habits of behaviour into a moral character:

Now, the great fault I have to find with Mr. Bentham as a moral philosopher, and the source of the chief part of the temporary mischief which in that character, along with a vastly greater amount of permanent good, he must be allowed to have produced, is this: that he has practically, to a very great extent, confounded the principle of Utility with the principle of specific consequences, and has habitually made up his estimate of the approbation or blame due to a particular kind of action, from a calculation solely of the consequences to which that very action, if practised generally, would itself lead…. It is not considered…whether the act or habit in question, though not in itself necessarily pernicious, may not form part of a character essentially pernicious, or at least essentially deficient in some quality eminently conducive to the ‘greatest happiness.’ To apply such a standard as this,

\(^{15}\) See Mill, Hamilton, p. 468ff.


\(^{17}\) Mill, —Remarks on Bentham‘s Philosophy,” p. 8. For the view that Mill‘s argument against Bentham is in fact influenced by the intuitionism of his philosophic enemy William Whewell see Snyder, Reforming Philosophy, pp. 242–243, p. 252.


\(^{19}\) Mill, Logic, p. 868, footnote ‘*’.
would indeed often require a much deeper insight into the formation of character, and knowledge of the internal workings of human nature, than Mr. Bentham possessed…. When the moralist thus overlooks the relation of an act to a certain state of mind as its cause, and its connexion through that common cause with large classes and groups of actions apparently very little resembling itself, his estimation even of the consequences of the very act itself, is rendered imperfect. For it may be affirmed with few exceptions, that any act whatever has a tendency to fix and perpetuate the state or character of mind in which itself has originated. And if that important element in the moral relations of the action be not taken into account by the moralist as a cause, neither probably will it be taken into account as a consequence.\(^\text{20}\)

Mill charged that Bentham’s and Hobbes’s false conceptions of human nature as an egotistic →machine, “built rationally to calculate and then to pursue its hedonic interest, was the psychological foundation underlying the kinds of reformist politics that tended to operate through and attempt to govern the outward material interests of the individual. Despite Rosen’s and Lyons’s attempts to show that Bentham never held such a simplistic view of human nature, to Mill Bentham nevertheless represented →the hopeless view that men were inherently and unalterably dedicated to selfishness.”\(^\text{21}\) Hobbes, Bentham and James Mill thus represented an indefensible form of psychological hedonism (that acts are always performed to satisfy a desire). This led them to propound, in Mill’s view, a form of political reformism which sought to suppress or deter through punishment the indelible injurious effects of psychological egoism (that people always aim to secure self-interest).\(^\text{22}\) By restricting the scope of autonomous action to the unimpeded pursuit of self-interest conceived as pleasure, Bentham thereby reduced the scope—even the possibility—for moral self-improvement. For Bentham, as for Owen and Auguste Comte, any moral improvement had to come from without. His politics were thus tainted, albeit less pervasively, with the stain of illiberalism.

\(^{20}\) Mill, ―Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy,‖ pp. 7–8.
\(^{21}\) Semmel, \textit{John Stuart Mill and the Pursuit of Virtue}, p. 89.
which marked Owenite and Comtean politics. In his *Autobiography* Mill reveals that establishing how psychological determinism easily fed into political despotism was an explicit intention in the *System of Logic*:

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, whether between individuals, races, or sexes, 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.

In Mill’s view, argues Bernard Semmel, “Bentham’s great intellectual crime was to have devised, perhaps unwittingly, a plan for liberticide.”

### Desiring and Resisting: Mill’s Naturalist Dilemma

Mill makes this psychological issue into an essentially moral-political problem. He objects to the notion of a perfectly rational ‘will’ which directs action, but he also appears to assert, against what he interpreted as Bentham's dangerous hedonistic egoism, the ability to ‘resist’ motives and desires. Overcoming Bentham’s egoism therefore presents both an opportunity and a serious problem for Mill. In arguing that action is not always the product of a self-interested desire, Mill has to show how actions can be performed in spite of strong desires, while simultaneously maintaining the naturalist outlook examined in Chapter Two which is


25 Semmel, *John Stuart Mill and the Pursuit of Virtue*, p. 158. On the connection between Bentham and Comte, Semmel writes, “[t]he later, having become familiar with Auguste Comte and his ideas, Mill saw the utopia constructed by the French positivist as a deliberate attempt to achieve the liberticidal society toward which the Benthamites were less consciously and less explicitly moving.” Comte’s influence on Mill is examined in Chapter Six.
hostile to a faculty of ‘willing’ against desires. Finally, he is professedly committed to a utilitarian ethic asserting that ‘human nature is so constituted to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness’ and that ‘to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility.’

To enlarge the scope for self-mastering and self-forming action from the constraints of Bentham’s psychological claim that we are governed by pleasure—in all we do, in all we say, in all we think,” Mill must show either that desire does not cause action, or that desires are not always self-interested. As demonstrated in the quotations taken from *Utilitarianism* above, this leads Mill into muddy conceptual territory, perhaps resulting in the kinds of incoherence Mill’s interpreters have alleged. Emblematic of this, the following two extracts from Mill’s *Logic* and one from *An Examination of William Hamilton’s Philosophy* seem to exhibit contradictory views on autonomy and moral psychology:

We know that we are not compelled, as by a magical spell, to obey any particular motive. We feel, that if we wished to prove that we have the power of resisting the motive, we could do so…and it would be humiliating to our pride, and (what is of more importance) paralysing to our desire of excellence, if we thought otherwise.

We have real power over the formation of our own character…. [O]ur will, by influencing some of our circumstances, can modify our future habits or capacities of willing.

I therefore dispute altogether that we are conscious of being able to act in opposition to the strongest present desire or aversion. The difference between a bad and a good man is not that the latter acts in opposition to his strongest desires;

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it is that his desire to do right, and his aversion to doing wrong, are strong enough
to overcome, and in the case of perfect virtue, to silence, any other desire or
aversion which may conflict with them…. [I reject] the figment of a direct
consciousness of the freedom of the will, in other words, our ability to will in
opposition to our strongest preference.\[30\]

In trying to establish, against Owen, Bentham and Hobbes that the desires and habits of our
characters are not irresistibly compelling, Mill appears both to affirm and to deny a capacity
of ‘willing’ in opposition to desire. It is clear that we must account for this apparent paradox,
and probe deeper into the relationship between the roles of motive, desire and action to
formulate a full account of Mill’s theory of character development.

This apparent dilemma requires careful examination of the three passages quoted
above.\[31\] By drawing on a wider range of Mill’s ethical and psychological writings, we are
able to suggest a means of resolving the problem of naturalist self-formation. Before we can
come to terms with Mills’ more complex view of how a ‘character’ is formed and liberated
(to some extent) from desire-impulses, we must first examine how Mill sets out to show that
actions are rarely, if ever, the product of a single dominating desire for self-interest conceived
as personal pleasure. Understanding Mill’s controversial project—against Bentham—to
divorce the immediate connection between desire and action, thereby fleshing out a positive
conception of moral self-development (the subject of Chapter Five) requires that we firstly
consider more carefully his claim that Bentham fundamentally misunderstood the complexity
of moral deliberation. Mill’s position, it will be argued, is that in everyday practical reality,
moral deliberation inevitably involves a messy and complicated ‘bundle’ of simultaneous,
competing and conflicting desires, rather than a simple, universal urge to satisfy what is
perceived to be immediately pleasurable or painless.

\[30\] Mill, Hamilton, pp. 452–453.
\[31\] To complete our exegesis of Mill’s attempt to liberate the agent from egoism and hedonism will take us into
the next chapter, which considers Mill’s idea of ‘habit’ and ‘purpose.’
The goal of this section is to show how Mill opens up a new argument against determinism. Mill argues that an adequate moral psychology must first take into account, as Bentham had not, the bundle of desires impacting upon the moral agent before it can be integrated into a science of character formation. If the ideas of character development and “self-formation” are mutually coherent, Mill must first show that action is not governed by a single universally overruling desire compulsion. As has been well documented, the special difficulty for Mill is that he must do this from an empirical, naturalist and utilitarian perspective without appealing to a metaphysical faculty of the will to resist pervasive desires.

**Terminological Observations**

Terminological definitions are useful in clarifying Mill’s engagement with Bentham, especially when the terms in which the debate is conducted may no longer reflect contemporary usage. The American Psychological Association (APA) *Dictionary of Psychology* defines “motive” as “a specific physiological or psychological state of arousal that directs an organism’s energies toward a goal.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* contains at least eleven definitions for “motive,” all of which share a common etymology. “Motive” appears in English in the fourteenth-century and is derived from the Latin *motivum*, which means “reason, impulse, cause” or, more literally, “that which moves or initiates motion.” The French equivalent, *motif*, is more explicitly linked to action: “reason for action.” Both the etymology and the current accepted definitions—scientific and literary—associate “motive” with the *cause* of movement.

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32 “Motivation” is defined as “the impetus that gives purpose or direction to human or animal behaviour and operates at a conscious or unconscious level. Motives are frequently divided into (a) physiological, primary, or organic motives, such as hunger, thirst, and need for sleep, and (b) personal, social, or secondary motives, such as affiliation, competition, and individual interests and goals. An important distinction must also be drawn between internal motivating forces and external factors, such as rewards or punishments, that can encourage or discourage certain behaviours.”

33 Mill occasionally seems to associate “motive” with “reason to act,” as in the case of “Bridan’s Ass.” See Mill, *Hamilton*, p. 468. See also Mill, *Logic*, p. 902. Mill occasionally hints that a motive is a reason to act, a rational or justificatory sanction, as distinct from “desire.”
consistent,\textsuperscript{34} Mill seems to align \textquoteleft\textquoteleft motive\textquoteright\textquoteright\ with the APA definition, intending it to mean, 
\textit{cause} of volition.

In the chapter \textquoteleft\textquoteleft On the Freedom of the Will\textquoteright\textquoteright in Mill\textquotesingle s critique of William Hamilton\textquotesingle s philosophy, Mill defines \textquoteleft\textquoteleft free-will\textquoteright\ as the capability \textquoteleft\textquoteleft of acting against motives.\textquoteright\textsuperscript{35} In other words, free-will is volition without, or in spite of, a motive.\textsuperscript{36} Although Mill sometimes uses \textquoteleft\textquoteleft motive\textquoteright\ to mean something closer to \textquoteleft\textquoteleft reason\textquoteright\ or \textquoteleft\textquoteleft justification\textquoteright\ for action (rather than \textquoteleft\textquoteleft cause\textquoteright\) the link between motive and action explained above captures Mill\textquotesingle s meaning in this case. \textquoteleft\textquoteleft Acting against motives\textquoteright\ therefore implies something logically nonsensical in Mill\textquotesingle s model: a physical event with no cause. This is also a definitional impossibility. In Mill\textquotesingle s model, a motive is something that induces one to act. If \textquoteleft\textquoteleft motive\textquoteright\ is understood merely as \textquoteleft\textquoteleft the combination of mental and environmental phenomena which caused the action,\textquoteright\ every action \textit{must} have a motive. As Mill states, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft the will is said to be determined by motives.\textquoteright\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{Mill\textquotesingle s Problem}

Let us now reconsider Mill\textquotesingle s claims that, superficially, appear contradictory:

We know that we are not compelled, as by a magical spell, to obey any particular motive. We \textit{feel}, that if we wished to prove that \textit{we have the power of resisting the motive}, we could do so…and it would be humiliating to our pride, and (what is of more importance) paralysing to our desire of excellence, if we thought otherwise.\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{34} Honderich, for example, acknowledges Mill\textquotesingle s tendency to use such terms interchangeably. See Honderich, \textit{A Theory of Determinism}, p. 224. In this case, Honderich specifically examines the difference between \textquoteleft\textquoteleft intention\textquoteright\ and \textquoteleft\textquoteleft volition.\textquoteright\textsuperscript{35} Mill, \textit{Hamilton}, p. 458. The context of Mill\textquotesingle s position is the argument that if the will is capable of resisting motives, punishment would cease to deter, and it would therefore be justified only for protection. \textsuperscript{36} Of course, in the free-will model the volition is also the cause of action; volitions themselves are uncaused, or unmotivated. The crucial point is that the will, not the action, is uncaused. \textsuperscript{37} Mill, \textit{Logic}, p. 842. \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 838. Emphasis added, except for \textit{feel}.\textquoteright
\end{footnotesize}
We have real power over the formation of our own character… [O]ur will, by influencing some of our circumstances, can modify our future habits or capacities of willing.\(^\text{39}\)

I therefore dispute altogether that we are conscious of being able to act in opposition to the strongest present desire or aversion. The difference between a bad and a good man is not that the latter acts in opposition to his strongest desires; it is that his desire to do right, and his aversion to doing wrong, are strong enough to overcome, and in the case of perfect virtue, to silence, any other desire or aversion which may conflict with them…. [I reject] the figment of a direct consciousness of the freedom of the will, in other words, our ability to will in opposition to our strongest preference.\(^\text{40}\)

We might note that the first passage trades entirely on our \textit{impressions} of the world and of our minds within it, rather than with the \textit{physical reality} thereof. We \textit{know},” we \textit{feel}” and we \textit{wish}” that \textit{we have the power of resisting the motive.” Here Mill does not state that we do in fact have such a power. In accordance with the argument presented in Chapter Three, he merely states that if we \textit{thought}” we lacked this power we would be humiliated and morally paralysed.

These responses do not satisfactorily address the serious tensions within Mill’s positions, however. First, the second passage states more plainly that we have a \textit{will}” which influences both our environment and itself. This is bordering on circularity. Second, the last passage seems directly to contradict the above interpretation of the first passage by \textit{disput[ing] altogether that we are conscious of being able to act in opposition to the strongest present desire or aversion.”\(^\text{41}\) Third, it seems unnecessarily pedantic to impose such a strict terminological framework that would draw too sharp a distinction between \textit{motive}” and \textit{desire}” in the above passages. Mill is clearly talking about a faculty of resistance. In the

\(^{39}\) Mill, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 177.
\(^{41}\) Ibid. Emphasis added.
first passage, he seems to imply consciousness of an ability to resist motives and desires, and, in the third, to deny it. Whether the motive or the desire is considered separately is immaterial because Mill denies that we are conscious of an ability to resist either in the last passage by introducing the idea of a preference.”

Moreover, in *Hamilton* and *A System of Logic*, from which these seemingly contradictory passages were extracted, Mill provides footnotes, each referring the reader to the other text for further elaboration. It is therefore incumbent upon Mill’s interpreters to assume that he intends them to be complementary, rather than antagonistic. Interpreters of Mill should also bear in mind that he often remarked that he learnt from Hobbes and James Mill that the best way to study abstract principles is to consider the concrete instances in which they apply. In this spirit, a simple hypothetical example might clarify the matter.

**Desire Bundles**

Consider a dieting chocoholic at a dinner-party. After a hearty meal the guests are served chocolate mud-cake for dessert. When the cake is offered to the dieting guest, this evokes a strong desire to eat chocolate. The deliciously rich-looking topping, itself adorned with fresh cream and strawberries, compels, in Mill’s words, like a magical spell.” Perhaps the temptation feels irresistible.” However, at the very same moment, the stricken guest is aware of other, very different, compelling motives. The guest desires not to offend the host by refusing the cake. More compelling still, the guest has become increasingly worried over the health risks of an unhealthy diet. The guest is apprehensive and, after an eye-opening visit to his GP, is wondering what his life would be like with diabetes, heart disease or kidney damage—hence the diet. There is another powerful desire to maintain a sense of dignity by

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42 “Mill was fully aware of the close dependence of the two works on one another.” See John M. Robson’s meticulous and authoritative “Textual Introduction” in Mill, *Logic*, CW: VII, p. lxxxv, n. 108. The final edition of the *System of Logic* contains eleven references to *An Examination of William Hamilton’s Philosophy*.

keeping the commitment he has made to diet. The guest has been proudly—and publicly—abstaining from chocolate for several weeks and does not want to incur the disapproval of the other guests by ‘giving in’ to the tempting cake. On the other hand, there is also an anticipation of shame in having to admit to breaking his promise not to eat chocolate. Perhaps, in addition, the meal was so filling that the guest simply feels unable to eat the cake, despite its delicious aroma and appearance. An alternative pleasure, an exciting cricket match at a critical juncture on a television in the next room, has already attracted several diners. Finally, there is a complex experiential reflection of the painful consequences—headache, toothache, nausea—that occurred the last time the guest ate chocolate. In the end, the guest refuses the cake, apologises to the host and joins the crowd around the television.

Here the guest is beset by a web of simultaneous motives and desires. The ‘power of resisting the motive’ to eat the cake of which the guest might feel cognizant during the deliberation is not an objective power of volition or will, however. Using Mill’s model, we should say that the guest had the sufficient fortitude of purpose to prefer not to eat the cake. That is, the guest desires a positive course of action: to be healthy, to maintain dignity, to keep a promise, to merit praise and to watch the cricket match. The desire to eat the cake, while powerful, is ‘resisted’ only in the sense that other competing desires are more compelling. The actions of the chocoholic are products of desire.

This is not to deny the validity and strength of the one motive, which the chocoholic felt upon being offered the cake. Rather, it is to affirm that life is comprised of many compelling motives and desires. In other words, motives are not experienced seriatim; they come in ‘bundles.’ At no point does the chocoholic individually assess and resist the desire to eat the cake. To attempt this would be psychologically implausible and, in all probability, socially bizarre. To propose that it is possible would amount to introducing a metaphysical concept (freedom of the will) that cannot be reconciled or accommodated within Mill’s
naturalist epistemology. Instead, Mill envisions a complex and often incommensurable constellation of competing motives (not all of them calculable as self-interest), the combined force of which nevertheless results in the action. It is from such a constellated psychological nexus that the deliberative process emerges.

The Error of Enumerating Motives

The “interest school” of moral psychologists, which includes Hobbes and Bentham, however, had erred by presenting human nature as governed by a single desire: self-interest, conceived as personal pleasure. Like Hobbes, Bentham’s jejune science of human nature, Mill argues, failed adequately to grasp the messiness of real-life decision-making, which is rarely governed by a single motive. “Man, that most complex being, is a very simple one in his eyes.” Real life deliberation does not reflect a neat psychological reductionism where actions are always explained by a single, universal and egotistic motive. Invoking his idea of counteracting causes and the theory of probabilistic causation, Mill argues in the Logic that actions are never (except in some cases of mania) ruled by any one motive with absolute sway, that there is no room for the influence of any other. The causes, therefore, on which action depends, are never uncontrollable; and any given effect is only necessary provided that the causes tending to produce it are not controlled.”

Mill had stated this objection in the first of his essays on Bentham, which warns against reducing the bundle of influencing motives to a simple desire. Indeed, Mill even boldly proclaims the futility of tabulating motivational forces altogether, suggesting instead that by their very multiplicity they escape the capacity or need for rational inspection: 

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44 Mill, “Bentham,” p. 96. James Mill was also a target for this criticism. In a letter to Francis Place (1817) James Mill gave a clear indication of his views on the simplicity of moral psychology: “If I had time to write a book...I would make the human mind as plain as the road from Charing Cross to St. Paul’s.” As cited in Graham Wallas, The Life of Francis Place, 1771–1854 (New York: Franklin, 1951/1898), p. 91. Packe speculates that Mill thought that “the great drawback of a logical way of thinking such as his, was that it argued as though everyone were alike. Dealing entirely with abstractions it left no room for personality.” Michael St. John Packe, The Life of John Stuart Mill (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 129.

45 Mill, Logic, p. 839.
attempt…to enumerate motives, that is, human desires and aversions, seems to me to be in its very conception an error.”\(^{46}\) Bentham had attempted precisely this in his “Table of the Springs of Action,” which purports to identify all motives acting on the mind and reduce them to six kinds of pleasure or pain.\(^ {47}\) Mill objects to the possibility of such a reductionist project, especially when Bentham, an unlikely poet on his own terms, enshrines it in a simple verse expressing “the whole fabric of morals and legislation”:

\[
\text{Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure—}
\]

Such marks in pleasures and in pains endure.

Such pleasures seek, if private be thy end:
If it be public, wide let them extend.

Such pains avoid, whichever be thy view:
If pains must come, let them extend to few.\(^ {48}\)

Mill reached these conclusions as early as 1833 when he wrote that “[a]s an analyst of human nature (the faculty in which above all it is necessary than an ethical philosopher should excel) I cannot rank Mr. Bentham very high. He has done little in this department, beyond introducing what appears to me a very deceptive phraseology, and furnishing a catalogue of ‘the springs of action,’ from which some of the most important are left out.”\(^ {49}\) Mill criticises Bentham for systematising the complex bundles of motives and desires experienced at any given time under a single all-powerful motive—the desire for immediate pleasure. Mill argues that this reductionist view fails to recognise the bundled nature of desire motivation. Mill concludes by proclaiming the complexity of human motivation and behaviour, and rules out the possibility of enumerating motives:

Motives are innumerable: there is nothing whatever which may not become an object of desire or of dislike by association. It may be desirable to distinguish by

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\(^{47}\) See also Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapter X.


peculiar notice the motives which are strongest and of most frequent operation; but Mr. Bentham has not even done this. 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.  

**Determinist Hedonism and Free-Willing**

In the passage from *Hamilton* in which Mill denies the capacity of “being able to act in opposition to the strongest present desire or aversion,” he is arguing against the existence of a perfect and independent lucidity—that is, of an ability, power or entity—called “freedom of the will,” as distinguished from desire, which rationalists like Kant and (subsequent to Mill) idealists such as T.H. Green and R. G. Collingwood have propounded. Experience confirms that our bodies move according to our desire, and such movements are not consequent of a purely cognitive willing faculty. To my apprehension, a volition is not an efficient, but simply a physical cause. “The physical feeling” of being capable of free-volition, of which the chocoholic may (or may not) be cognizant when he refuses the cake, is probably a state of nervous sensation beginning and ending in the brain. The ennobling sensation that we are capable of resisting powerful motives is therefore ultimately a valuable simulacrum.

The illusion that we have a mystical volition-force over our bodies and desires is therefore itself a product of false perception. It is a trick the “brain” plays on itself. When it

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52 R.G Collingwood, for example, gives a classic example of the free-will theorist tendency to posit a dualist moral psychology in which the “will” is pitted against bodily desire: Incivility “threatens[s] his consciousness of freedom by making him feel that his power of choice is in danger of breaking down and the passion or desire likely to take charge.” R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, as quoted in James Connolly, “Ci vility, Civilization and Self-Censorship,” paper presented to the European Consortium of Political Research biennial conference, Universität Potsdam, Germany, September 2009, pp. 13–14.
53 Mill, *Logic*, p. 356, p. 355. “Our will causes our bodily actions in the same sense, and in no other, in which cold causes ice, or a spark causes an explosion of gunpowder. The volition, a state of our mind, is the antecedent; the motion of our limbs in conformity to the volition, is the consequent.”
55 Ibid.
56 Note Mill’s naturalistic language. “Volitions are not known to produce anything directly except nervous action, for the will influences even the muscles only through the nerves.” Mill, *Logic*, p. 362. Mill forgoes the
is said that we are conscious of a resisting power, Mill cannot admit that our consciousness of the volition contains in itself any a priori knowledge that the muscular motion will follow. In other words, our perception of a resisting power may not correspond to a physical reality. Were we paralysed from birth, Mill contends, we would have no consciousness of the power voluntarily to move our limbs; the idea itself would never have occurred to us. "The power of our will to move our bodies...is not known to us independently of experience" because "each person’s conceptions are governed and limited by his individual experiences and habits of thought."

Rather than an independent faculty impervious to motives and desires, the ‘will’ is itself a causally explicable product of desire. We are not conscious of, nor do we possess, an ability to weigh desires individually and then direct our bodies into motion. But neither are our actions governed by a singular, self-interested desire to act in a way that would produce the most immediate amount of sensory pleasure. Thus Bentham cannot account for the abstaining chocoholic, who, in his model, would presumably always eat the cake. In fact, taking up the argument of the previous chapter regarding the pain of coercion and the paralysis of believing determinism to be true, Bentham effectively encourages the chocoholic to eat the cake by instilling the fatalistic belief that he cannot resist the desire.

Mill states that we do not have the capacity or the need to register and isolate the strongest present desire,” such that this singular motive is the particular thing that we must oppose and repress to achieve in action the conscious, certain aim of being a virtuous person. This is both a false psychological picture and a simplistic view of real-life situations and more mechanistic language of Hobbes, preferring terms such as "muscle," "nerve" and "brain." He also avoids terms evoking a mysterious willing property such as "mind." Though it is perhaps less colourful, Mill’s language resonates much more strongly with modern scientific discourse than does Hobbesian, Benthamite or Kantian imagery.

58 Ibid., p. 362, p. 361. "What persons can, and what they cannot, conceive, is very much an affair of accident, and depends altogether on their experience, and their habits of thought."
59 Free-will theorists, by contrast, teach the opposite.
deliberations. We can never be certain of knowing what the “the strongest present desire” is, and, a fortiori, we can never be certain of our “being able to act in opposition” to it. As Mill tersely remarks, “this is not the way in which things take place on our planet.” Desires exist, and are perceived, in a combinatory rather than singular mode of experience. A putative capacity of freedom of the will is, as Mill says, a “figment” of the imagination. In any case (by implication) a sense of attaining virtue would require a further and separate capacity of knowing with certainty what is, at the given moment, the “strongest present desire” to which we must apply that will.

Rather than a theory of virtue as desire-resistance, then, Mill argues that a “good man…desires to do right, and [has an] aversion to doing wrong.” In other words, a virtuous person is not one who strives more or less successfully “in opposition to his strongest desires.” Rather, a virtuous person desires to do right with sufficient strength to “silence” the many opposing desires and aversions. Within a bundle of compelling desires, the combination of positive desires compelling healthy living, the goodly esteem of one’s friends and watching cricket, as well as aversions such as the desire not to cause offence or incur the shame of breaking a promise, “silences” the desire to eat the cake.

“Will” plays no part in this matrix. Thus Snyder overemphasises the role of “willing” when she states that for Mill moral freedom over one’s character requires “choosing our

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60 Mill, *Hamilton*, p. 468. In this case, Mill is criticising what he thinks is a particularly silly and specious argument against the causation of volitions by motives which held that, were there no particular reason to favour one course of action over another, there would be no action, the agent being paralysed into indecision. “If, they [free-will theorists] say, the will were solely determined by motives, the ass, between two bundles of hay, exactly alike, and equally distant from him, would remain undecided until he dies of hunger. …But this is not the way in which things take place on our planet. From mere lassitude, if from no other cause, he would intermit the process, and cease thinking of one only, and that fact, combined with the sensation of hunger, would determine him to a decision.” Buridan’s Ass exists only in logic, not in experience. This example, and Mill’s response to it, exemplify Mill’s practical attitude towards seemingly obtuse and irresolvable philosophical problems.


62 Virtue therefore cannot be the resistance of desire—hence Mill’s uncharitable assessment of stoicism and asceticism in *Utilitarianism*. In Mill’s view, if our actions are caused by a single predominant desire we are unfree.
desires and impulses.”\(^{63}\) This implies the existence of a “choosing-self” which is beyond natural causation. Mill resists this implication by insisting that we are not directly cognizant of an ability to choose one course of action over another. On these grounds Mill explicitly rejects “the figment of a direct consciousness of the freedom of the will, in other words, our ability to will in opposition to our strongest preference.”\(^{64}\) He is hostile to the idea of a mediating “will” capable of objectively weighing and rationalising individual desires, selecting some and rejecting others, while simultaneously impervious to their motivational influence. This idea of a purely free will—free in the sense that it is not determined by desires or motives, and can in fact resist them—posits a false contest between a desiring and a deciding self, and is the mainstay of the metaphysical mindset Mill rejects. In Mill’s view, conscience, willing and volition are not victories over desire, but products of it. At this stage Mill could agree with Hobbes that “[w]ill … is the last Appetite in Deliberating.”\(^{65}\)

Taken as synonyms, *will*, *volition* and *motive* are defined wholly in terms of desire: the “strongest present desire” (Mill) or “the last appetite in deliberating” (Hobbes). For Mill, “conscience” is a desire itself, “the desire to do right.”\(^{66}\) When we describe a victory of the will (refusing the cake, for example) we do not mean that a mysterious deciding-self has successfully resisted a powerful desire or motive. Instead, we mean that the other desires (e.g., to be healthy) were strong enough to prevail over weaker desires, such as the desire to eat the cake. Mill charges that free-will theorists ignore this distinction, while psychological determinists err in thinking conceptions other than self-interest, self-preservation or personal

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\(^{63}\) Snyder, *Reforming Philosophy*, p. 118.

\(^{64}\) Mill, *Hamilton*, p. 453.


pleasure—conceptions such as virtue or the love of money and fame—cannot be objects of desire in themselves, nor motives to action.\(^67\)

On the free-will side of the debate, William Hamilton posits a resisting will and a desiring body. Passion and reason are imagined in a conflict of conscience, in which the reasoning will, when sufficiently vigorous, emerges victorious by silencing bodily desires. His error, repeated by Snyder,\(^68\) is thus to "represent...to himself the conflict as taking place between me and some foreign power, which I conquer, or by which I am overcome."\(^69\) Mill explicitly rejects such a dualism. Experience reveals no independent willing- or rationalising-self. Instead, Mill argues, "it is obvious that I am both parties in the contest; the conflict is between me and myself; between...me desiring a pleasure and me dreading self-reproach." In Mill’s view, the "contest" is between competing and counteracting desires and aversions. In making this distinction, Mill's psychology entertains, then rejects, the classical understanding of autonomy as an awareness of the capacity to take more than one course of action:

I am told, that if I elect to murder, I am conscious that I could have elected to abstain: but am I conscious that I could have abstained if my aversion to the crime, and my dread of its consequences, had been weaker than the temptation? If I elect to abstain: in what sense am I conscious that I could have elected to commit the crime? Only if I had desired to commit it with a desire stronger than my horror of murder; not with one less strong.\(^70\)

Mill concedes that there may be a "desiring I" and a "conscience-stricken I." However, these are both manifestations of different desires—the desire to murder, and the desire to avoid the punishment and ignominy of being a murderer. The reason for "Me, or, if you please, my Will, to be identified with one side [conscience] rather than with the other [desire], is that one of the Me's represents a more permanent state of my feelings than the

\(^67\) Hobbes lists glory among the motives to action, but it is reduced to self-interest. Mill means to say that things are capable of being desired without reference to ultimate ends. See Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 235ff.

\(^68\) Snyder, *Reforming Philosophy*, p. 118.


\(^70\) Ibid., p. 451. Emphasis added.
other does.” The desire to murder will (hopefully) be transient and weak, while the desire to be a good moral person is a permanent and powerful influence. Conflicts of the ‘will’ where we imagine ourselves both prospectively and retrospectively deliberating over two courses of action (murder or abstention form murder; eating or refusing the cake) are, if anything, conflicts between short- and long-term desires and aversions.

It is a mistake, therefore, to imagine a conflict between ‘will,’ which is merely a permanent state of desiring, and short-term desire. According to Mill, this simple but critical imprecision causes us to overlook how it is absurd to say that I act in opposition to my preference; that I do one thing when I would rather do another; that my conscience prevails over my desires—as if conscience itself were not a desire—the desire to do right.” Rejecting the idea that we are endowed with an ability consciously to resist desires, Mill completes his repudiation of the ‘classical’ understanding of autonomy as the ability to act otherwise than one does act:

I am told [by free-will theorists] that whether I decide to do or to abstain [as in the case of murder], I feel that I could have decided the other way. I ask my consciousness what I do feel, and I find, indeed, that I feel (or am convinced) that I could, and even should, have chosen the other course if I had preferred it, that is, if I had liked it better; but not that I could have chosen one course while I preferred the other.

In the end, we are guided by our ‘preference”—that is, our desire—not a faculty of willing in the Kantian or Hamiltonian sense of volition beyond causation. To say that we could, at any given moment, choose multiple courses of action is simply to recognise that we are capable of desiring or preferring many different things.

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71 Mill, Hamilton, p. 452.
72 This subject is a major theme of Chapter Five.
74 Ibid., p. 450.
Once the analysis becomes retrospective, the psychological picture becomes clouded. To say that we *could have acted* other than we did is to say that we *were* capable of desiring many different things, not merely the one we did in fact desire or choose. Mill wants to show that it is *not* the case that we can act contrary to our strongest preference or desire. Once we locate the cause of action in desires, motives and preferences (or, as we shall see in Chapter Five, in ‘habits’ and ‘purposes’), rather than an inscrutable but supervening ‘will,’ the cause of action must, by definition, be our strongest desire or preference. To say that we could have performed another action is merely to say that we could have *desired* differently than we did. But it is not to say that, given the same strongest desire, we could have resisted it. Such a hypothesis is neither logically nor psychologically coherent.

The free-will metaphysicians are nevertheless committed to the error of positing a dualistic conception of human nature that conceives of a self that is at once choosing and desiring. The choosing self, they erroneously argue, must therefore be somehow beyond the governance of causation and natural science. But according to Mill there exists no such pre-desiring, non-naturalist capacity. In any case, if such a capacity did exist, we could not possibly be aware of it. Therefore if a capacity of free-willing really exists in the sense held by Hamilton and Kant—that we are profoundly free in the face of events around us while also cognizant of a powerful ability to choose one or another course of action—we could never study it. The problem with such a view, for Mill, is that it confuses sensation, which tells us how things are in the world, with prediction, which posits how things will or could be. Once again, the argument trades upon Mill’s distinction between explanatory and predictive perspectives, suggesting a rather radical conception of self-awareness:

To be conscious of free-will, must mean, to be conscious, before I have decided, that I am able to decide either way. Exception may be taken *in limine* to the use of the word consciousness in such an application. Consciousness tells me what I do or feel. But what I am able to do, is not a subject of consciousness. Consciousness
is not prophetic; we are conscious of what is, not of what will or can be. We never know that we are able to do a thing, except from having done it, or something equal and similar to it. We should not know that we are capable of action at all, if we had never acted.\textsuperscript{75}

We neither know nor feel that we are capable of acts of choice, however conceived, unless we have previously chosen. Elaborating the last sentence in the above passage, Mill rhetorically remarks that \textit{\textemdash}if we were born with a cataract, we are not conscious, previous to being couched [cured] of our ability to see. We should not feel able to walk if we had never walked, nor to think, if we had never thought.\textsuperscript{76} In Mill’s view, as opposed to Kant’s and the free-will theorists’ views, the \textit{will} is not engaged in a contest with desire. At any given moment that is experienced, we are cognizant (if of anything at all) of \textit{bundles} of competing desires, rather than a willing faculty that evaluates, selects or resists each single desire.

\textbf{Conclusion: “Snapshot” Moral Psychology}

At this point in our analysis of Mill’s thought we have a moral psychology diverging from Hobbes’s and Bentham’s egoism in one important respect. In Mill’s view, human behaviour is never governed by a singular, irreducibly self-interested desire. More specifically, we have a picture of volition closer to Hobbes than to Bentham. For Bentham, we act only out of a desire for something pleasant or an aversion to something painful. Mill interprets this as a desire for the agent’s own immediate self-interest, and then tries to show how the deliberation process is more complex, with a bundle of competing desires operating at any one time, rather than a simple desire for something conceived as immediately pleasant. Hobbes appears to acknowledge \textit{the whole summe of Desires} afflicting the agent, but he nevertheless reduces all action to simple appetites and aversions.\textsuperscript{77} For Hobbes it is an immutable Law of Nature that our strongest desire is always ultimately reducible to instinctive self-preservation.

\textsuperscript{75} Mill, \textit{Hamilton}, p. 449.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. See Mill’s textual note marked \textit{——*}.
\textsuperscript{77} Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan}, I, VI, p. 127.
Mill ultimately dissents from this view, and contends that the deliberation process involves a complex bundle of simultaneously experienced and often conflicting desires. The chocoholic example shows how Mill rejected Bentham’s view that actions are always causally explicable in terms of immediate self-interest, conceived as the attainment of a mental state considered pleasurable to the agent. Although Mill denies that there is a singular, all pervasive desire motivating human behaviour, he simultaneously rejects the idea of an inherent (or extra-causal) faculty or capability of willing in opposition to desires. As this chapter has shown, while Mill holds that actions are rarely the product of a single, simple desire, he nevertheless affirms that behaviour is explicable in terms of desire.

Our understanding of Mill’s objections to these views can be illuminated by considering Joel Kupperman’s recent survey of popular and philosophical theories of moral character. Mill averred that both Hobbes and Bentham had erred in trying to ‘enumerate motives.’ In Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and Bentham’s *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* we find tabulations of motives, all reduced to appetites and aversions. Kupperman describes this as a ‘snapshot view of ethical choice.’ The snapshot view is concerned only with singular ‘discreet choices’ about how we ought to act. This perspective does not take into account the fact that such choices are rarely performed instantly and, as such, are in fact subject to a range of fluctuating circumstances. Most importantly, Kupperman argues that the snapshot view of decision-making ignores the importance of character development: by focussing on single decisions these philosophers can discount the role of character development in choice.”

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79 Ibid., p. 149.
80 It is comparable to Frankfurt’s argument against the alternate possibilities example discussed in Chapter Two, p. 51, n. 6.
81 Kupperman, *Character*, pp. 149–150.
82 Ibid., p. 87, p. 150. Kupperman identifies three problems with the ‘snapshot view.’ First, ‘many moral choices are not completed instantly or in a brief period of time.’ Second, circumstances may change, affecting
Kupperman’s critique of snapshot moral psychologies evokes comparison with Mill’s bundled-desires approach. Rather than focussing on shallow, isolated, single-desire instances, Kupperman recommends that “[a]n ethics of character…must take account of the ways in which projects and decisions are integrated through time.” Although he fails to detect the connection, Kupperman echoes Mill in castigating moral philosophers for failing to acknowledge the developmental, character-influenced, time-bound and bundled nature of motives that are present at any given moment in which we think of ourselves as deliberating over a difficult choice. Our choices do not reflect the tidy, enumerated theories of Bentham and Hobbes, in which a single overpowering desire compels us into action. According to Kupperman—and to Mill—this is like “analysing a walk as a series of discrete decisions to move one’s feet.” This is simply not an accurate encapsulation of the bundled multiplicity of powerful motives we experience at any given time. We must avoid the tendency to frame decision procedures as if all choices are discreet.

While Kupperman accuses Mill of partaking in snapshot psychology himself, it is, in fact, this perspective that Mill wants to repudiate. Mill and Kupperman implore us to take stock of the complexity of ethical decision-making. Mill has, in view of the complexity of human experience in time and amidst events, introduced a modest element of mental freedom, or indeterminacy, in liberating the agent from the oppression of a single motive—self-interest as immediate pleasure. But he has not yet shown how we can achieve a degree of liberation from desire itself. This chapter has shown how we begin being more free in our

the initial moral choice. Thus all ethical commitments must be qualified: “will take care of this, unless later I decide that it would be better not to.” Finally, it is simply artificial. “In cases in which we decide to help or protect someone or something, the helping or protection is unlikely to be completed in an instant. Typically a sustained effort over a period of time is required.”

83 Kupperman, Character, p. v.
84 Like Mill, Kupperman affirms the difficulty in “individual[ing] and number[ing]” motives. He also comes very close to Mill’s idea of counteracting causes, adding the dimension of time. Ibid., p. 150.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., p. 149.
87 Ibid., p. 73. Without defending the point, Kupperman classifies both Bentham and Mill as representing classical utilitarianism.”.
volitions—freer than Bentham and Hobbes allowed—even though those volitions are products of desire and not of will.” Up to this point the analysis of Mill’s thought has identified nothing incompatible with Hobbes’s statement in Leviathan that will…is the last appetite in deliberating.” 88 Indeed, so far this thesis has shown only how Mill uses a desire bundle model to repudiate both the reductionist egoism of Bentham and Hobbes, and the free-will metaphysics of Hamilton, Reid, Whewell and Kant. To pursue the idea of freedom as character self-development in Mill’s thought we need to consider how Mill saw the agent liberated from determinism by introducing two more causes of action: habit and purpose. The next chapter will explore how, to Mill, the bundled desire psychological process illustrates the very basis of moral psychology. To complete the picture, we need to interrogate Mill’s understanding of several more critical and controversial concepts, including self-development,” moral freedom,” confirmed character” and confirmed virtue.” The next chapter explores Mill’s attempts to overcome Hobbes’s egoism by arguing that while all behaviour is ultimately explicable in terms of desire, the developed character is capable of forming habits” and other modes of willing in which actions, while initially directed by a desire, are performed without any recourse to the ends they originally were meant to satisfy.

VIRTUE, FREEDOM AND INTERNAL-CULTURE

MILL’S "IDEAL STANDARD OF CHARACTER"

[T]he love of right…[is what] the best moralists and theologians consider to constitute the true definition of our freedom.


[N]one but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free.


Positive ideas about moral character” are rarely evoked in contemporary political and moral philosophy.¹ A number of recent scholars have sought to address this lacuna, arguing that ethical character ought to be taken more seriously as a genuine philosophical concept.² Indeed Joel Kupperman boldly proclaims that ethical philosophy” ought to be refocused…so that character is taken as central…. [E]thical philosophy will have to be restructured once this is understood.”³

Establishing the centrality of character in moral and political thinking was in fact an animating aim of John Stuart Mill’s Moral Science. Mill aimed to provide a complete cartography of human nature, revealing universal Laws of Mind” just as the physical

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³ Kupperman, *Character*, p. v, p. 3. “[A]ll of ethics looks different when character is taken seriously.”
sciences had theorised laws of gravity and motion. Mill’s Ethology—a central sub-branch of Moral Science—proposed to systematise the universal laws of the Formation of Character” into an associationist psychology that would reinforce both the scientific foundations of his reformist agenda and his attacks against what he thought were the metaphysical pretensions of his conservative opponents. Deduced from psychological Laws of Mind, Ethology would identify and explain the complex causal processes affecting moral development, behavioural traits and the formation of ethical sensibilities. The centrality of this branch of Moral Science was beyond doubt. It was to be “the immediate foundation of the Social Science.”

The received view amongst contemporary political theorists, however, is that attempts to define a new character-based ethics are ambiguous. “Character approximates what a person is,” Kupperman unhelpfully contends. It is generally thought that Mill never articulated a coherent Ethology; he merely asserted the central role it would play. This chapter seeks to challenge this view. What is important about Mill’s idea of moral development is, not that he never enunciated it in a purely systematic fashion, but that he returns to the theme over and again throughout his published works and private

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4 While he could not accept their social and political prescriptions, Mill shares this general methodological outlook with Hobbes, Bentham, Owen and Comte.
5 The Oxford English Dictionary dates this term to the late nineteenth-century, but it was in fact first coined by Mill in 1843. “Ethology” comes from the Greek ἔθος [ethos or nature], a word more nearly corresponding to the term “character” as I here use it, than any other word in the same language.” Mill, Logic, p. 869. Mill’s term did not catch on. Ethology is now the modern sub-discipline of Zoology that studies animal behaviour.
7 Kupperman, Character, p. v. Kupperman’s definition of character is not compatible with Mill’s. Kupperman does not incorporate a moral element. His most basic definition of character is a person’s “normal pattern of thought and action” (p. 13; see also p. 17). A “strong character” is where the person’s “normal pattern of thought and action…is strongly resistant to pressures, temptations, difficulties, and to the insistent expectations of others” (p. 14). Kupperman thus brings an ascetic tone to his notion of character, which, coupled with the idea of “resistance,” does not chime with Mill. Kupperman in part acknowledges this and is critical of Mill, whom he describes as “elitist” (pp. 86–87, p. 89, n. 2).
8 Mill intended to begin a treatise on Ethology in 1854 but was apparently persuaded by Harriet Taylor-Mill to turn to a critique of religion. Mill began composing “The Utility of Religion” instead. See Mill’s letter to Harriet Taylor-Mill dated 7 February 1854 and her reply dated 14 and 15 February 1854 in F.A. Hayek, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor: Their Correspondence and Subsequent Marriage (London: Routledge, 1951), p. 192, pp. 195–196. For the overstated view that Mill “ever even began constructing the ethology…and he eventually abandons the enterprise” see Nicholas Capaldi, John Stuart Mill: A Biography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 177. For the converse view that Mill’s later writings can be interpreted as “ethological enquiries” see Ball, “Mill’s Ethology Reconsidered,” pp. 26–27. Ball criticises a colleague who told him that “Ethology” was “the greatest book Mill never wrote.”
correspondence. Key elements of Mill's science of character formation are contained in many of his moral, political and cultural-critical texts. Mill’s Ethology can be understood as an integral part of his battle against the determinist moral psychologies and liberticidal reformism of Hobbes, Owen and Bentham. Mill attempts to incorporate the romantic insights into “self-culture,” “interiority” and “the inward domain of consciousness” he gleaned from the writings of Coleridge, Carlyle and Wordsworth with a commitment to enlightenment empiricism. This is part of a wider project to restore the importance of the emotions in Moral Science.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the connection between Mill’s idea of “moral freedom” and his “ideal standard of character.” This chapter argues that Mill’s idea of character self-development involves specific moralised ideas. In particular, Mill links the development of an emotionally fecund, analytically sharp, morally aspirational character with “virtue” and “complete” freedom. To be a morally free person, for Mill, is to pursue a particular form of “self-culture” which draws on romantic insights regarding the individual’s “interiority.” The key theme of this chapter is thus Mill’s apparent conflation of “moral freedom,” virtue and the creation of a “confirmed character.” To have a character is, for Mill, a form of moral evaluation, as well as an objective, indicative mental state. Measuring the freedom of one’s character development—as well as its moral worth—involves a controversial set of assumptions about what constitutes an emotionally and rationally developed individual. Mill’s idea of “moral character” is bound up with the political and moral aims of his anti-determinist moral psychology. It is in this context that it must be understood.

9 Ball, “Mill’s Ethology Reconsidered,” p. 27.
Interpretations of “Moral Freedom” in Mill’s *System of Logic*

In a well-known passage in the *System of Logic* Mill seems to argue that virtue is identical to, or at least the signal of, “complete” freedom. Further to complicate the matter, this conceptual conflation occurs when Mill is enunciating his idea of character self-determination:

> And indeed, if we examine closely, we shall find that this feeling, of our being able to modify our own character if we wish, is itself the feeling of moral freedom which we are conscious of. A person feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist; that were he desirous of altogether throwing them off, there would not be required for that purpose a stronger desire than he knows himself to be capable of feeling. It is of course necessary, to render our consciousness of freedom complete, that we should have succeeded in making our character all we have hitherto attempted to make it; for if we have wished and not attained, we have, to that extent, not power over our own character, we are not free. Or at least, we must feel that our wish, if not strong enough to alter our character, is strong enough to conquer our character when the two are brought into conflict in any particular case of conduct.12

In the 1868 penultimate edition of the *Logic* Mill added a controversial concluding sentence:

> –And hence it is said with truth, that none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free.”13

*Moralist Illiberalism and Neutralist Pluralism*

Mill’s apparent moralisation of mental freedom—a clear departure from Hobbes, Owen and Bentham—is certainly controversial, as an impressive amount of scholarly criticism attests.14

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13 Ibid.
The critical landscape can be broadly divided into *moralist* and *neutralist* interpretations. Bikhu Parekh, Uday Mehta, Beate Jahn, Maurice Cowling, Isaiah Berlin, Gertrude Himmelfarb, John Rawls, Charles Larmore and John Gray (among others) have argued that Mill articulates an intolerant and moralistic doctrine of self-realisation. The central tenet of the *moralist* interpretation is that Mill’s idea of freedom cannot be disentangled from an “exclusionary” idea of the good life. What it is to be free involves an appeal to Mill’s positive idea of moral goodness. Mill’s idea of self-determination (the indicative quality “moral freedom”) is defined in morally suggestive language; it is a characteristic of a “person of confirmed virtue.” Contemporary liberals such as Larmore suggest that the intermixture of psychological and moral categories “betray[s]…the liberal spirit.” Others such as Cowling argue that such moralism has overtly authoritarian implications for Mill’s political thought. According to this view Mill’s liberalism is a form of “moral totalitarianism,” rather than a classic statement of liberal neutrality:

[Mill’s liberalism] was not so much a plea for individual freedom, as a means of ensuring that Christianity would be superseded by that form of liberal, rationalistic utilitarianism which went by the name of the Religion of Humanity…. Mill’s object was not to free men, but to convert them, and convert them to a peculiarly

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16 E.g., Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, pp. 46–49.

exclusive, peculiarly insinuating moral doctrine. Mill wished to moralise all social activity… and to mark each with his own emphatic imprint.\(^\text{18}\)

According to this contemporary viewpoint, only particular forms of character development count as moral freedom for Mill. His liberalism is therefore hostile to diversity and plurality and cannot adequately approach the complexity of modern political life, which is dominated by irreconcilable moral values. According to Mehta, Parekh and Jahn, the most vociferous and incisive proponents of the illiberal-moralist interpretation, to be free is to realise a parochial, elitist and outmoded nineteenth-century view of what it is to be a good moral person.\(^\text{19}\) Mill’s Ethology—the cornerstone of his moral and social science—is therefore “infected” with an intolerant and anachronistic moral world-view.\(^\text{20}\) A truly liberal liberalism, by contrast, “forgoes any appeal to the ideals whose controversial character sets the problem… for political liberalism. It must be acceptable by reasonable people having different views of the good life, not just by those who share, for example, Mill’s ideal of the person.”\(^\text{21}\)

**The Neutralist Interpretation**

But Mill has sympathetic critics too. In contrast to the moralist-illiberal interpretation, John Skorupski, Bruce Baum, Robert Devigne and G.W. Smith argue that there is no positive moral ideal underpinning Mill’s ideas of mental and moral freedom. The *neutralist* response


\(^{21}\) Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, p. 51, p. 53, p. 118, pp. 129–30. “Liberals such as Kant and Mill, who have coupled their political theory with a corresponding notion of what in general ought to be our personal ideal, have betrayed in fact the liberal spirit. They have thereby exposed liberalism to the ‘demystification’ practiced by antiliberal critics. The fundamental liberal insight is the inescapable controversiality of ideals of the good life and thus the need to find political principles that abstract from them.” Larmore argues that liberalism must take a neutral position with respect to controversial ideals of the good life.” A failure to take such a neutral stance is, of course, Larmore’s chief criticism of Mill.
to the moralist-illiberal challenge can be classified into three distinct sub-categories. The first can be termed the ‘freedom as rationality’ interpretation. In this view the passage in which Mill equates virtue with complete moral freedom means to place a value on rationality, not the realisation of objective moral ideals. The second view can be termed the ‘freedom as a mode of choosing’ approach. This approach interprets moral freedom as deliberative choice. According to Baum, Mill means to value a reflective and deliberative “mode of choosing,” rather than a particular scope of “right” choices. This view emphasises the way in which moral ideals are generated, rather than their ethical content. A “morally free” person is therefore someone whose choices are reflective and autonomous, rather than someone who conforms to a particular standard of character. The third neutralist interpretation can be termed the ‘freedom as capability’ approach. Devigne argues that by “moral freedom” Mill means the opportunity or capability to self-amend. Mill does not require the stronger idea that we must “actualise” this capability, just that we are aware of our potential for self-determining behaviour.

These three arguments are strands in a neutralist interpretation of Mill’s idea of moral freedom. In various ways, they deny that Millian freedom involves appeals to positive moral concepts, affirming that his idea of freedom is neutral towards conceptions of the good life. Before considering Mill’s position further, it is important to consider the neutralist positions in greater detail.

**Freedom as Rationality**

Skorupski argues that by moral freedom Mill means rationality, not the achievement of objective moral ideals. Mill’s idea of autonomy consists in the mode according to which

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25 Ibid., p. 97.
motives and desires are determined. Motives that are formed from without, such as motives caused by social pressures, customs or one’s socio-economic position, are unfree, or heteronomous.” On the other hand, motives that are formed from within, from one’s unique individualised moral imagination, are free, or autonomous.” Moral freedom has to do with the ability and practice of rational choice among motives. The autonomous formation of motives is therefore the rational” formation of motives. Freedom of will is rational autonomy. Skorupski argues that virtue…is moral freedom,” but moral freedom is simply the capacity to recognise and respond to reasons.” The virtuous and morally free character acts on rational, or good,” reasons. Skorupski actively plays down the moral content in Mill’s position. In this view, virtue is rationality: To say that none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free is no more than to say that none but a person of confirmed rationality is completely free.

This interpretation suffers from two deficiencies. First, it imputes to Mill a more neutral and, it must be said, Kantian sense of freedom as the ability to bring one’s desires under the control of a steady rational purpose.” Skorupski in fact detects a common essence to Mill’s and Kant’s ideas of freedom: I am free to the extent that I can resist desires when there is reason to do so… It is not too much to say that Mill’s position is Kant’s without the

27 Ibid., p. 280, pp. 350–359. While Skorupski detects perfectionist” tendencies in Mill’s conception of moral freedom (“autonomy is not a pre-moral notion”), he nevertheless associates it with rationality rather than other more overtly positive moral values.
29 Skorupski, John Stuart Mill, p. 43, p. 293. Skorupski is unequivocal: autonomy is nothing but the capacity to respond to good reasons.”
30 Ibid., p. 354.
31 While a careful and comprehensive interpreter of Mill, Skorupski tends to align Mill and Kant, and consistently to reveal his sympathy to the Kantian critique of naturalism. For example, he remarks of moral freedom or rational autonomy (in Mill’s view, as in Kant’s, they are the same).” He also notes that a naturalist scientific psychology…cannot deflate the central notion of rational autonomy without also undermining itself. On that point the Kantian critique of naturalism survives all challenge.” Skorupski, John Stuart Mill, p. 255, p. 282, p. 43.
transcendentalism."\textsuperscript{32} For Skorupski, Mill values the autonomous ability to govern desires," suggesting a capacity for bringing my motives under rational scrutiny and control."\textsuperscript{33} While Skorupski is sensitive to Mill's awkward conceptual positioning between free-will and determinist psychologies, his proclivity to suggest a "rational" governance of motivation suggests a rather stark duality in which a rational deciding-self governs the emotional desiring-self.\textsuperscript{34} While causally explicable, actions can be autonomous if the agent has \textit{a good reason} for doing something, and the agent uses his \textit{power to resist} motives for which there is no good reason to indulge. Moral freedom therefore combines two views that Mill rejected, as Chapter Four showed: a higher faculty of rationality and a capability to resist desires:

Freedom is rational autonomy: the ability to grasp reasons and to act on them, resisting where necessary those motives which there is reason not to pursue…. I am more or less free overall, more or less of an autonomous agent, according to the degree to which I can bring my motives under rational scrutiny and control. Heteronomy results from the inability to reflect rationally on motives, or—where there is that ability—from weakness of will.\textsuperscript{35}

The limits of this interpretation materialise when we ask what counts as "rational" action. On this point, Skorupski is fatally ambiguous: "Rational autonomy is the ability to recognise and act upon rules: rules constitutive of rationality and society."\textsuperscript{36} To be free is to regulate one's behaviour in accordance with "objective" laws of rationality, psychology and society, upon which Skorupski does not elaborate.\textsuperscript{37} In addition to going well beyond Mill's own views, we are no closer to answering the key question of what counts as a "good reason" for action. Skorupski's somewhat circular response is unsatisfying: a "good reason" is a

\textsuperscript{32} Skorupski, \textit{John Stuart Mill}, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 254. This interpretation is echoed by Snyder, who argues that Mill's idea of moral freedom over one's character requires "choosing our desires and impulses." Snyder, \textit{Reforming Philosophy}, p. 118.
\textsuperscript{34} For example see Skorupski, \textit{John Stuart Mill}, pp. 253–255.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 254. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 280, p. 282. Indeed, it appears that Skorupski reads his own theorising of the naturalist account of freedom into his interpretation of Mill. He introduces his own fields—"scientific psychology" and "philosophical anthropology"—that are intended to supersede Mill's psychology and Ethology.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
rational reason; a rational reason conforms to the rules constitutive of rationality and society.”38 Whatever the veracity of such a proposition it is clear that Mill did not hold this view.

Freedom as a “Mode of Choosing”

Baum provides perhaps the strongest statement of the neutralist interpretation of Mill’s idea of moral freedom. He denies that it contains any moral elements at all.39 According to Baum, Mill’s assertion that only the virtuous are free is only ostensibly perfectionist, endorsing only a particular mode of choosing.”40

For Baum, Millian virtue is a measure of power, not of moral goodness: when he says that “none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free,” his point is that only such persons manifestly yield sufficient power over [their] own character[s].” Baum states that Mill’s wording here is deceptive, and we ought not to be misled by Mill’s rhetorical expression in this passage. Mill sometimes uses morally charged language, but his conception of freedom is significantly different from moralized views in which freedom is equated with virtuous action.” According to Baum, Mill does not mean that virtue requires

38 Skorupski contentiously asserts that the existence of ostensibly non-naturalist qualities like objective rules does not in fact conflict with naturalism. From the fact that the existence of these rules cannot be reduced to the naturalistic level…it does not follow that there are no objective rules of action, or that their existence can be reduced to the mental states and physical circumstances of individuals alone…. When individuals are interpreted hermeneutically [as in Mill], as reasoners and agents, we already posit the existence of objective rules to which they and we respond.” Skorupski, John Stuart Mill, pp. 280–281.
40 Baum, Rereading Power and Freedom, pp. 30–31
41 Ibid., p. 29.
42 Ibid., p. 22. Baum does not indicate which moralised conceptions of freedom he means. Baum gets into difficulty with the following definition of Mill’s idea of freedom: we are more or less autonomous and, therefore, more or less free overall—all other things being equal—to the degree that we have developed our capacity for reflectively pursuing our more important purposes.” The idea that we have more important purposes” does not square with Baum’s claim that freedom is a capacity for deliberation and not virtuous action. At the least, the idea that freedom is measured by the pursuit of important purposes rather than mere purposes introduces a clear moral element into the definition of what counts as free action. For a similar criticism of Baum, albeit in a different context, see Jennifer Pitts’s review of Baum’s Rereading Power and Freedom in Political Theory, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2002, pp. 301–305, p. 304. Pitts argues that, despite criticising Mill for failing to comprehend other forms of moral development as forms of freedom, Baum adopts his own objective standard of freedom which he uses to criticise Mill’s alleged failures. Baum’s interpretation suggests a rather whiggish history of freedom, in which Baum looks back from a contemporary vantage point to judge how far along the
the formation of a particular kind of character. Despite explicitly identifying complete freedom with virtue in the *System of Logic*, Mill is better understood...as insisting on autonomy rather than the exercise of virtue as a condition of being _completely free_. [H]e does not construe freedom as the exercise of virtue.

Baum’s Mill means to say only that deliberative and reflective choice is good. This does not entail the stronger (moralised) proposition that there is a particular range of ‘right’ choices.” The heart of Baum’s neutralist interpretation is a distinction between *methods* and *ends* of choosing:

> [W]hat distinguishes Mill’s conception of freedom from moralized conceptions is that he construes ‘completely free’ action in terms of a particular *mode of choosing* rather than in terms of a particular range of ‘right’ choices.... What is important...is people’s capacity to determine the course of their own lives. By contrast, moralized conceptions of freedom focus on the *ends* chosen by agents as the distinguishing mark of whether or not their actions are truly free.

*Freedom as Capability*

The thread of Baum’s interpretation is taken up by Devigne. Devigne argues, against proponents of the illiberal-moralist interpretation—namely Rawls and Larmore—that Mill’s ‘moral freedom’ does not require the *realisation* of any particular form of character; it simply requires the conceptualising of a form of individualised goodness and its unhindered pursuit. Drawing on Baum’s mode-of-choosing argument, Devigne states that ‘the specific end or good that individuals strive for is less important than conceiving a goal and displaying...path to freedom Mill managed to travel.... Despite explicit claims to the contrary, then, Baum tends to suggest that there is a single standard of freedom and that while Mill was far ahead of his contemporaries, he nonetheless fell short of our own understanding.” Indeed it appears Baum’s general intention is to discredit moralised conceptions of freedom which he finds “deeply problematic and illiberal.” Baum, *Rereading Power and Freedom*, p. 29.


44 Ibid., pp. 30–31. Emphasis in original. Baum's interpretation is confounded by Smith's more nuanced reading of Mill. While the ‘ideal they strive for is less important than that they conceive some ideal or other, and display their freedom in striving to re-form their lives in its name...temperance and virtue [sometimes] take on a manifestly moral aspect for Mill.” In some contexts, ‘the notion of freedom as virtue is unambiguously moral.” Smith, ‘Freedom and Virtue in Politics,” p. 128.
reason in striving to re-form their lives in its image…. [U]nlike the ancients Mill does not identify the good towards which the self-defining agent aims…. [T]he highest good is not the pursuit of some specific good.”

Moral freedom is thus simply the ability to conceptualise, pursue and attain the agent’s personal perception of the good life. Complete freedom, therefore, is the successful moulding of our character in light of our own image of what is good, and hence it is said with truth that none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free.”

According to Devigne, moral freedom consists not in rationality or reflective choice—he criticises Skorupski on this point—but in an awareness that one is capable of amending one’s character if one desires to do so. Individuals…are morally free as long as they know that if they were desirous of changing, they could do so.” In Devigne’s interpretation, moral freedom is a capacity, the opportunity for the self-development of character.” This involves two distinct kinds of freedom. The first is Hobbesian negative liberty: the freedom of action to do what a person enjoys.” The second is higher freedom” or true freedom,” in which case the individual wills the desires he or she desires.” Moral freedom” unites these two categories into an opportunity,” option,” capability” or ability” to self-develop one’s character.”

Devigne’s interpretation suffers from a number of flaws. This interpretation is based on Mill’s statement in the controversial passage of the Logic quoted above that a person feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist; that were he desirous of

45 Devigne, “Cultivating the individual and Society,” pp. 101–102. Mill does not identify the specific end or good the agent should pursue.” In this view, virtue is stripped of its positive moral foundation. Virtue is simply the pursuit of any conception of the good, regardless of substance. The only caveat is that one’s pursuit of moral excellence does not harm or impede others.
46 Ibid., p. 102.
47 Ibid., p. 97.
48 Ibid., p. 96. Emphasis in original.
49 Ibid., pp. 93–99, passim.
altogether throwing them off, there would not be required for that purpose a stronger desire than he knows himself to be capable of feeling.” However, Devigne omits Mill’s immediate qualification, which—in accordance with Skorupski’s interpretation—explicitly adds a realisation clause as a condition of being morally free.” Mill states that it is of course necessary, to render our consciousness of freedom complete, that we should have succeeded in making our character all we have hitherto attempted to make it; for if we have wished and not attained, we have, to that extent, not power over our own character, we are not free.”

Devigne interprets Mill as a thinker sympathetic to established, conservative ideals. In his view, if one has achieved a state of character consistent with one’s personal ideals, it is sufficient for moral freedom to maintain it. As Devigne states, Mill recognises that some individuals’ objectives are not the development of a new way of life, but rather its maintenance. These individuals are morally free so long as they know that if they were desirous of changing, they could do so.” Although Devigne’s self-assigned task is to answer the criticisms of Rawls, Larmore and others who see Mill as too moralistic or illiberal, he does not address their most salient points, namely that Mill’s idea of moral freedom requires the perpetual reformation of moral character. In Mehta’s words, anything which is not aspiring to improvement or is in the process of being improved must on account of that be designated as retrograde…. Life for Mill is ascent, and it has as its opposite any form of stasis.” Mill’s statement in Hamilton that we are under a moral obligation to seek the improvement of our moral character” does not accord with Devigne’s view that all

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50 Mill, Logic, p. 841.
51 But for Skorupski the quality to be realised is rationality, not moral goodness.
52 Mill, Logic, p. 841.
54 Ibid., p. 97. Emphasis added. Cf., Smith, “Freedom and Virtue in Politics,” pp. 126–128. Although we may think we are free without trying or even wanting to try to amend our character, we cannot know that we are free unless we actually try and succeed.”
55 Mehta, Liberalism and Empire, pp. 103–105. The problem is that Devigne frames his interpretation as a direct answering of the misguided charge of Rawls, Larmore, Macedo, Galston and others, who claim that Mill’s vision of freedom is too comprehensive and ultimately illiberal, but ignores their more salient points. Devigne, “Cultivating the Individual and Society,” p. 97.
individuals have an opportunity—but not an obligation—to self-amend.” Mill’s language is an explicit call to action; we are instructed not only to conceive new ways of life” (to use Devigne’s phrase), but also to seek” out the means to achieve them. The act of struggle, of moral striving, labouring and exercise,” is clearly more valuable to Mill than complacency or maintenance. This leaves little room for a Mill amenable to defending existing character states. An individual whose objective is the maintenance” of an existing way of life is neglecting the moral obligation” for perpetual self-improvement. Moral maintenance, though admirable perhaps in its fortitude and diligence, is clearly a different thing to moral freedom. Protecting and underscoring an existing moral state cannot be what Mill means by moral freedom. It is clear that the idea of freedom as a capability and the interpretation of moral freedom as character maintenance” do not answer the rather forceful objections voiced by Mehta, Larmore and others.

*Freedom as “Temperance”*

One final interpretation of Mill’s idea of moral freedom merits consideration. G.W. Smith perhaps occupies the middle-ground in this debate. Smith sits between those who discern

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58 Skorupski is more careful here: “Autonomy as moral freedom is an empirical capacity: it can be developed but it requires resources to develop. And we must not confuse it with a quite different conception of autonomy—autonomy as the ability to do what one wants.” Skorupski makes clear that moral freedom is not freedom to do as I like.” In his view, it is a freedom to be rational. Skorupski, *John Stuart Mill*, p. 355.  
59 Moreover, given Mill’s comments regarding the individual’s “unique” individuality in *On Liberty*, it is doubtful whether one who takes his or her character ideals from received views—which is what Devigne is implicitly suggesting—would even have a character at all in Mill’s paradigm.  
60 In *On Liberty* Mill clearly states that adopting an existing or customary” way of life is not a choice at all, and makes no use of the faculty of deliberation.” Without constantly applying and exercising the faculty of choice in the perpetual quest for self-development, the agent becomes morally inactive and therefore ceases to be a self-determining and morally free individual. Our freedom can be affirmed only through action, as opposed to maintenance: “The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular powers, are improved only by being used. The faculties are called into no exercise by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing only because others believe it. If the grounds of an opinion are not conclusive to the person’s own reason, his reason cannot be strengthened, but is likely to be weakened, by his adopting it: and if the inducements to an act are not such as are consonant to his own feelings and character (where affection, or the rights of others, are not concerned) it is so much done towards rendering his feelings and character inert and torpid, instead of active and energetic.” Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 262.
illiberality in Mill’s alleged freedom-as-self-realisation doctrine and the neutralist interpreters who deny any moral flavour to Mill’s idea of moral freedom. In contrast to the strongly neutralist interpretations of Baum, Skorupski and Devigne, Smith acknowledges that a conception of virtue is “constitutive” of Mill’s theory of moral freedom:

An individual who is free in this stronger sense, free that is to say in the sense of being able to reform his character if he wishes, might not, of course, in fact wish to do so. He might be quite happy to indulge every passing whim without ever giving a serious thought to striving for character self-reform. But such a man, Mill says, cannot really be free…. So, although we may think we are free without trying or even wanting to try to amend our character, we cannot know that we are free unless we actually try and succeed.

...

Mill holds that a necessary condition for freedom is that an agent should be able to amend his character if he wishes, but for ‘complete freedom’ and ‘confirmed virtue’ he must actually desire to do so, and succeed.61

In contrast to Devigne and Baum, Smith shows that Mill’s idea of moral freedom requires a desire for perpetual character development and reformation through action. This desire is tied in with a concept of virtue. Here, Smith detects two senses of virtue: the aesthetic, involving the conceptualisation of the individual’s character as a “work of art”; and the moral, which embraces the “love of the good” and “the provision of external circumstances designed to encourage and stimulate the individual into developing habits and dispositions appropriate to his status and responsibilities as a citizen of a democratic state.”62

Smith finds J.S. Mill primarily concerned with negative virtues drawn chiefly from the writings of James Mill: the taming of hedonistic human nature; the self-control and temperance to resist immediate or short-term pleasures; and the fortitude to resist

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62 Ibid., p. 130. Cf., Mill, Hamilton, p. 130: “if our character is such that while it remains what it is, it necessitates us to do wrong, it will be just to apply motives which will necessitate us to strive for its improvement, and so emancipate ourselves from the other necessity.”
ordinary internal temptations.\textsuperscript{63} The aesthetic and the moral dimensions coalesce into a conception of virtue as \textit{temperance},” which constitutes moral freedom. In Smith’s view, virtue, conceived as temperance, is \textit{logically constitutive of true or complete freedom.” The measure of \textit{self-mastery}“ is the successful development of a temperate character. \textsuperscript{64} Ultimately \textit{Mill’s conception of real freedom” is constituted by temperance and self-control.}\textsuperscript{65}

While acknowledging that \textit{temperance and freedom are clearly connected in an intimate way by Mill with typically moral values, such as civic responsibility and the general good},” Smith argues that we ought to understand Mill’s conception of virtue as an aesthetic, rather than a moral position.\textsuperscript{66} Mill’s conception of moral freedom is ultimately neutral because it identifies freedom with essentially negative virtues such as self-control and restraint, not by reference to positive moral qualities. Smith concludes, however, that Mill vacillates between the aesthetic and the moral in a way that suggests a general incoherence or ambivalence on his part about the connections between moral freedom, virtue and character development. \textit{Mill’s own interpretation of his novel conception of freedom as the successful exercise of the virtue of temperance is ambiguous, or...ambivalent.”}\textsuperscript{67} Smith contends that Mill never coherently or comprehensively elaborated this connection: \textit{At this crucial point Mill is, unfortunately, neither sufficiently specific nor explicit…. Mill remains vexingly indecisive in execution”; he \textit{slip[s] from the aesthetic to the moral,” and is \textit{sometimes impossible to pin down at all.”}\textsuperscript{68} In the passage in the \textit{System of Logic} in which Mill identifies freedom with virtue, there is \textit{a profound ambiguity.”}\textsuperscript{69} In making this argument Smith recalls the spirit of the earlier incoherency interpretation:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Smith, \textit{Freedom and Virtue in Politics,” p. 127. C.f., Skorupski, \textit{John Stuart Mill}, p. 355.}
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 134.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Ibid., p. 131.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid., pp.128–131.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p.128.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Ibid., pp. 128–129, p. 116, p. 125, n. 40.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Ibid., pp. 127–128.
\end{itemize}
Mill...develops a conception of freedom as, essentially, the exercise of virtue.... [However] Mill is neither a particularly clear nor consistent thinker.... The categories he hammers out in his crucial proof of freedom in the *Logic* are themselves marred by obscurity and ambiguity, and the manner in which he exploits his conceptual innovations is often oblique and unsystematic. In particular his understanding of the relation between character and virtue is tantalisingly undeveloped.\textsuperscript{70}

In different ways, Mill's sympathetic interpreters do not adequately account for the implication contained in the *Logic* that moral freedom is measured in terms of moral goodness. They therefore cannot engage fully with the claims of the illiberal-moralist interpretation. It is clear that this gap must be filled in order more adequately to understand Mill’s paradigm of moral character.

**Desire, Habit, Virtue**

First, the account of Mill's moral psychology must be completed. By studying more closely the relationship between self-formation, virtue and moral freedom, a fourth argument against determinism emerges. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill builds on his idea of the multiplicity of desires (the desire bundles discussed in Chapter Four), purposively complicating and extending the motives of human action. “Complete” freedom, Mill argues, first requires that the individual cultivates “habits of willing” and moral “purpose” so that actions are not, in any single case, determined by an uncontrollable internal compulsion, such as a self-interested desire, or environmental factors, such as “the despotism of custom.” In clarifying the psychological process by which “habit” and “purpose” are added to bundles of desires in the motivational matrix, Mill’s paradigm of character development and idea of moral freedom are brought into sharper relief. By exploring this argument against determinism we are put into a position to

\textsuperscript{70} Smith, “Freedom and Virtue in Politics,”., p. 116, p 134. Smith’s ultimate conclusion perhaps sits best with the emerging interpretation that Mill's thought is anti-liberal and with the traditional view that Mill is incoherent. He ends by identifying the usual tensions between empiricism and idealism. “[T]he question must arise as to whether such a notion of freedom can be coherently advanced without an accompanying metaphysical shift to Idealism.”
examine more closely the intimate connection between moral excellence and moral freedom in Mill’s Ethology.

Desiring Ends; Desiring Means

It is clear that for Mill moral freedom requires the mastering of one’s habits and temptations.” To be free is most fundamentally to overcome internal and environmentally determining factors in the formation of moral character. But what is “complete” freedom? Further, what is a “self-determining” character? What does a “power of self-formation” entail? These questions are unanswerable in the determinist frameworks of, respectively, Hobbes, Bentham and Owen:

[N]o liberty can be inferred to the will, desire, or inclination, but the liberty of the man; which consisteth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to doe. (Hobbes).

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure… They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think. (Bentham).

[M]an is not a free agent, and does not create his own qualities, his will, or his conduct. (Owen).

To understand Mill’s idea of “self-formation” we need to compare the controversial passage from the System of Logic quoted above to Mill’s remarks on moral psychology in Utilitarianism (1861) and An Examination of William Hamilton’s Philosophy (1865). Here,

72 Mill, Logic, p. 842.
74 Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, p. 11.
75 Owen, The Revolution in the Mind, p. xxiii.
Mill expounds his bundled-desire psychology and explains how the individual attains a virtuous character through a process of autonomous self-formation.

Although critical attention to Mill’s *Utilitarianism* generally focuses on Mill’s “proof” of the normative utilitarian standard, it is important not to forget that, in that essay, Mill is doing moral psychology.”

He argues that the only way to cultivate a virtuous character is to desire virtue as a means to happiness. But once this initial means-ends calculation is made, a complex psychological process occurs. Over time the means one employs in the pursuit of a goal are conflated with the initial end. Eventually, the distinction between means and ends dissolves altogether and the means are conceived as a part of the end. As Mill explains, “from being a means to happiness, it has come to be itself a principal ingredient of the individual’s conception of happiness…. What was once desired as an instrument for the attainment of happiness, has come to be desired for its own sake.”

The means employed to attain the end thereby become ends in themselves and, ultimately, objects of desire. For example, the attainment of wealth, fame and power (as well as virtue) can be felt as a part of one’s happiness, even though each of these goods holds no initial prospect of pleasure in itself and is originally pursued as strategic means to a hedonic end. Mill’s point is that “means not originally desired can become the objects of desire.” This requires a moral psychology that incorporates the way in which behaviour changes over time:

> It is at least certain that we gradually, through the influence of association, come to desire the means without thinking of the end: the action itself becomes an object of desire, and is performed without reference to any motive beyond itself.

**Habitual Behaviour**

Not all actions are produced immediately by desire motivation, however. As Mill states in the

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79 Ibid., p. 238.
Logic: “A motive [is] not always the anticipation of a pleasure or pain.” Here, Mill introduces the idea of habitual motivation. Through the regular performance of a means that has become desired as an end in itself, the motivation from desire is eventually dulled or removed. The means are then carried out without any anticipation of the pleasurable end they are intended to secure, or even the pleasure we came to derive from the means themselves.

Mill formulates these psychological claims into a three-stage view of moral development. First we strategise means to achieve a hedonic end. Then the means become pleasurable without reference to the end. In the final stage, the means are pursued disinterestedly.” In this case, the disinterested pursuit of a goal is habitual.” As Mill states, “[m]any indifferent things, which men initially did from a motive of some sort, they continue to do from habit…[and] we may will from habit what we no longer desire for itself, or desire only because we will it.” Mill now hints that this utilitarian conception of habitual willing is related to virtue. In cases of confirmed virtue,” the individual is eventually motivated by habit:

[W]ill is a different thing from desire…. [A] person of confirmed virtue, or any other person whose purposes are fixed, carries out his purposes without any thought of the pleasure he has in contemplating them, or expects to derive from their fulfilment; and persists in acting on them, even though these pleasures are much diminished, by changes in his character or decay of his passive sensibilities, or are outweighed by the pains which the pursuit of the purposes may bring upon him.

Mill insists that this is not a departure from the utilitarian premise that happiness is the only thing inherently desired. The “highly important psychological fact” of habitual willing cannot be divorced from desire. Mill means only to assert that will, like all other parts of our constitution, is amenable to habit.” This does not entail a denial of psychological

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hedonism: “It is not the less true that will, in the beginning, is entirely produced by desire; including in that term the repelling influence of pain as well as the attractive one of pleasure.”

This is a crucial divergence from Bentham’s epiphenomenalism—the view that the cause of a state of consciousness is always a physical state, and never another state of consciousness. . . . [O]ne mental state cannot cause another.”

Bentham held that mental states are produced solely by painful and pleasurable sensations and are not themselves involved in the production of other mental states. In direct opposition to this view, Mill argues that mental states and behaviours have causal powers over the development of subsequent mental states and behaviours.

In failing to understand the complex integration of “mental states” into a general behavioural mode (a “character”) Bentham had fundamentally misunderstood moral psychology. Understanding this process requires that we jettison the “snapshot” view of ethical decision-making entirely. Not every action can be explained by the inherent psychological impulse to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. We must take account of the agent’s experiential history and “continuous patterns of decision” in explaining his or her actions and modes of behaviour.

Mill argues that “the previous mental history of the individuals must have some share in producing or in modifying the whole of their mental character.” He considers this principle “an inevitable consequence of the laws of mind.”

Mill’s critique of Bentham is closely related to his idea of habitual behaviour. Mill

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83 Mill, Logic, p. 842; Mill, Utilitarianism, 236.
85 Mill intended this argument as a criticism of both Bentham and Comte. See Mill, Logic, pp. 850–860; Skorupski, John Stuart Mill, pp. 261–264. It might be said that in Bentham’s psychology the mind is passive, while Mill incorporates passive and active qualities.
86 In Mill’s Moral Science, when a state of mind is caused by another state of mind it is an operation of the Laws of Mind; when a state of mind is produced by a “physical state” it is a law of physical science. This view was also a feature of Owen’s criticism of Bentham and James Mill. See Mill, Logic, pp. 849–850; and Skorupski, John Stuart Mill, pp. 261–262.
87 Kupperman argues that “any [ethical or psychological] theory needs to supply a way of understanding continuous patterns of decision and should abandon or modify. . . . the snapshot view.” Kupperman, Character, p. 157.
88 Mill, Logic, p. 856.
conceives the production of habits as an increase in moral freedom, a partial but significant liberation from desire. According to Mill, a mental state becomes “habitual” when desire bundles no longer play an “active” causal role in moral development:

Will, the active phenomenon, is a different thing from desire, the state of passive sensibility, and though originally an offshoot from it, may in time take root and detach itself from the parent stock; so much so, that in the case of an habitual purpose, instead of willing the thing because we desire it, we often desire it only because we will it.⁸⁹

This is not a transcendental process, however.⁹⁰ Despite the crucial implication that in cases of habitual behaviour an action can be “willed” (i.e., caused) without motivation from desire, desire remains the ultimate, if not immediate, originator of all modes of behaviour. “Will is the child of desire, and passes out of the dominion of its parent only to come under that of habit.”⁹¹ In the case of virtue, Mill is careful to reaffirm the necessary initial connection between desire and action: “Those who desire virtue for its own sake, desire it either because the consciousness of it is a pleasure, or because the consciousness of being without it is a pain, or for both reasons united.”⁹² The central pillar of utilitarian psychology—pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends”—is compatible with a desire for virtue because this desire is capable of becoming “a part of happiness”⁹³:

The person is made…happy by its mere possession; and is made unhappy by failure to obtain it. The desire of it is not a different thing from the desire of happiness, any more than the love of music, or the desire of health. They are

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⁹¹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 239. See also, Mill, *Hamilton*, p. 468. It is through this desire-initiated project that its motivational forces can be “conquered” by mental influences and by education.” Mill, *Logic*, p. 859.
⁹² Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 237. Mill reiterates the point in *Hamilton*: “Not only the love of money, but the love of acquisition, of possession, of accumulation, is a feeling created by association. What is desired for itself is the use and enjoyment of individual objects: the possession of a store of them is at first desired as a means to that; but after it has been long pursued as a means, it becomes itself an end—the object of the passion of appropriation, or property, a passion sui generis, and (as life has hitherto been carried on) one of the principal moving powers in human affairs.” Mill, *Hamilton*, pp. 284–285.
⁹³ “[P]eople desire nothing as ends unless they are parts of their happiness.” West, *Mill’s Utilitarianism*, p. 86.
included in happiness. They are some of the elements of which the desire of happiness is made up. Happiness is not an abstract idea, but a concrete whole; and these are some of its parts. …Virtue, according to the utilitarian conception, is a good of this description. There was no original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure, and especially to protection from pain. But through the association thus formed, it may be felt a good in itself, and desired as such with as great intensity as any other good.  

However far from the initial desire one’s “habit of willing” may develop it never involves a faculty of resisting, rationalising, isolating or selecting desires. Habitual willing does not conceive an isolated point in time at which individual reasons are rationally addressed in a manner that amounts to direct desire resistance. Ultimately, Mill maintained that pleasure and pain are causally linked to all voluntary human acts…though some only indirectly, through past associations of the act with pleasure.” All habitual behaviour can be eventually traced back to an initial desire. As Mill explains in a note appended to the 1869 edition of James Mill’s *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, “[d]esire is…in truth, the initiatory stage of Will.” Although the process of habitual willing allows a certain independence from the motivational compulsion of desire bundles, “[i]t is not the less true that will, in the beginning, is entirely produced by desire.” Mill is attuned to the tensions in this position, which perhaps explains the persistent reiteration of the ultimate connection between desiring virtue and being a habitually virtuous person:

How can the will to be virtuous, where it does not exist in sufficient force, be implanted or awakened? Only by making the person desire virtue—by making him think of it in a pleasurable light, or of its absence in a painful one. It is by associating the doing right with pleasure, or the doing wrong with pain, or by eliciting and impressing and bringing home to the person’s experience the pleasure naturally involved in the one or the pain in the other, that it is possible to call forth

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97 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 238. Desire is understood as a present conception of something as pleasurable. The anticipation of pleasure is called “hope,” not desire.
that will to be virtuous, which, when confirmed, acts without any thought of either pleasure or pain.\(^98\)

The object of moral education is to educate the will: but the will can only be educated through the desires and aversions; by eradicating or weakening such of them as are likeliest to lead to evil; exalting to the highest pitch the desire of right conduct and the aversion to wrong; cultivating all other desires and aversions of which the ordinary operation is auxiliary to right, while dis- countenancing so immoderate an indulgence of them, as might render them too powerful to be overcome by the moral sentiment, when they chance to be in opposition to it.\(^99\)

This argument must be understood within Mill's critique of determinism and, in particular, within the context of Bentham's hedonistic determinism. Mill is constructing a moral psychology that differs fundamentally from Bentham's epiphenomenalist model. In Mill's view a series of mental states is developed into a "moral character" which can, by the process described above, be driven by non-desire-based motivation. Here Mill widens the scope of mental freedom by showing that character development—a blank in Bentham's and Hobbes's psychologies—liberates the agent, to however humble a degree, from egotistic or hedonistic impulses. Desire is described as a "passive sensibility," a mere reaction to external stimuli. Conversely, "willing" is the active formation of habitual mental states. As Mill holds—against Bentham—that all mental states have causal potential, the formation of habitual behaviours increases the amount of motivational forces acting upon the agent, thus enhancing the agent’s moral freedom. There was to Mill an important distinction in holding, as he did, that pleasure is the only thing inherently desired, and subscribing to the determinist view that such a desire is always expressed in action.

*Noxious Habits*

But acting habitually is not the same as being virtuous. —That which is the result of habit

\(^{98}\) Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 239.

affords no presumption of being intrinsically good.\textsuperscript{100} In fact, habitual action can be noxious.\textsuperscript{101} The liberation from a state of desire-compulsion to habitual willing is exemplified in the pursuit of power, wealth and fame, none of which is morally praiseworthy. For example, Mill observes that we originally pursue wealth for the goods and services it can buy. There is nothing originally more desirable about money than about any heap of glittering pebbles. Its worth is solely that of the things which it will buy; the desires for other things than itself, which it is a means of gratifying.\textsuperscript{102} Then we come to desire money in itself, without reference to its utility. At this stage, money is desired not for the sake of an end, but as part of the end.” It is no longer a means to happiness,“ having, over time, become a principal ingredient of the individual’s conception of happiness.”\textsuperscript{103} Finally, in Utilitarianism, A System of Logic and Hamilton Mill affirms that it is common to seek noxious” ends habitually, without any motivation from desire:

This...is but an instance of that familiar fact, the power of habit, and is nowise confined to the case of virtuous actions. Many indifferent things, which men originally did from a motive of some sort, they continue to do from habit. Sometimes this is done unconsciously, the consciousness coming only after the action: at other times with conscious volition, but volition which has became habitual, and is put into operation by the force of habit, in opposition perhaps to the deliberate preference, as often happens with those who have contracted habits of vicious or hurtful indulgence.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{100} Mill, Utilitarianism, p. 239.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., p. 237.
\textsuperscript{102} In the 1867 edition of Hamilton Mill uses the same analogy to reiterate the point: “Does any one think that money has intrinsically, by its own nature, any more value to us than the first shining pebbles we pick up, except for the things it will purchase? Yet its association with these things not only makes it desired for itself, but creates in many minds a passionate love of it, far surpassing the desire they feel for any of the uses to which it can be put.” Mill, Hamilton, p. 284.
\textsuperscript{103} “The love of money is not only one of the strongest moving forces of human life, but money is, in many cases, desired in and for itself; the desire to possess it is often stronger than the desire to use it, and goes on increasing when all the desires which point to ends beyond it, to be compassed by it, are falling off.” Mill, Utilitarianism, p. 236.
\textsuperscript{104} Mill, Utilitarianism, p. 238.
As we proceed in the formation of habits, and become accustomed to will a particular act or a particular course of conduct because it is pleasurable, we at last continue to will it without any reference to its being pleasurable. Although, from some change in us or in our circumstances, we have ceased to find any pleasure in the action, or perhaps to anticipate any pleasure as the consequence of it, we still continue to desire the action, and consequently to do it. In this manner it is that habits of hurtful excess continue to be practised although they have ceased to be pleasurable…

Habitual modes of behaviour earn Mill’s epithet “confirmed character.” They are not necessarily virtuous, however, and do not exhaust the full scope of moral development. In elaborating his theory of character development Mill incorporates a measure of liberation and independence as a necessary constituent: “It is only when our purposes have become independent of the feelings of pain or pleasure from which they originally took their rise, that we are said to have a confirmed character.” But characters come in varied moral hues; a “confirmed character” can be vicious or virtuous. As Kupperman summarises, “[s]trength of character is independent of goodness of character, in that deeply wicked people have strong characters.” Having a character, Mill argues, involves a transcendence of determinist motivational forces such as the desire for immediate pleasure (internal determinism) and the social circumstances in which character formation occurs. There is therefore a direct connection between the formation of habitual behaviour—an increase in motivational freedom—and the creation of a confirmed character. In this view, habitual action is freer than desire-motivated action, but it is not necessarily virtuous:

105 Mill, Logic, p. 842.
106 Kupperman closely follows Mill on this point: “Character has a vital role in how we act. That is, to have a character is to act in such a way that the person one is plays a major role in any explanation of one’s behaviour. To have no character is to act in such a way that one’s behaviour might be viewed as (at least approximately) the product of forces acting on one. Thus, the person who always yields to temptation quickly, without a struggle, would be spoken of as having no character, as would the extreme conformist who always does what is expected of him or her. To have no character, therefore, is to be morally unreliable, a state not as bad as being wicked. The wicked can be relied on in a negative way.” Kupperman, Character, p. 7.
A habit of willing is commonly called a purpose; and among the causes of our volitions, and of the actions which flow from them, must be reckoned not only likings and aversions, but also purposes. It is only when our purposes have become independent of the feelings of pain or pleasure from which they originally took their rise, that we are said to have a confirmed character. "A character," says Novalis, "is a completely fashioned will:" and the will, once so fashioned, may be steady and constant, when the passive susceptibilities of pleasure and pain are greatly weakened, or materially changed.110

Here, Mill is describing a process of character development that involves an extension of moral freedom, but he has not yet introduced the idea of virtuous development. The first stage of character development involves a liberation from the motivation of immediate desire. In this case the agent has a confirmed character because his will is "steady and constant," and his "passive susceptibilities of pleasure and pain are greatly weakened, or materially changed." Behaviour generated by desire bundles is unlikely to be consistent over time, while habitual behaviour is capable of reliable prediction.111 Mill argues that the "completely fashioned will" of the "confirmed character" may be steadily and constantly "noxious," however, as in the habitual pursuit of wealth or power.

Habit and Virtue

In Utilitarianism, Mill distinguishes virtue from other habitual traits—such as the pursuit of power, money and fame—in two ways. Firstly, virtue requires that the habitually sought end is reconciled with an individual's previously conceived personal moral ideals. No-one starts out wanting to love money habitually, Mill claims, even if they do desire to be wealthy. The habitual pursuit of wealth is an undirected form of moral development. If the mode of habitual behaviour accords with the agent's personal moral ideals, the development of a confirmed character is said to be self-directed:

111 Ibid., pp. 836–837. This is why the character cannot be confirmed virtuous until its virtuous behaviour is performed without the anticipation of pleasure. While virtue is desired and not yet habitual, its constancy cannot be relied upon. Mill, Utilitarianism, p. 239.
Third and last comes the case in which the habitual act of will in the individual instance is not in contradiction to the general intention prevailing at other times, but in fulfilment of it; as in the case of the person of confirmed virtue, and of all who pursue deliberately and consistently any determinate end.\footnote{Mill, \textit{Utilitarianism}, p. 238.}

This is a necessary but not sufficient condition of virtue. The second criterion of virtuous character development is that the habitual mode of behaviour contributes to general well-being. Here, Mill goes well beyond the idea of virtue as rationality or temperance. Mill argues in \textit{Utilitarianism}, \textit{A System of Logic}, \textit{Hamilton} and the \textit{Autobiography} that the virtuous person has a positive “desire to do right” and, more importantly, is a benefit to society. Virtue is a moral good precisely on these grounds; its goodness depends on its tendency to promote utility:

That which is the result of habit affords no presumption of being intrinsically good; and there would be no reason for wishing that the purpose of virtue should become independent of pleasure and pain, were it not that the influence of the pleasurable and painful associations which prompt to virtue is not sufficiently to be depended on for unerring constancy of action until it has acquired the support of habit…. [T]he will to do right ought to be cultivated into this habitual independence. In other words, this state of the will is a means to good, not intrinsically a good; and does not contradict the doctrine that nothing is a good to human beings but in so far as it is either itself pleasurable, or a means of attaining pleasure or averting pain.\footnote{Ibid., p. 239.}

Mill’s position is that the purpose and habits of the confirmed character are virtuous only if they produce happiness. He justifies the pursuit of virtue by arguing that such characters are a sum benefit to the aggregate measure of social utility.\footnote{Mill, \textit{Logic}, p. 952; Mill, \textit{Utilitarianism}, p. 236ff. This is the “difference between it [virtue] and the love of money, or power, or of fame.”} Indeed, “actions and dispositions are only virtuous because they promote another end than virtue.”\footnote{Mill, \textit{Utilitarianism}, p. 235. Of the social dimension of virtue, Capaldi writes that for Mill “civic virtue in a liberal culture requires us to help others.” Virtue in the polis is to be mindful and sensitive of others’ interests. Capaldi, \textit{John Stuart Mill: A Biography}, p. 288. In contrast, Ryan argues that this form of argument collapses a}
ideal nobleness of will and conduct.” In Mill’s view, the noble character is a utility maximiser: “If it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it.” Mill explicitly reaffirms this position in *Utilitarianism*, the *Logic* and *Hamilton*. The state most conducive to the general happiness,” he argues, is the disinterested pursuit of virtue as a good in itself. Thus Mill claims that utilitarianism enjoins and requires the cultivation of the love of virtue up to the greatest strength possible, as being above all things important to the general happiness.” When read together, these three texts display a striking commonality, an adequate demonstration of which is best achieved by considering the following three passages together:

Utilitarianism...could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit.... [T]he mind is not in a right state, not in a state conformable to Utility, not in the state most conducive to the general happiness, unless it does love virtue in this manner—as a thing desirable in itself, even although, in the individual instance, it should not produce those other desirable consequences which it tends to produce, and on account of which it is held to be virtue. ...[T]here is nothing which makes him so much a blessing to them as the cultivation of the disinterested love of virtue.

subtle distinction between duty and excellence, that is, between what society requires from us as a minimum standard of public morality, and the excellence of voluntarily going above and beyond the minimum standard. Echoing Smith's account of aesthetic virtue, Ryan states that the...ars of individual life [the pursuit of nobleness and self-culture]...lie beyond duty, which it is the function of the existence of moral rules to protect, but not to enforce upon men.” Alan Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1990), p. 233ff. See also Alan Ryan, *J.S. Mill* (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 143–146.

Ibid., pp. 213–214, p. 235, p. 237. Emphasis added. The next sentence reads: “This opinion is not, in the smallest degree, a departure from the Happiness principle.”
[O]n the whole more happiness will exist in the world, if feelings are cultivated which will make people, in certain cases, regardless of happiness. I fully admit that this is true: that the cultivation of an ideal nobleness of will and conduct, should be to individual human beings an end, to which the specific pursuit either of their own happiness or of that of others…should, in any case of conflict, give way. But I hold that the very question, what constitutes this elevation of character, is itself to be decided by a reference to happiness as the standard. The character itself should be, to the individual, a paramount end, simply because the existence of this ideal nobleness of character, or of a near approach to it, in any abundance, would go further than all things else towards making human life happy; both in the comparatively humble sense, of pleasure and freedom from pain, and in the higher meaning, of rendering life, not what it now is almost universally, puerile and insignificant—but such as human beings with highly developed faculties can care to have.119

My position is, that a human being who loves, disinterestedly and consistently, his fellow creatures and whatever tends to their good, who hates with a vigorous hatred what causes them evil, and whose actions correspond in character with these feelings, is naturally, necessarily, and reasonably an object to be loved, admired, sympathized with, and in all ways cherished and encouraged by mankind; while a person who has none of these qualities, or so little, that his actions continually jar and conflict with the good of others, and that for purposes of his own he is ready to inflict on them a great amount of evil, is a natural and legitimate object of their fixed aversion, and of conduct conformable thereto.120

In both *Utilitarianism* and *A System of Logic* Mill's idea of virtuous character development is formulated in the midst of his defence of the utilitarian standard—‘that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.’121 In *Utilitarianism* Mill implies that virtue involves a transition from a character determined by ‘low’ desire impulses to a character whose habitual

mode of action strives for “the general cultivation of nobleness of character.” This is a prescriptive maxim. In that same text Mill directs the reader to Book VI of the *System of Logic*, in which we find the decisive statement: “the general principle to which all rules of practice ought to conform, and the test by which they should be tried, is that of conduciveness to the happiness of mankind, or rather, of all sentient beings: in other words, that the promotion of happiness is the ultimate principle of Teleology.” Any practical maxim Mill lays down must, at some point, be justified by its propensity to promote, directly or indirectly, general well-being, virtue included. As the free and virtuous character, by definition, strives for goodness and nobility, Mill has incorporated a positive moral requirement: the virtuous person—which is to say a “morally free” person—desires to do what is good and right, and is a socially valuable utility maximiser.

Mill’s ideas of “an ideal nobleness of will and conduct,” “the moral hero” and “beneficence” are pregnant with moral assumptions. But they are also formulated and conceived within an idea of mental and moral freedom. Freedom is understood as a form of moral development in which the agent is liberated from the lowest possible desires to a state of habitual beneficence by forming a “higher” desire “to do right.” As Mill remarks in *Hamilton*, “the love of right…constitute[s] the true definition of our freedom.”

As Mill defends virtue directly as a promoter of utility, Skorupski, Baum and Devigne fail to complete Mill’s account when they identify virtue only with the habitual subordination

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122 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 211–214, p. 236. “Life would be a poor thing, very ill provided with sources of happiness, if there were not this provision of nature, by which things originally indifferent, but conducive to, or otherwise associated with, the satisfaction of our primitive desires, become in themselves sources of pleasure more valuable than the primitive pleasures, both in permanency, in the space of human existence that they are capable of covering, and even in intensity.”
123 See Mill’s footnote “*” in *Utilitarianism*, p. 238.
124 Also: “that [Utilitarian] standard is not the agent’s own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether.” Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 213.
126 E.g., Mill, *Hamilton*, p. 451, p. 464. It is notable that Mill’s discussion of nobility and love of the good in *Hamilton* is entwined within his general discussion of “freedom of the will.” There is no clear distinction in that text between moral freedom and moral goodness.
of one's behaviour so that it reconciles with a coherent and rational moral narrative. This is a necessary, not sufficient condition of virtue. Furthermore, the passivity implied in the rational subordination of one's desires into a temperate moral character does not reflect Mill's preoccupation with the active cultivation of a positive love and desire to do right. Moral activity and exercise consists in the self-formation of habits by means-ends strategising, not the performance of habitual behaviour. However, these qualities are only a part of Mill's idea of virtue, encapsulating only the beginnings of moral freedom. To complete the connection between virtue and freedom we must consider Mill's ideal standard of character—an overtly moralised concept.

The Internal Culture of the Individual

In his Autobiography, Mill records how he came to discover that the romantic writings proscribed by his father and Bentham, such as the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, had deep psychological insight. While determinists such as Owen and Bentham focussed solely on the ordering of outward circumstances in order to achieve their reforms, romantics such as Carlyle, Wordsworth and Coleridge were preoccupied with what Mill came to call internal culture. These were the channels through which I received the influences which enlarged my early narrow creed. Mill was reformulating his old opinions within the context of his appreciation of the new romanticism, which, in Mill's words, represented the European reaction against the negative philosophy of the eighteenth century:


The influences of European, that is to say, Continental, thought, and especially those of the reaction of the nineteenth-century against the eighteenth, were now streaming in upon me. They came from various quarters: from the writings of Coleridge…from the Coleridgians with whom I was in personal intercourse; from what I had read of Goethe; from Carlyle’s early articles in the Edinburgh and Foreign Reviews, though for a long time I saw nothing in these (as my father saw nothing in them to the last) but insane rhapsody…. [Though legitimate, the insights of counter-enlightenment thinkers] were held in an exaggerated and violent manner by the thinkers with whom I was now most accustomed to compare notes, and who, as usual with a reaction, ignored that half of the truth which the thinkers of the eighteenth-century saw.¹³¹

Initially under the influence of these romantic writers, Mill developed a personal ethic that “attached great importance to the recognition and nourishment of the inner world.”¹³² As Colin Heydt notes, the romantic writers of the early nineteenth-century advocated the importance of “interiority”—of “feeling and disposition”—as part of a trenchant critique of utilitarianism’s outward, mechanical focus.¹³³ Whereas Carlyle proclaimed “the infinite worth of moral goodness…[of] the mind which is within us,”¹³⁴ Bentham had written, “[c]all them soldiers, call them monks, call them machines: so they were but happy ones, I should not care.”¹³⁴

Benthamite reform was characterised by the belief that social and political life ought to be reorganised so that the direct promotion of pleasure and the removal of pain was the telos of legislation. The utilitarians were unequivocal in their disregard for virtue-ethics and fuzzy, romantic notions like internal self-culture and moral education. The standard of morals was utility measured through action. This resulted in a contempt for the emotions: “Feelings,

as such, he [James Mill] considered to be no proper subjects of praise or blame; right and wrong, good and bad, he regarded as terms having reference only to conduct; to acts and omissions; there being no feeling which may not lead, and does not frequently lead, either to good or to bad actions."

In response to this idea, Mill turned to the importance of ostensibly aesthetic, yet fundamentally moral, concepts such as self-culture, asking “what will be his [a Benthamite’s] comparative worth as a human being?” Bentham’s contented pleasure machine was an image of character deformation, having “no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation.” For Mill, however, “it really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it. Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself.”

Although he repudiated their metaphysics and abhorred their political conservatism, Mill found value in the romantic thinkers’ focus on the inner-self. Indeed Mill’s thought as a whole, Heydt and Capaldi argue, can be seen as an incorporation of romantic insights within utilitarian reformism. These insights were closely associated with emotion. It is certain that Mill’s first warming towards the importance of emotions and “feelings” in moral development came at the time of his first disenchantment with the utilitarianism of Bentham and James Mill. While Mill’s analytical faculty was sharpened to the point of notoriety, his education produced a “stunted” and canalised emotional capacity. The cultivation or

\[\text{135 Mill, Autobiography, p. 51, p. 113.} \]
\[\text{136 Mill, On Liberty, p. 263. By contrast, Mill remarks of James Mill’s idea of “desert, which he thought only due to actions.” Mill, Autobiography, p. 113.} \]
\[\text{137 Capaldi, John Stuart Mill: A Biography, pp. xv–xvi, passim; Heydt, “Mill, Bentham, and “Internal Culture,”” passim.} \]
\[\text{138 Mill, Autobiography, p. 181.} \]
\[\text{139 Mill’s early achievements are documented in Ryan, J.S. Mill, pp. 19–23. For example, in addition to mastering Greek, Latin and French, by the age of 12, Mill had edited his father’s History of British India and had been personally taught political economy by Ricardo. Packe cites a study which rather implausibly claims that at this stage of his life Mill’s IQ was measured at 190. Michael St. John Packe, The Life of John Stuart Mill (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 40.} \]
\[\text{140 Stillinger, Early Draft, pp. 184–185.} \]
expression of emotion had no place whatsoever in his father’s curriculum, and, as Mill
strikingly noted, was largely absent in family life:

For passionate emotions of all sorts, and for everything which has been said or
written in exaltation of them, he professed the greatest contempt: he regarded them
as a form of madness; ‘the intense’ was with him a bye-word of scornful
disapprobation. He regarded as an aberration of the moral standard of modern
times, compared with that of the ancients, the great stress laid upon feeling.\textsuperscript{141}

\ldots

\[M\]y father’s teachings tended to the undervaluing of feeling…. [T]he effect was
that the cultivation of feeling…was not in much esteem among us, and had very
little place in the thoughts of most of us, myself in particular.\textsuperscript{142}

Mill remarks that he ‘grew up in the absence of love & in the presence of fear.’” He
believed that this neglect of and contempt for emotion crippled his moral development:

\textit{–}many & indelible are the effects of this bringing-up, in the stunting of my moral growth.\textsuperscript{143} 

This moral and emotional ‘stunting’ contributed to a lack of imagination and spontaneity,
leading ultimately to a self-conception as ‘a mere reasoning machine’” and a painful feeling
of moral coercion.\textsuperscript{144} Mill believed that he had an emotionally barren character that had been
made \textit{for} him by his educators; his was a development over which he could claim no
ownership. Mill’s lack of emotional self-culture manifested as an absence of moral
freedom—a ‘lacking in any inner sense of agency.’\textsuperscript{145} Diagnosing the deficiencies in his own
moral development in a passage later excised from Mill’s \textit{Autobiography} by Harriet Taylor-
Mill, Mill stated that this was ‘\textit{a}nother evil I shared with many of the sons of energetic
fathers’:

\begin{itemize}
\item[]\textsuperscript{141} Mill, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 51.
\item[]\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., p. 113.
\item[]\textsuperscript{144} Mill, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 111.
\item[]\textsuperscript{145} Nussbaum, \textit{Hiding from Humanity}, pp. 196–197.
\end{itemize}
To have been, through childhood, under the constant rule of a strong will, certainly is not favourable to strength of will. I was so much accustomed to expect to be told what to do, either in the form of direct command or of rebuke for not doing it, that I acquired a habit of leaving my responsibility as a moral agent to rest on my father, my conscience never speaking to me except by his voice. The things I ought not to do were mostly provided for by his precepts, rigorously enforced whenever violated, but the things which I ought to do I hardly ever did of my own mere motion, but waited till he told me to do them; and if he forbore or forgot to tell me, they were generally left undone. I thus acquired a habit of backwardness, of waiting to follow the lead of others, an absence of moral spontaneity, an inactivity of the moral sense and even to a large extent, of the intellect, unless roused by the appeal of some one else,—for which a large abatement must be made from the benefits, either moral or intellectual, which flowed from any other part of my education.  

In the winter of 1826, at the age of twenty, and with an already achieved notoriety as a political and intellectual prodigy, Mill became disillusioned with Benthamite utilitarianism and fell into a kind of depression:

[M]y heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to be found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.  

Bentham's and James Mill's anti-emotion utilitarian pedagogy had become what Isaiah Berlin aptly describes as an "appalling success." Mill realised that excessive rationalism has a tendency to wear away the feelings" and that there was a connection between self-culture, self-formation and well-being.

The most important consequence of Mill's "mental crisis" was the connection it galvanised in his mind between depression, impassivity and the loss of agency in one's moral

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development. Mill’s crisis left him with a new aim. Instead of focusing exclusively on the
 ordering of outward circumstances,” the mistake of James Mill and Bentham, Mill placed a
 “prime” importance on the individual’s self-culture, and, in particular, the cultivation of the
 emotions in moral education. 149 Mill had painfully discovered that “speculation never ought
to be the sole and exclusive occupation of anyone.” 150 While the critical and analytical
 faculties are of great importance, a singular mental focus on their exclusive development
canalises and deforms moral development. Mill now saw that “variety” and “many-
sidedness” were the key ingredients to a fully developed moral character. 151 Moreover, the
view that tested morality exclusively through actions seemed to have missed something
fundamental about a person’s character. Neglecting the inner realm of “disposition” and
“feeling” was not only emotionally destructive, it was bad psychology:

It is a common saying that the only true test of a person’s character is actions.
There is much error in this. Actions, even habitual ones, are as fallacious a test of
character as any other. A person’s actions are often an indication not so much of
what the person is as of what he desires to be thought; or, in the case of a better
sort of persons, of what he desires to think himself. Actions, no doubt, are the
fittest test for the world at large, because all they want to know of a man is the
actions they may expect from him. But to his intimates, who care about what he is
and not merely about what he does, the involuntary indications of feeling and
disposition are a much surer criterion of them than voluntary acts. 152

Mill found himself in a cultural and intellectual atmosphere hostile to the emotions.
The combination of Britain’s ascetic Protestant culture 153 with Benthamite and empiricist
theorising on the damaging effects of poetry and “passion” on the rational intellect resulted in
a discrediting of the legitimate place of the emotions in ethical life. Despite their intuitionist

150 Mill, “Diary,” 17 February, 1854, CW: XXVII, p. 655. “Speculation” is contrasted with “feeling” in this
diary entry.
151 Upon receiving a “musical present” from a correspondent after the death of Harriet Taylor-Mill, Mill replied
that “[i]t is a great advantage to you as it is to me, and very useful under depression, to be interested in a great
153 This theme is examined in more detail in Chapter Six.
metaphysics and social conservatism, the romantic writers’ emphasis on the importance of aesthetic, emotional, imaginative and poetic cultivation provided a portrait of more varied, active and “balanced” moral character. In this context, Mill formulated his new aims. These included the promotion of the emotional development as crucial to well-being and a belief in the importance of a “balanced” moral character:

I, for the first time, gave it [the cultivation of “feeling”] its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual. I ceased to attach almost exclusive importance to the ordering of outward circumstances, and the training of the human being for speculation and action.

... The maintenance of a due balance among the faculties now seemed to me of primary importance. The cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed. And my thoughts and inclinations turned in an increasing degree towards whatever seemed capable of being instrumental to that object.\(^{154}\)

Mill began to perceive “lightness,” “feeling” and “humour” as indispensable to well-being and moral development.” He argued that the cultivation of these qualities produces an individual who can approach the difficulties of every-day life with maturity, resilience and fortitude. In Mill’s view, “a certain infusion of the laughing philosopher... is a prodigious help towards bearing the evils of life, and I should think has saved many a person from going mad.” Conversely, the absence of these qualities is the sign of an undeveloped, one-sided and “stunted” character.\(^{155}\)

“Feeling” was the catalyst of Mill’s recovery. It was Mill’s conception of himself as an impassive “reasoning machine” that led to his depression, and it was the realisation that


all feeling was not dead within me” that led him out of it.\textsuperscript{156} Mill had realised that his Benthamite self-identity as “a reformer of the world” took no account of the individual’s inner world.\textsuperscript{157} In contrast to the determinist psychologies of Owen, James Mill and Bentham (and much of British empirical philosophy), Mill thinks that providing an emotionally nourishing and inspiring environment in which the individual can construct his own moral ideals and aspirations is likely to encourage striving and social progress, and promote well-being. In making this argument, Mill singles out several characters for praise.

**Mill’s Models of Perfect Character**

Although Mill never explicitly elaborates on the complete traits of the perfect character, he does profess admiration for several heroic characters. In Christ, for example, we see, among other amiable qualities, the virtues of beneficence, conviction, selflessness and sacrifice.\textsuperscript{158} In the great, the immortal Marcus Antoninus [i.e., Marcus Aurelius],”\textsuperscript{159} Mill finds a model character which serves as a source of positive moral inspiration.\textsuperscript{160} Mill writes of his extreme admiration of the man” whose writings comprised the highest ethical product of the ancient mind.”\textsuperscript{161} He had certainly read *The Meditations*,\textsuperscript{162} in which we find the image of the soul” as a sphere.” For Marcus Aurelius perfection entails the cultivation of the mind”


\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., p. 137, p. 113. “[M]y zeal was as yet little else, at that period of my life, than zeal for speculative opinions. It had not its root in genuine benevolence, or sympathy with mankind; though these qualities held their due place in my ethical standard. Nor was it connected with any high enthusiasm for ideal nobleness. Yet of this feeling I was imaginatively very susceptible; but there was at that time an intermission of its natural aliment, poetic culture, while there was a superabundance of the discipline antagonistic to it, that of mere logic and analysis.”


\textsuperscript{160} Marcus Aurelius serves as an ideal figure of history with whom we ought to imagine ourselves working in concert to promote the moral improvement of humankind. See Mill, “The Utility of Religion,” p. 422. Mill was not alone in his praise. His nineteenth-century contemporary Matthew Arnold described Marcus as “perhaps the most beautiful figure in history” and “so beautiful a moralist.” See Anthony R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 8.


into a “perfectly rounded orb.” It is reasonable to assume that the pursuit of roundedness that marked out Marcus's moral character was the chief source of Mill’s admiration:

If ever any one, possessed of power, had grounds for thinking himself the best and most enlightened among his contemporaries, it was the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Absolute monarch of the whole civilized world, he preserved through life not only the most unblemished justice, but what was less to be expected from his Stoical breeding, the tenderest heart.

The balancing of “heart” and “justice” in this passage suggests comparison to Mill’s idea of balancing the emotional and rational faculties.

Socrates and Moral Development

Mill’s appraisals of Christ and Marcus Aurelius are complementary, yet, at best, cursory. His veneration of the moral characters of Socrates and Harriet Taylor-Mill receives a more comprehensive expression. To Mill, Socrates’ character stands as a heroic, poetic and inspirational source of moral excellence. As in his engagement with Owen and Bentham, Mill’s argument turns introspective and autobiographical. Indeed Mill’s first attraction to “poetical culture” was owed not to nineteenth-century romantics, or even to Shakespeare, but to the “poetic culture of the most valuable kind”—that of reverential admiration for the lives and characters of heroic persons; especially the heroes of philosophy.” The paradigmatic hero of philosophy is found in Plato’s pictures of Socrates.

Even during the earlier phases of his education, Socrates’ image of excellence was an inspiriting and ennobling source of “poetic culture” to Mill. He recalls with effusive fondness how James Mill’s moral convictions…were very much of the character of those of the Greek philosophers. Even at the very early age at which I read with him the Memorabilia of

165 See also Mill, Autobiography, p. 113.
166 Ibid., p. 115.
Xenophon, I imbibed from that work and from his comments a deep respect for the character of Socrates; who stood in my mind as a model of ideal excellence.\textsuperscript{167} From an early age Mill admired Socrates as an ideal character. The language Mill uses—"reverential," "hero," "poetic culture," "model of ideal excellence"—suggests an admiration for much more than a rational, even-tempered Stoic sage. Rationality is indeed one of Socrates' qualities, but it is not the sole source of his virtue. The life and moral example of Socrates, as much as his ideas, were things to be emulated, resurrected and encouraged. They serve as a positive incentive to moral striving.

As a testament to the value of Socrates' excellent character, Mill places great importance on the historical accuracy of extant accounts of Socrates' life. Mill translated and published several Platonic dialogues in the 1820s and 1830s.\textsuperscript{168} He greatly admired the estimation of Socrates in G.A. Grote's \textit{History of Greece}, which he reviewed in 1850. Mill's correspondence from this period reveals that he was troubled by several apparent inconsistencies in these depictions of Socrates' life. In Mill's letters, reviews and translations, it matters, in a way that is foreign to many modern interpreters,\textsuperscript{169} that Socrates is a genuine historical figure. It is of great importance to Mill that we have an accurate record of Socrates' exemplary life.\textsuperscript{170} For Mill, Socrates' "remarkable character" was as important for moral development as the Socratic method was for rational development.\textsuperscript{171}

\textsuperscript{167} Mill, Autobiography, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{169} In a recent debate with Roman Catholic and conservative commentator Dinesh D'Sousza, Christopher Hitchens was asked whether it mattered to him that Socrates probably never existed. Hitchens responded that it made no difference because the vitality of Socratic ideas is independent of its author's life: "It doesn't matter [whether Socrates existed]…. I can still say I'm for the Socratic method. Nothing depends for me on the demonstration of his physical existence; it is a matter only of ideas.” An abridged video of this exchange can be viewed at the following URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zw8TjGTrcTc (accessed 7/7/2010).
\textsuperscript{170} Mill venerates Socrates' character as an example to be followed. He persistently argues that there is an "urgent need, at the present and at all times, of such a teacher.” To Mill, the example of Socrates' "remarkable character" is as important now as it was in ancient Athens: "A direct antagonist of such unsifted general notions and impressions on moral subjects, Socrates occupies an unique position in history; and the work which he did requires to be done again, as the indispensable condition of that intellectual renovation, without which the
Mill’s admiration of moral excellence as exemplified in Socrates’ character was a clear break with Bentham—if not with James Mill, who also held the ancients in high regard. Mill’s specific admiration for Socrates’ character can be contrasted with Bentham’s markedly less complementary view:

Fanny Wright told me Socrates was pure as an icicle. I answered that it was my misfortune to read Greek, and to know better. What I read of Socrates was insipid. I could find in him nothing that distinguished him from other people except his manner of putting questions.¹⁷²

To see how this relates to Skorupski’s, Baum’s, Devigne’s and Smith’s misreading of Mill’s value-laden idea of moral freedom we must reconsider Mill’s infamous discussion of Socrates and the fool in *Utilitarianism*. The fool is both less autonomous and less rational than Socrates, and exerts less control over his life. His actions are governed by a single motive: immediate pleasure. But this un-freedom is necessary, not sufficient, for the fool’s foolishness. Socrates is more rational and autonomous, but he also leads a more worthwhile life—indeed, independent of its rationality. In the well-known passage in *Utilitarianism* in which Mill introduces the Socrates-fool analogy, experience is the sole feature that distinguishes their characters. Mill explicitly states that the reason Socrates is a legitimate and “competent” moral judge of character is because he has known many characters.¹⁷³ The fool is disqualified as a judge of character *because* he has known only one foolish character: “if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their side of the question. The other party to the comparison [Socrates] knows both sides.”¹⁷⁴ Socrates was once foolish, and

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¹⁷³ —— “From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final.” Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 213.
¹⁷⁴ Also, in his 1854 diary Mill gives a brief formulation of the idea which later became the “Socrates
through a process of character development, by experience and acquaintance, has become virtuous.

The point of that example is to prove Mill’s assertion that one who has experienced a range of pleasures and characters will most likely settle on the one which most exercises the higher faculties,” which is to say, the noble and excellent character of Socrates, as compared to the sequacious and inane character of the fool. The example is intended to show that such experienced individuals (a fool who has become a Socrates) will no longer be content with θηω” or foolish pleasures. Greater experience will ensure a preference” for the higher pleasure of the love of right. As Mill states, they will give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties,” such as sympathy with others. Socrates will never agree to be made content with a fool’s pleasures, even with the guarantee that he will be satisfied. Socrates’ dignity”—not his rationality—in the end prevents him from considering the fool’s pleasures as pleasures at all. If the capacity for autonomous action—conceptualised as exerting power over one’s character—is all Mill has in mind with his conception of freedom, then Socrates can be no freer than the fool, for they both share the same innate capacity for autonomy, and, just as no Socrates desires to be a fool, no fool desires to be a Socrates.

dissatisfied” passage in Utilitarianism. The only true or definite rule of conduct or standard of morality is the greatest happiness, but there is needed first a philosophical estimate of happiness. Quality as well as quantity of happiness is to be considered; less of a higher kind is preferable to more of a lower. The test of quality is the preference given by those who are acquainted with both. Socrates would rather choose to be Socrates dissatisfied than to be a pig satisfied. The pig probably would not, but then the pig knows only one side of the question: Socrates knows both.” Here Mill clearly says that experience, not rationality or freedom, is the test of what counts as a virtuous character. See Mill, Diary,” 23 March, 1854, CW: XXVII, p. 663.

175 Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast’s pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs.” Mill, Utilitarianism, p. 211.

176 Ibid.

177 It is important to note a subtlety here: Socrates’ character has developed to the point where the things that are pleasurable to the fool are simply not pleasurable to him. This is distinct from a value judgement about the fool’s pleasures. The things that please the fool are not looked on as morally pernicious or fickle, they simply produce no pleasure for Socrates; they are objects of desire only to the foolish.
Furthermore, Socrates is virtuous beyond his self-critical attitude, severe rationality and dignity. To Mill his life is both better and more valuable than the fool. The process of development and experience that Socrates has undergone has produced a certain kind of socially beneficial character to whom foolish or visceral pleasures are simply not pleasurable at all. More importantly, on the social level, Mill is confident that the qualities Baum, Devigne and others identify as a neutral conception of freedom—deliberation, rationality and choice—will encourage the fool to become a Socrates.\footnote{Presumably, if they do not—if, after intense deliberation, critical reflection, and experience of other characters the fool thinks the character of the pig is better than the character of Socrates—Mill presumably would not consider them so important.} Mill’s point is that Socrates’ excellent character is a social commodity. Socrates is virtuous not because he has chosen this character in a particularly rational and reflective manner; his character is good because it is infectious, encourages moral striving and contributes to social welfare. While Mill clearly admires Socrates as an ideally virtuous character, he never claims that rationality or a “mode of choosing” distinguishes the virtuous Socrates from the vicious fool. It seems clear that Mill does not wish to suffer a society of fools, however rational or introspective they are.

**Harriet Taylor-Mill and the “Ideal Standard of Character”**


Mill’s praise for Harriet Taylor-Mill’s “incomparable” intellect is scattered throughout his writings. An understanding of what Mill admired about Taylor-Mill can illuminate the connection between “internal culture,” virtue and moral freedom. Mill saw
Taylor-Mill’s conciliation of passion and reason—her “fiery soul” and “vigorous eloquence”—as an idealised form of moral self-development. What is remarkable about Mill’s praise for Taylor-Mill is not that he considered her a unique intellect, but that he considered her the embodiment of the highest analytical and artistic development. Mill argued that she combined an “eminent practical capacity” with “the richest and strongest of natures.”

This character was perfectly developed, it had “all the faculties in equal perfection,” harmonising “a real majestic intellect” with an admirable and imaginative “moral nature.” Her character development showed that emotional self-culture and interiority—her life was one of inward meditation—could co-exist with “the profoundest and most far-sighted” intellect.

Harriet Taylor-Mill was remarkable in the way Bentham and indeed J.S. Mill were not. According to Mill, she had combined the highest cultivation of the logical and analytic faculties with an equal and harmonious cultivation of the artistic, imaginative and emotional faculties. In his Autobiography Mill claimed that Taylor-Mill was a better philosopher than himself, and a better poet than Shelley and Carlyle. More broadly, in her own moral character she seemed to unify the best aspects of enlightenment empiricism with the emotional spur of Carlylean romanticism. Her genius was that she was “more a poet than he [Carlyle] and more a thinker than I [Mill].”

The point to be gleaned from this is that Mill admired Harriet Taylor-Mill not only for being a more incisive philosopher than himself, or for being a more imaginative poet than Shelley; her greatest achievement was that she was both. Hers were “qualities of mind and

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182 Mill, Autobiography, p. 183. Emphasis added. As an exemplar of poetic self-culture, Taylor-Mill’s “own nature included his [Carlyle’s], and infinitely more.”
Taylor-Mill’s uniqueness lies in the simultaneous unification of a highly developed poetic-emotional sensibility with an acute rational faculty. To her outer circle she was a beauty and a wit, with an air of natural distinction, felt by all who approached her: to the inner, a woman of deep and strong feeling, of penetrating and intuitive intelligence, and of an eminently meditative and poetic nature. In harmonising a fecund poetic imagination with a sharpened analytic capacity, Taylor-Mill provided her husband with an ideal standard of character,” revealing to him the acute deficiencies in his development. Mill wrote that Taylor-Mill became to me a living type of the most admirable kind of human being.” Through this influence, Mill’s conception of the highest worth of a human being was immeasurably enlarged and exalted.” This was not simple admiration. The qualities Mill exalts are explicitly linked to substantive claims about moral freedom. Taylor-Mill’s moral development culminated in a rationally and emotionally developed character that Mill advocated as an ideal standard.” Furthermore, she was also a morally free agent whose character development was self-directed. In Mill’s words, her moral nature was a self-moving engine.” The striking and admirable balance” in Taylor-Mill's moral development provided a second source of poetic culture” to Mill, and, like the character of Socrates, provided an image of moral perfection Mill attempted to emulate. Mill’s extraordinary encomium makes substantive points regarding the connection between emotional development, moral freedom and virtue, and is worth quoting in full:

[I]t was necessary that the object of my admiration should be of a type very different from my own; should be a character preeminently of feeling, combined however as I had not in any other instance known it to be, with a vigorous and bold speculative intellect. Hers was not only all this but the perfection of a poetic and artistic nature. …Accordingly the first years of my friendship with hers were, in respect of my own development, mainly years of poetic culture. It is hardly

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185 Capaldi, John Stuart Mill: A Biography, pp. 83–84.
necessary to say that I am not now speaking of written poetry…. The real poetic culture was, that my faculties, such as they were, became more and more attuned to the beautiful and elevated, in all kinds, and especially in human feeling and character and more capable of vibrating in unison with it.\textsuperscript{186}

In her, complete emancipation from every kind of superstition…resulted not from the hard intellect but from strength of noble and elevated feeling, and coexisted with a highly reverential nature. …Alike in the highest regions of speculation and in the smallest practical concerns of daily life, her mind was the same perfect instrument, piercing to the very heart and marrow of the matter; always seizing the essential idea or principle. The same exactness and rapidity of operation, pervading as it did her sensitive as well as her mental faculties, would with her gifts of feeling and imagination have fitted her to be a consummate artist, as her fiery and tender soul and her vigorous eloquence would certainly have made her a great orator, and her profound knowledge of human nature and discernment and sagacity in practical life, would in the times when such a carrière was open to women, have made her eminent among the rulers of mankind. Her intellectual gifts did but minister to a moral character at once the noblest and the best balanced which I have ever met with in life.\textsuperscript{187}

I have never known any intellect in man or woman which, taken for all in all, could be compared to hers. All other intellects when looked at beside hers seem to be but special talents,—a peculiar knack…dealing with one particular thing…. [H]er mind is always the same perfect instrument…. The same exactness & rapidity of operation pervading all her senses as well as her mental faculties, would with her gifts of feeling & imagination have made her a consummate artist in any department.\textsuperscript{188}

\textit{“Balance” and Harmonious Development}

It is important to note that Mill incorporated subtleties into this picture of perfect character development. While the “balancing” of the intellectual and emotional faculties is of supreme

\textsuperscript{187} Mill, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 195.
importance in the development of moral character and the exercise of moral freedom, this is not itself the ultimate end. Harriet Taylor-Mill's balanced character is the "ideal standard" because each side is highly developed. The untrammelled pursuit of both "interiority" and rationality ought to be the aim, rather than balancing and rounding one's character.

The idea of balance at the expense of spiritedness, Mill complains, usually evinces an underlying hostility to the emotions and an intention to check the "heroic" tendencies in favour of the perceived superior benefits of a severe rationality. "Balance" can often be a by-word for emotional repression. In this spirit Mill criticises the idea of mental "symmetry." The individual ought not to correct one side with the other (though this is inevitably the practical effect), but ought to pursue the development of each, fiercely and independently. Mill clarifies that he means to instil the importance of emotional development and rational development as enterprises in themselves. Balance itself is not a reward, it is an insurance against the dominance of one particular tendency, against both impassioned frivolity and excessive, enervating analytical pedantry. Heightened simultaneous development, rather than final symmetry, is Mill’s goal. "Great and strong and varied faculties are more wanted than faculties well proportioned to one another." The fact that one’s faculties are "well-proportioned" ultimately reveals little of that individual's moral development. Rather than advocating "balance" Mill is often carving out a sphere of moral freedom in which emotional development might prosper.189 Mill elucidates this idea in a diary entry in which he criticises romantic ideas of moral "symmetry" he had found in the writings of Goethe:

To me it seems that nothing can be so alien and (to coin a word) antipathetic to the modern mind as Goethe's ideal of life. He wished life itself, and the nature of every cultivated individual in it, to be rounded off and made symmetrical like a Greek temple or a Greek drama. It is only small things, or at least things

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uncomplex and composed of few parts, that admit of being brought into that harmonious proportion. As well might he attempt to cut down Shakespeare or a Gothic cathedral to the Greek model, as to give a rounded completeness to any considerable modern life. Not symmetry, but bold, free expansion in all directions is demanded by the needs of modern life and the instincts of the modern mind. Great and strong and varied faculties are more wanted than faculties well proportioned to one another; a Hercules or a Briareus more than an Apollo. Nay, at bottom are your well-balanced minds ever much wanted for any purpose but to hold and occasionally turn the balance between the others? Even the Greeks did and could not make their practical lives symmetrical as they made their art; and the ideal of their philosophers, so far from being an ideal of equal and harmonious development, was generally one of severe compression and repression of the larger portion of human nature. In the greater huddle of multifarious elements which compose modern life, symmetry and mental grace are still less possible, and a strong hand to draw one thing towards us and push another away from us is the one thing mainly needful. All this is distinctly or obscurely felt by all who are entitled to any voice on such questions; and accordingly Goethe never influenced practical life at all, unless indeed by making scepticism illustrious; and his influence of any kind even in Germany seems to be now entirely gone.¹⁹⁰

The time when Mill realised that "the maintenance of a due balance among the faculties, now seemed...of primary importance" was precisely the time at which he discovered that the exclusive pursuit of analytical development was the root cause for his depression. While noting the importance of "a due-balance," the aim was always to restore the place of the emotions in character development, which had been actively suppressed in the thought of Bentham, James Mill and the determinist-empiricist British tradition. The idea of moral "balance" can thus be interpreted as a feature of Mill's wider aims to restore the legitimacy and defend the importance of emotional development in creating good social citizens.

¹⁹⁰ Mill, ″Diary,″ 6 February, 1854, CW: XXVII, pp. 651–652. The veneration of Hercules's moral character is not meant to imply a preference for virtue, as a quality distinct from pleasure. As Semmel clearly shows, to Mill the "choice of Hercules" was the choice of virtues such as justice, temperance,...veracity, perseverance, readiness to encounter pain and especially labour; regard for the public good..." See Semmel, *John Stuart Mill and the Pursuit of Virtue*, p. 2. It is worth noting that aside from "temperance" these are all active virtues.
It is certain that for Mill the *active* imaginings of the poetic and emotionally fecund moral character are more important than the *passive* qualities—temperance, maintenance, resistance—of the "rounded" character. The distinction here is between spirited moral *activity* and anaemic moral passivity, which, Mill argues in *On Liberty*, leads first to moral stagnation and then ultimately to degeneration.\(^{191}\) Conceived as a form of perpetual moral striving rather than a balancing or "maintenance" of the faculties, emotional self-culture was Mill's animating goal.\(^{192}\)

*Moral Freedom and Counter-Enlightenment Romanticism*

The idea of self-formation is inextricable from Mill’s conviction that the emotions deserve a central place in moral development and Ethology. Mill’s idea of poetic self-culture was formulated within the context of his repudiation of the determinism of Owen and Bentham. The emotional stunting of Mill's own character is attributed to a lack of self-mastery over its formation, a lack of influence on his part over his own character development. For example, Mill recounts of how his friends in the late 1820s considered him a "made‘ or manufactured man,” a heteronomously determined character rather than an organically developing individual. He relates with a degree of pride how John Sterling, the romantic and "disciple of Coleridge," was shocked to find Mill was so receptive to romanticism's critique of utilitarianism, and such an avid admirer of the poetry and histories of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle. Sterling and his Coleridgean friends with whom Mill was intimate (such as Frederick Maurice) evidently thought of Mill as a mere Benthamite imprint, a reproduction rather than an independent or self-developed thinker "with a head that reasons like a great Steam Engine works."\(^{193}\) This was an image of moral deformation:

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\(^{192}\) "The cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed.” Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 147.

\(^{193}\) John Sterling, as cited in Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill*, p. 86.
In our Debating Society they [Coleridgeans] made their appearance as a second Liberal and even Radical party, on totally different grounds from Benthamism and vehemently opposed to it; and they brought into their discussions the general doctrines and modes of thought of the European reaction against the philosophy of the eighteenth century. The modifications which were taking place in my old opinions naturally gave me some points of contact with them; and both Maurice and Sterling were of considerable use to my development [sic]. In after conversations with Sterling he told me how he and others had been accustomed to look upon me as a "made" or manufactured man, having had a certain impress of opinion stamped upon me which I could only reproduce; and what a change took place in his feelings when he found, in the discussion on Wordsworth and Byron (in which as might be expected he made a brilliant speech), that Wordsworth and all that is implied in Wordsworth belonged to me as much as to him and his friends. But if I agreed with them much more than with Bentham on poetry and general culture, I was as much opposed to them as ever on religion, political philosophy, ethics and metaphysics, and as long as we continued our debating practice we were almost always on contrary sides.  

Mill styles the development of his thought in this period as a constructive collision between the best qualities of the Enlightenment—represented by empiricism in epistemology, utilitarianism in ethics and radicalism in politics—and the poetic awakening of nineteenth-century romanticism. Mill sought a reconciliation of the Enlightenment’s attitude towards religion, political philosophy, ethics and metaphysics with romanticism’s approach to poetry and general culture. Both views offered indispensable insights, but these insights were "half" or "fractional truths," glimpses into a wider, more comprehensive Moral Science:

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194 Mill, *Autobiography*, pp. 161–163. Despite Mill’s suggestion that these insights are owed to anti-enlightenment romanticism, it has been suggested that the emphasis on rounded or many-sided development is important to enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Ferguson. See Lisa Hill, *The Passionate Society: The Social, Political and Moral Thought of Adam Ferguson* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), pp. 12–17, pp. 208–209.  
195 But though, at one period of my progress, I for some time undervalued that great century [the eighteenth-century], I never joined in the reaction against it, but kept as firm hold of one side of the truth as I took of the other.” Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 169.  
196 Mill, "Bentham,” p. 94.
The fight between the nineteenth century and the eighteenth always reminded me of the battle about the shield, one side of which was white and the other black. I marvelled at the blind rage with which the combatants rushed against one another. I applied to them, and to Coleridge himself, many of Coleridge's sayings about half truths; and Goethe's device, —many-sidedness,” was one which I would most willingly, at this period, have taken for mine.\textsuperscript{197}

A comprehensive Moral Science thus incorporates the varied strains of the Enlightenment—empiricism, induction, naturalism, utilitarianism, radicalism—with those of the counter-enlightenment of the early nineteenth-century—the importance of interiority, the emotions and individuality. Mill feared that there were qualities in both sets of ideas that carried illiberal implications.\textsuperscript{198} In attempting this reconciliatory task, Mill felt there was a connection between romantic, anti-enlightenment insights regarding emotional and —many-sided” moral development, and an increased scope for moral freedom.

**Conclusion**

Mill's lack of emotional development, memorably recorded in his *Autobiography*, provided the germ for a wider argument about the importance of emotional development in character formation. Mill's comments about achieving "due balance” and his statement in the essay "Theism” that "when imagination and reason receive each its appropriate culture they do not succeed in usurping each other's prerogatives” can thus be interpreted as a rebuttal to Benthamite passivity. They are arguments more for the importance of the emotions and the ethical imagination in moral development than for the production of a perfectly "rounded” character.\textsuperscript{199} Bentham considered poetry "the everlasting enemy” of reason,\textsuperscript{200} and had argued that the "passions,” the imagination and the emotions distracted and corrupted the

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\textsuperscript{198} For example, aside from the his criticism of Comte (to be discussed in the next chapter) Mill could not accept Carlyle's almost authoritarian conservatism. Carlyle reacted strongly against Mill's *On Liberty*, commenting with typical verve, "[n]o if it were a sin to control, or coerce into better methods, human swine in any way…. Ach Gott in Himmel!” Clearly Mill's liberalism was interpreted at the time, at least by Carlyle, to outlaw the compulsion of conceptions of the good. See Himmelfarb, *On Liberty and Liberalism*, p. 294.
\textsuperscript{199} Mill, "Theism,” p. 484.
rational mind. Bentham clearly adhered to the view popular in much of the history of philosophy that the mind is a battleground where the incompatible functions of emotion and reason are perpetually warring. Where Mill found a potential groundswell of emotional development, leading to social beneficence and personal well-being, Bentham saw only an art of misrepresentation. Poetry was better and more valuable than push-pin to Mill because push-pin cultivated none of the qualities he considered crucial to utility in the largest sense.

In these examples, it is the active moral exercise of poetic and imaginative self-culture that increases the happiness of life and gives elevation to the character. The Benthamite mechanistic conception of the mind as a simple desire-processing organ had deleterious implications for the moral freedom of the agent. The cultivation of the emotions came to be considered by Mill as a precondition for self-determination: any education which aims at making human beings other than machines, in the long run makes them claim to have control of their own lives. What appears to some of Mill’s late twentieth-century interpreters as an unacceptable moralisation of a morally neutral quality (freedom) is in fact an attempt by Mill to combat the determinist and illiberal tendencies of his intellectual inheritance. Mill saw his defence of emotional development as a blow for moral freedom and self-development.

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201 “Poetry,” Bentham concluded, as incompatible with truth and exactitude.” Dinwiddy, Bentham, pp. 40–41, p. 114.
202 Dinwiddy, Bentham, pp. 40–41, p. 114. The criteria for assessing language are accuracy and logic. Thus Bentham quipped that the only real difference between poetry and prose was that some of the lines did not go as far as the margin.
204 Mill, Theism,” p. 483.
205 Mill, Considerations on Representative Government, p. 403.
Mill’s project relied on explicitly moral categories, however. The "ideal standard of character" has achieved moral freedom through the cultivation of particular faculties in particular ways. One, like the youthful Mill, who has failed to develop an “active” poetic and imaginative self-culture has clearly not exhausted the possibilities for character development. Indeed, it is instructive that Mill linked emotional deficiencies in his own character to the oppressive forces of his early environment. Such a character might be rational and self-reflective, but is clearly not morally free. There are emotional and ethical possibilities of which, though capable, the agent has not developed. The lack of emotional “self-culture,” in short, can be conceived in Mill’s paradigm of character development as a form of unfreedom, stemming from the heteronomous formation of character.

With this view in mind, it is difficult to reconcile Mill’s praise for Harriet Taylor Mill’s morally “perfect” development with Skorupski’s interpretation of Mill’s idea of freedom as “rational autonomy.” The realm of “imagination, self-culture, [and] personal aesthetics,” as Ryan observes, “lies beyond rationality.” Similarly, Devigne’s argument that moral freedom requires only a “maintenance” of character or a “capability” for self-amendment does not reflect the nature of Mill’s admiration for Harriet Taylor-Mill’s “ideal character.” Her character, Mill found, was intrinsically engaged in an active process of refinement, moral striving and perpetual development. “Self-improvement, progress in the highest and in all senses, was a law of her nature.” Mill describes a highly specific type of self-development in which the grandest pursuit of emotional self-culture is a requirement of moral freedom and a constituent of virtue.

207 Ryan, The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill, p. 233. Ryan does not explain how these notions relate to moral freedom, however.
While Smith perceptively detects the important place of virtue in Mill's idea of "self-mastery," his bisection of character development into aesthetic and moral dimensions collapses into an essentially moral position. When we come to the question of what justifies the pursuit of an emotionally and rationally self-mastering individual (the question, what makes this pursuit good?), Mill provides an explicitly moral argument. The aesthetic aspects of Mill's idea of character development are subsidiary to a more fundamental moral base in two ways. First, this individual—as in the case of Socrates and Harriet Taylor-Mill—is an inspiration to others and a spring to their moral aspirations. Their "ideal standard of character" encourages others to become self-determining, morally active individuals. Second, their disinterested pursuit of self-culture directly contributes to individual well-being. In individual and social terms, the noble character is a utility maximiser. Mill's moralised language here is instructive: it is better—for the agent and society—to be a Socrates than to be a fool; to be the balanced Harriet Taylor-Mill and not the emotive Thomas Carlyle.209

Virtue—the love of the good, and the self-development of emotional and rational internal culture—is a necessary precondition of moral freedom. Without a highly attuned attention to self-culture, one has not utilised the full scope of power over one's moral development and is therefore not morally free. This is how we ought to interpret Mill's statement that "none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free." Virtue is an explicitly moral category, involving the "love" of the desire to do right," as well as "silencing" any desire which conflicts with it by means of habitual character self-development. The ability to cultivate such desires into the habitual and disinterested pursuit of an emotionally fecund, rationally developed, socially beneficent character is the source of our moral freedom: "It is because this state of mind is possible to human nature, that human

209 Furthermore, the self-determining, emotionally and rationally developed moral aspirant is likely to be happier than the heteronomously determined, passive agent.
beings are capable of moral government.” In other words, self-formation is possible because the habitual love of the good (as opposed to immediate pleasure) is possible. Freedom, therefore, requires moral action, doing →right.” When we take the final step in this definition and ask what counts as →right” action, Mill states that utility is the ultimate arbiter of moral action. This clearly involves other moralised conceptions such as →utility in the largest sense” and →man as a progressive being.” Although sometimes expressed in an opaque way, Mill’s idea of moral freedom is constituted by explicitly moral categories.

And yet it is unclear that conflating the moralised idea of →self-culture” with a psychological theory of mental freedom leads inexorably to an illiberal and moralistic approach, as some have claimed. Indeed this criticism seems to be founded on an underlying ideological presupposition that contemporary political theory must →abstract” itself from controversial views on the good life. In one prominent liberal theorist’s view, the →fundamental justification” of →a liberalism come of age” cannot appeal →to some particular and controversial view of human flourishing.” To many modern liberals writing after Berlin and Rawls, →liberalism is not a philosophy of man, but a philosophy of politics.” While this assumption may be central to modern political liberalism, the idea that politics operates independently of ethics or psychology—what Larmore calls →the liberal separation of realms”—would have seemed eccentric to the systematisers of the nineteenth century.

210 Mill, Hamilton. p. 453. This statement appears in the context of Mill's discussion of virtue and desiring to do right.
213 Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity, p. 51.
214 Ibid., p. 129, p. 118. Though their critiques are based upon opposing perspectives, both Larmore and Mehta see the conflation of conceptions of human nature and political norms as the seed of illiberalism. See Mehta, Liberalism and Empire, p. 52: “the universal claims can be made because they derive from certain characteristics that are common to all human beings.”
215 Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity, p. 130. However, Skorupski rightly asserts that →philosophy in this grand nineteenth-century manner—the attempt to see things as a whole—is at the heart of what Mill did.” Skorupski, →The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill,” p. 190. In contrast, Larmore summarises the dominant neutralist (Rawlsian) position: “People may hold such views [on →natural law” metaphysics and →moral principles”] as a matter of private conscience, but the public reason that we must exercise as citizens in
As Mill’s moral and political maxims are derived from assumptions about the “Laws of Mind,” there is a fundamental, if not always acknowledged, disparity between him and modern liberals in the construction of liberalism’s proper purpose and scope.

The prevailing contemporary viewpoints concerning the moral limits and political applications of liberalism can therefore lead to the distortion and misinterpretation of the aims of Mill’s moral and political programme, which, as Heydt perceptively observes, often responds to problems which are “no longer visible to us.” By searching for a morally neutral political theory, proponents of the illiberal interpretation are missing something fundamental to Mill’s aims. Formulated within a view of moral freedom inextricable from moralised notions of character development, Mill saw his defence of emotional self-culture as an act of restoration rather than moral prescription. Defining emotional development in terms of moral freedom and utilitarian social virtues was Mill’s way of tempering the tendencies for mental and political despotism in the British empirical tradition, while simultaneously resisting the cultural conservatism and intuitionist metaphysics of the nineteenth-century reaction against it. Mill does not articulate a single perfect character to which “self-culture” must inexorably lead; his argument is more subtle, seeking to show how the prevailing views on moral psychology and social reform deformed moral development, deprived the agent of the “power of self-formation,” and therefore of moral freedom. Socrates and Harriet Taylor-Mill exemplified different forms of self-cultured moral development which seemed
determining the ground rules of our political life should not...appeal to ‘an independent order of moral and political values,’ imposed as it were from without.” Charles Larmore, “Behind the Veil,” The New Republic, February 27, 2008. Accessed 9/11/2009. URL: http://www.tnr.com/print/article/books/behind-the-veil


Heydt, “Mill, Bentham and ‘Internal Culture,’” p. 301. In this case, the problems Heydt identifies are healing the enlightenment-romanticism divisions, and managing the onset of democracy and the effects of rapid industrial development.
threatened by ‘the despotic yoke of public opinion’ in the mid-Victorian era. As Collini observes:

It would, of course, be naïve to assume that it [—moral character”] always involved an appeal to exactly the same values, or to an identical ideal of human life: on this subject, John Stuart Mill’s writings are most vulnerable to having representative status thrust upon them, so we would do well to remember that his famous plea for individuality was couched as a protest against what he called ‘the pinched and hidebound type of character’ which he took to be enjoying an insidious popularity in the moral reflection at the time.  

These themes are not confined to Mill’s more abstract philosophical endeavours. Adequately to understand the centrality of this moralised concept of freedom in Mill’s Moral Science and wider social critique we need to take the exegesis out of abstract moral psychology and locate its deployment in actual political and social debates. By considering Mill’s critique of Protestantism—unintelligible when divorced from the idea of emotional self-culture and his struggles with determinist theories of character—we begin to see how, contrary to those who find an illiberal ‘urge” behind its positive moral foundation, Mill utilised his ideas of self-culture and moral freedom as a powerful critique of moral interventionism and of certain kinds of political reform.

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219 E.g., Mill, ‘De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [I],’ p. 81.
After posthumously publishing Mill’s *Autobiography*, Helen Taylor received a letter inquiring about her step-father’s religious views. “It seems to me very marvellous,” her correspondent wrote, “that Mill and the other leading teachers of his age should adopt the attitude of simply not mentioning the subject of Christianity at all.”¹ Throughout his life Mill had remained publicly silent about his personal views on religious belief. When pressed to disclose them by the electors of Westminster at an election speech in 1865, Mill repeatedly refused.² But we know from his private correspondence that theological and religious questions were persistent in his mind.³ A letter written in 1854 by Harriet Taylor-Mill offers an insight into Mill’s thinking at the time he began writing the *Autobiography, On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*—perhaps the emblematic statements of Mill’s political creed:

> About the Essays, dear, would not religion, the Utility of Religion, be one of the subjects you would have most to say on—there is to account for the existence nearly universal of some religion (superstition) by the instincts of fear, hope and mystery etc.,…to show how religion and poetry fill the same want, the craving after higher objects, the consolation of suffering, the hope of heaven for the selfish, love of God for the tender and grateful—how all this must be superseded

³ For example, Mill’s 1854 diary, in which he recorded one philosophical thought each day, contains more entries on religion than any other topic. While there are 19 entries on religion, there are only five on political issues, two on equality and one on the British Empire. See Mill, “Diary” CW: XXVII.
by a morality deriving its power from sympathies and benevolence and its reward
from the approbation of those we respect.  

These sentiments fit easily into Mill’s philosophic outlook, given his position as an
empiricist in epistemology, a utilitarian in ethics and a radical in politics. It therefore
surprised and evidently embarrassed Mill’s liberal and radical disciples when they read in the
posthumously published *Three Essays on Religion* (1874) that hope for an afterlife and the
idolisation of divine moral perfection are "legitimate and philosophically defensible."  

Worse still, in later life Mill’s radicalism appeared to have given way to a dull, half-hearted
conservatism. The "influences of religion on the character which will remain after rational
criticism has done its utmost against the evidences of religion," Mill writes, "are well worth
preserving."  

Such was the concern among Mill’s followers that his friend, the Scottish
philosopher Alexander Bain, asked Helen Taylor for permission to edit the text to preserve
Mill’s reputation as a hard-nosed, secularly-minded reformist.  

There are two distinct strands in Mill’s critique of religion. On one hand, Mill argues
that Protestantism fosters and enforces a vapid and materialistic culture, but on the other,
that the same culture can provide a source of nourishment to the emotions, sentiments and
imagination—all of the qualities Mill thinks modern industrial society tends to suppress.
Furthermore, in later essays Mill suggests that religious experiences encourage moral striving
and self-development. Paradoxically, Mill seems to argue that Protestant culture is
simultaneously the cause of, and the cure for, the injurious tendencies in modern liberal

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6 Ibid., p. 488.
8 Mill tends not to distinguish between Protestant denominations. Essays such as *On Liberty*, "The Utility of
Religion" and "Theism" use general terms such as Protestantism and Protestant nation to describe a range
of denominations from High-Church Anglicanism to Calvinism. Even when Mill does mention specific forms of
Protestantism he rarely ever moves beyond the most general characterisations (Unitarians, "Unitarian
followers") suggesting he meant to distinguish at the most general level between the Catholicism of the
Continent and the Protestant culture of Britain.
society. It leads to the enervation and deformation of individual character, and fosters a desolate feeling of powerlessness in the face of pervasive economic and cultural forces; yet it also stimulates the imagination and promotes moral striving.

This tension is reflected in the scholarly literature. Mill is variously styled as: an intolerant radical who sought to destroy Christianity,\(^9\) a “reluctant sceptic” who advocated the psychological necessity of religion,\(^10\) an “emotional Protestant”\(^11\) and also a closet believer whose work is a “Romantic theology” infused with a subterranean conviction that “God probably existed.”\(^12\)

This chapter examines the apparent incongruity between Mill’s early critique of Protestant culture in the 1830s, and the quasi-sympathetic treatment of religious belief in later texts such as *Three Essays on Religion* (1874), *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865) and “Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews” (1867) to illuminate Mill’s idea of emotional self-development. While much scholarship has focused on Mill’s analysis of theological proofs and his proposal for a secular Religion of Humanity, these studies largely ignore the development in Mill’s attitude towards Protestantism.\(^13\) The increasing prominence of the emotions in the evolution of Mill’s social critique shows that Mill’s political thought is primarily pre-occupied with the formation and development of moral

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character, rather than articulating a serious blueprint for social organisation or laying down rules of obligation and duty. Mill used his notion of emotional self-development first to critique the asceticism of Protestant culture and, second, as an argument against illiberal political reforms such as Auguste Comte’s Religion of Humanity. The importance of the emotions in political philosophy and moral development is evident in both the increasing ambivalence in Mill’s critique of religion and the developments in his increasingly sceptical attitude towards Comte’s politics.

The purpose of this chapter is further to highlight the importance of emotional development and “internal culture” in Mill’s theory of character formation. The chapter will explore the ruptures and complexities in Mill’s analysis of religion by teasing out the origins, foundations and, most importantly, evolution of his critique of British Protestant culture. Sections one and two present Mill’s early and later critiques of Protestant culture. The chapter concludes by exploring the pathways of Mill’s disillusionment with Auguste Comte, focusing on the tensions between Mill’s early enthusiasm for Comte’s Religion of Humanity and the more subdued and heavily qualified judgement of the effect of religion on emotional development in Mill’s later essays. A study of Mill’s increasing scepticism towards Comte’s political philosophy is of central importance to the aims of this thesis. First, in his engagement with Comte, Mill stresses the importance of the emotions in his idea of self-development. Second, Mill formulates the view that, while a secular Religion of Humanity might be a more effective measure for encouraging moral development, the eradication or supersession of supernatural religion is not necessarily desirable. Mill’s eventual repudiation of Comte’s reformism indicates a developing scepticism in Mill’s views on the prospects for encouraging the development of his “ideal standard of character” through direct political and social reform. Coming to terms with the apparent incongruity in Mill’s critique of religion
and understanding the sceptical trajectory of his attitude towards Comte are essential to an adequate understanding of Mill’s ideas of moral freedom and character formation.

**Mill’s Early Critique of Protestant Asceticism**

Mill’s views on “internal culture” and character development outlined in Chapter Five—the unity of emotion and reason and the active desire for moral excellence—underpinned Mill’s critical reflections in the early 1830s concerning rapid industrial progress and social transformation. Mill’s work in this period amounts to a damning critique of modern Britain. He argues that industrialisation makes virtues of self-interest, self-aggrandizement and productivity, while actively suppressing introspection, reflective critical analysis and deliberation.\(^{14}\) Worse still, when these virtues are entrenched in social and cultural institutions they stifle all forms of thinking and creativity that are not immediately valuable in terms of profits or gains.\(^ {15}\) The idolisation of “the narrow sphere of…money-getting pursuits,” Mill complains, implicitly shapes the dispositions, tastes and values of the modern individual. It cultivates a sequacious, enervated and selfish national character.\(^ {16}\) In England, “this idol ‘production’ has been set up and worshipped with incessant devotion for a century back…. [I]t lies at the root of all our worst national vices, corrupts the measures of our statesmen, the doctrines of our philosophers & hardens the minds of our people so as to make it almost hopeless to inspire them with any elevation either of intellect or soul.”\(^ {17}\) In other words, industrialism became a forceful, formative, but deleterious influence on the

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\(^ {15}\) “There has been much complaint of late years, of the growth, both in the world of trade and in that of intellect, of quackery, and especially of puffing; but nobody seems to have remarked, that these are the inevitable fruits of immense competition; of a state of society where any voice, not pitched in an exaggerated key, is lost in the hubbub. Success, in so crowded a field, depends not upon what a person is, but upon what he seems: mere marketable qualities become the object instead of substantial ones, and a man’s labour and capital are expended less in doing anything, than in persuading other people that he has done it. Our own age has seen this evil brought to its consummation.” Mill, *Civilisation*, p. 133.


development of English national character, and the modern individual is subsumed within a culture of impassive materialism: “The evils are that the individual is lost and becomes impotent in the crowd, and that individual character itself becomes relaxed and enervated.”

For Mill, British Protestantism’s puritanical attitude towards emotion and creative passion makes it an accomplice to the baseness and despotism of British “money-getting” culture in the nineteenth-century. In particular, Mill argues that Protestantism is an ascetic doctrine. Like the industrial culture it helped to foster, Protestantism inculcates a “relaxation” of the emotional and introspective half of character; it discourages the individual’s “active” practices and qualities such as self-culture, independence and love of the good. Not unlike the mechanical utilitarianism of James Mill and Bentham, it advocates passive, external values such as responsibility and duty. Protestantism therefore combined the unsatisfactory aspects of the utilitarian reformism Mill had disavowed with an ascetic aversion to passion and creativity, eventually deteriorating into conservatism and quietism. Mill’s early critique was based on two central points. First, Protestantism was an ascetic dogma. Second, it was a morality of obedience. These two strands find rhetorical expression in *On Liberty*:

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18 Mill, *Civilisation*, p. 136, p. 121, p. 125. Mill generalises from these observations that “by the natural growth of civilisation, power passes from individuals to masses.” Indeed, for Mill, the emancipation from Papal authority achieved by the Reformation serves as an earlier example of the same kind of power diffusion evident in the rise of the English middle class and the prevalence of market culture in the early nineteenth-century.

19 For Mill’s argument that the affective power of religions is located in their ability to shape and utilise public opinion and social norms see Mill, “Utility of Religion,” pp. 410–412: “without the sanctions superadded by public opinion, its [religion’s] own sanctions have never…exercised a very potent influence.” For the view that Protestantism is an ascetic doctrine see Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 255–256.

20 It is thus “the direct negation of the utilitarian standard.” Protestant asceticism is to be distinguished from the popular conception of Stoicism, Mill argues, because while Protestantism holds that pleasure is evil and pain is good, the Stoics held simply that “pain is no evil, and pleasure no good.” In Mill’s words, “they stopped halfway.” Mill, *Whewell on Moral Philosophy*, p. 176. For Mill’s opposition to asceticism see also Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 217. In his 1854 diary, Mill considered an alternative to the ascetic hegemony of Protestant culture. He aligns Stoicism with Puritanism and opposes both with the hedonism of Epicurus. The flight from happiness, Mill remarks, “must be a failure now when an earthly life both pleasant and innocent can be had by many and might by all. What is now wanted is the creed of Epicurus, warmed by the additional element of an enthusiastic love of the general good.” Mill, “Diary,” CW: XXVII, p. 666. This view was also expressed by Bentham, who described asceticism as “the offspring of delusion.” As quoted in Fredrick Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill* (Routledge: London, 2003), p. 127.
Its ideal is negative rather than positive; passive rather than active; Innocence rather than Nobleness; Abstinence from Evil, rather than energetic Pursuit of Good.... In its horror of sensuality, it made an idol of asceticism, which has been gradually compromised away into one of legality.... It is essentially a doctrine of passive obedience; it inculcates submission to all authorities found established.\(^{21}\)

Through this medium of affective character development, Protestantism, like the dogmas and hierarchies it sought to throw off, inculcates subservience, ever fearful of the heroic, romantic spirit that Mill's theory of character formation and idea of moral freedom sought to encourage.

**Comte and the Religion of Humanity**

To counter these evils, Mill drew on the ideas of the French positivist philosopher Auguste Comte. Comte had been developing a systematic vision for social transformation with a firm grounding in positivist science. The total unification of beliefs, aims and cultural practices is an indispensable requirement in Comte's conception of a positivist state—the most advanced stage of social evolution. According to Comte, religion had provided this social adhesion throughout human history. The positivist society too would need a religion, but it would be a godless religion, administered by a clerisy of positivist philosophers. Devoid of mystical and irrational supernaturalism, the positivist religion would be a "\textit{culte de l'Humanitie}," founded on the aims and epistemology of positivist science.\(^{22}\)

In his essay "The Utility of Religion" (written in 1854) Mill, with some important qualifications, appropriates Comte's Religion of Humanity to strengthen his own critique of


\(^{22}\) Auguste Comte, *Système de politique positive* (London: Longmans, Green and co., 1875–1877, four volumes, first edition 1851–1854).
Protestant culture. Regarding the effects of traditional religion, Mill addresses three questions. First, “whether the belief in religion is really indispensable to the temporal welfare of mankind.” Second, “whether the usefulness of the belief is intrinsic.” Third, Mill’s main focus is on determining “whether the benefits which it yields might not be obtained otherwise.” Mill in particular sets out to analyse the link, if it exists, between religion, “supernatural beliefs and inducements” and “well-being.”

Here Mill is emphatic: religion is an enemy of progress. It retards the cultivation of the intellect, “perverts” the “moral sentiments,” inculcates selfishness and is “intellectually unsustainable.” Its power is derived from its monopoly over early education and the inculcation of fear. The prospect of divine punishment and reward is an ineffective motive for virtuous action. Worse still, the appeal to the supernatural consecrates prejudices, prevents free inquiry into important moral issues and reinforces conservative ideologies.

Mill concludes that belief in the supernatural is not necessary to individual or social well-being. Indeed, there are “other sources of virtue and happiness which stand in no need of the support of supernatural beliefs.” Although religion contributes to beneficial ends in some indirect ways, it is not due to their doctrines, but to their being generally accepted and culturally empowered. While supernaturalism does have the emotional advantage of inculcating the comforting hope for a reunion with loved-ones in an afterlife, Mill is dismissive of such superficial and selfish ideas: “I cannot but think that as the condition of mankind becomes improved, as they grow happier in their lives, and more capable of

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27 Ibid., pp. 416–4117.
deriving happiness from unselfish sources, they will care less and less for this flattering expectation.”

When in “The Utility of Religion” Mill comes to assess the influence of religion on character development—the value...of religion to the individual...as a source of personal satisfaction and elevated feelings”—he concludes that such a value is not to be disputed.”

He remarks that, despite its asceticism, religion is potentially a source of aesthetic and emotional culture. For this reason, the idea of religious institutions must not be dismissed altogether: the scepticism of the understanding does not necessarily exclude the Theism of the imagination and feelings.” But Mill is certain that these potentially beneficial influences on internal culture are not exclusive to supernaturalism. In fact, these benefits to character development are fully available to a secular religion. Moreover, a Religion of Humanity would be capable of imparting them without reinforcing conservative prejudices in politics, society and philosophy.

Given the advantage of early education and the authority of public opinion, Mill, drawing explicitly on Comte, suggests that the idealisation of our earthly life—rather than of a supernatural deity—would provide a better motive to virtue and altruism. If inculcated through the cultus and institutions of a religion, Mill argues that the deification of humanity’s epic struggle for progress throughout history could instil the beneficial moral influences formerly associated with supernatural religion. The Religion of Humanity would be stripped of supernaturalism and asceticism. It would have its own mythology and moral narratives, but they would be secular. Moreover, it would not rely on

30 Ibid., pp. 419–420.
31 Ibid., p. 426.
32 “This condition [the desire to replicate ideal goodness] is fulfilled by the Religion of Humanity in as eminent a degree, and in as high a sense, as by the supernatural religions even in their best manifestations, and far more so than in any of their others.... I will now further maintain that it is not only capable of fulfilling these functions, but would fulfil them better than any form whatever of supernaturalism. It is not only entitled to be called a religion: it is a better religion than any of those which are ordinarily called by that title.” Mill, “Utility of Religion,” p. 422.
33 Ibid., p. 420.
selfish motives, such as Divine punishment or reward, to encourage moral development.\textsuperscript{34} Instead, it would promote an "obligation towards the universal good" by embracing positive moral qualities, such as "sympathy and benevolence and the passion for ideal excellence."\textsuperscript{35}

The goal would be to encourage people to imagine themselves engaged in a timeless battle against superstition, conservatism and dogmatism. The moral agent would be an ally of great historical figures such as Marcus Aurelius or Socrates, who are offered as secular deities—beacons of excellence to light the path to moral development. The labours of the moral agent would be conceived as part of a task that would be continued by future generations. In this secular religion, the individual would "live ideally in the life of those who are to follow them."\textsuperscript{36} Moral self-development, therefore, would be a contribution to the historical struggle. Mill states that the Religion of Humanity's moral narrative may even draw on the idea of "a struggle between contriving goodness and an intractable material, as was believed by Plato, or a Principle of Evil, as was the doctrine of the Manicheans." In such a theory, the individual imagines him or herself as a "fellow-labourer" working for the "triumph of good over evil."\textsuperscript{37}

Mill was aware that such a mythology would require certain epistemic "indulgences." These would be outweighed by the positive incentives to moral striving and the pursuit of excellence: "Against the moral tendency of this creed no possible objection can lie." As Mill explains, "the contemplation of these possibilities [of being an earthly participant in a struggle between good and evil] is a legitimate indulgence, capable of bearing its part, with

\textsuperscript{34} Mill, "Utility of Religion," p. 421: "This exalted morality would not depend for its ascendency on any hope of reward...but the approbation, in this, of those whom we respect, and...whom we admire or venerate."

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., pp. 426–427

\textsuperscript{37} Mill here is actually referring to a form of supernaturalism, but he believes that the Religion of Humanity and the Manichean world-view "may be held in conjunction," suggesting that a secular religion might incorporate elements of supernaturalism if they could contribute to moral improvement. For further detail see Heydt, "Narrative, Imagination, and the Religion of Humanity in Mill's Ethics," passim.
other influences, in feeding and animating the tendency of the feelings and impulses towards good.”

At this stage in the development of his political thought (circa. 1840–54), Mill finds in Comte’s Religion of Humanity a useful mechanism to further his own views on social reform and human flourishing. Mill meshes the general spirit of Comte’s Religion of Humanity with his own views about the importance of individuality, moral autonomy and moral striving. Millian presuppositions about the formation of emotionally developed and rationally mature characters, and the appropriate conditions for good, progressive societies are clothed in grand ideas about a Religion of Humanity. Its mythology was intended to unite Mill’s ideas about self-formation, moral development and social reform. Mill envisioned a morality grounded on large and wise views of the good of the whole that would avoid the illiberal implications of Owenite and Benthamite reformism, neither sacrificing the individual to the aggregate, nor the aggregate to the individual, but giving to duty on the one hand and to freedom and spontaneity on the other their proper province.

Above all, the Religion of Humanity would encourage moral development. In contrast to Protestantism’s inculcation of passive and negative values such as duty and obligation, the religion of Humanity promotes the active contemplation of and aspiration to moral excellence. In short, in stark contrast to Protestant teachings—a decayed morality of obedience—it encourages active moral striving. The positive characters of heroic ancients such as Socrates produce a much more ennobling effect on our capacity for self-development. However, Mill argues, these examples have been overrun by the prevailing morality of asceticism and duty.

39 Ibid., p. 421.
40 As Mill says, “we greatly doubt if most of the positive virtues were not better conceived, and more highly prized, by the public opinion of Greece than by that of Great Britain; while negative and passive qualities have
Mill’s Later Critique of Religion

Given the force of this social critique, scholars have asked why Mill, in his later essays, purported to have found significant value in the same religious culture he excoriates for its oppressive, ascetic and irrational tendencies. If the Religion of Humanity could reproduce the best effects on the character of the old religions, why did Mill think that the traditional oppressive and enervating religious culture could be “well worth preserving”? A clue is provided in Mill’s reaction against the stages of Comte’s own thinking.

Reviewing Comte’s thought as a whole in 1865, Mill now presents a very different attitude towards Protestantism from that which he expressed in “The Utility of Religion” (written 1854, published 1874). First, he takes aim at Comte’s alleged misinterpretation of English social development, complaining that Comte has underestimated Protestantism’s positive influence on the reasoning and logical faculties. In *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865), Mill argues that through its notion of direct responsibility to God and, in some denominations, its non-hierarchical structure, Protestant theology, as distinct from Catholic, at least “cultivates the intelligence and conscience of the individual believer.” An example is the culture of reading the bible at home with one’s family, rather than passively receiving scripture from a priest. In a backhanded compliment Mill says of Protestant doctrines that “[t]he food may not have been the most nourishing, but we cannot be blind to the sharpening and strengthening exercise which [it] gave to the understanding—the discipline in abstraction and reasoning.”

Mill affirms this critique of Comte and reappraisal of Protestant culture in an 1861 letter to Arthur W. Greene. He observes that:

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The Protestant forms of Christianity, not claiming for themselves any divinely confirmed infallibility, hold as a principle that the mode in which truth ought to be arrived at & the only legitimate mode of obtaining full assurance of it, is by the operation of the individual reason & conscience: which makes the permission & even the encouragement of free enquiry indispensable, in theory at least, however much the contrary may often be the case in practice.  

Imagination, Idealised Perfection and Moral Striving

Mill’s apparently revised appraisal of Protestant culture reaches its apogee in the essay “Theism” (written 1868–70), even though that essay is a sober and systematic demolition of theological proofs. Mill’s final word on theological claims to knowledge is a Humean agnostic compromise: “the rational attitude of a thinking mind towards the supernatural, whether in natural or revealed religion, is that of scepticism as distinguished from belief on the one hand, and from atheism on the other.” There is little evidence for the existence of a deity, “insufficient for proof, and amounting only to one of the lower degrees of probability.” But the philosophical critique is not the end of the matter, nor is it Mill’s central concern about the importance of religion.

In the concluding chapter of “Theism,” Mill turns again to religion’s influence on emotional development. Mill now distinguishes between Protestantism’s potential to nourish the emotions and the tendency for industrial society to suppress them. Here he reconsiders one of the central questions posed in “The Utility of Religion”: what is the effect of religion on individual character? Mill argues that religion can exercise “inner” faculties such as imagination and creativity and provide a counterweight to the rigour of scientific thinking and ascetic culture. This argument takes two forms. First, religion provides idealistic models that can promote moral striving. Second, “the poetry of the supernatural”—operating through

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43 Mill, “To Arthur W. Greene,” 27 December. 1861, CW: XV, p. 759. Mill goes on to indicate that his writings do not aim at “undermining Theism,” and that he was “far from thinking that it would be a benefit for mankind in general, if without any other change in them, they could be made disbelievers in all religion.”

qualities such as hope, beauty and cheerfulness—are useful in developing emotional sensitivity which may be dulled by analytic activity or stifled by a powerful technocratic culture. Religion, in sum, can be a useful spring for emotional development.

Leaving aside the philosophical questions posed by theistic moral imperatives, Mill suggests that Christianity’s idealisation of divine moral perfection can be a sanctuary for the emotions; it offers an alternative aesthetic to what Mill elsewhere describes as the “pinched and hidebound” character promoted by consumer culture. In “Theism,” Mill observes that, even in its most “corrupt” and morally injurious periods, religious culture has always promoted an idealised image of moral perfection. Such vistas of divine perfection can promote moral striving. Indeed, even in “The Utility of Religion,” Mill had echoed Harriet Taylor’s view that “Religion and poetry address themselves...to the same part of the human constitution: they both supply the same want, that of ideal conceptions grander and more beautiful than we see realised in the prose of human life.”45 The “poetry of the supernatural” paints an alternative picture of idealised goodness that sharply contrasts with the day-to-day “quackery,” “hubbub” and drudgery of modern life described in the earlier essay, Civilisation (1836).46 As Mill explained:

Belief in a God or Gods, and in a life after death, becomes the canvas which every mind, according to its capacity, covers with such ideal pictures as it can either invent or copy. In that other life each hopes to find the good which he has failed to find on earth.... More especially, this belief supplies the finer minds with material for conceptions of beings more awful than they can have known on earth, and more excellent than they probably have known. So long as human life is insufficient to satisfy human aspirations, so long there will be a craving for higher things, which finds its most obvious satisfaction in religion. So long as earthly life

46 E.g., Mill, Civilisation, p. 133.
is full of sufferings, so long there will be need of consolations, which the hope of heaven affords to the selfish, the love of God to the tender and grateful.⁴⁷

In the later essay “Theism” (written between 1868 and 1870), Mill gives this idea a new twist, hinting that the “beneficial effects” of idealising moral perfection are most intense when supernaturally sanctioned. Imagining a “perfect Being” creates an ideal picture of what our character and society might be. However shaky its scientific footing, such an alternative ideal inspires a romantic desire for “striving.”⁴⁸ Mill argues that theology makes supernatural claims and is therefore a perversion of scientific understanding and not a department of truth or philosophy, but religion can perform an important social function as a cultivator of the emotional and creative faculties. Through its idealisation of moral perfection—communicated, for example, through music, ceremony, homiletics, art and architecture—religion adds a source of aspiration and emotional nourishment to the prosaic machinations of modern life:

To me it seems that human life, small and confined as it is, and as, considered merely in the present, it is likely to remain even when the progress of material and moral improvement may have freed it from the greater part of its present calamities, stands greatly in need of any wider range and greater height of aspiration for itself and its destination which the exercise of imagination can yield to it without running counter to the evidence of fact; and that it is a part of wisdom to make the most of any, even small, probabilities on this subject, which furnish imagination with any footing to support itself upon.⁴⁹

Mill expands upon this theme in his 1867 “Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews,” delivered one year before he wrote “Theism.” Here Mill observes that great works of art, architecture and poetry perform an important role in the

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⁴⁸ The romantic ‘spirit’ in this line of reasoning has been well documented. See Devigne, “Reforming Reformed Religion,” pp. 22–25; and Capaldi, John Stuart Mill.
cultivation of the sentiments by providing the "wider range and greater height of aspiration" he envisages in "Theism":

All the arts of expression tend to keep alive and in activity the feelings they express. Do you think that the great Italian painters would have filled the place they did in the European mind, would have been universally ranked among the greatest men of their time, if their productions had done nothing for it but to serve as the decoration of a public hall or a private salon? Their Nativities and Crucifixions, their glorious Madonnas and Saints, were to their susceptible Southern countrymen the great school not only of devotional, but of all the elevated and all the imaginative feelings.  

The contemplation of beauty or perfection widens one's "intellectual horizon" and stimulates the creative and aesthetic faculties. Mill then contrasts the noble, beautiful, imaginative and virtuous with the existing state of selfishness and ordinariness:

Even apart from any specific emotional expression, the mere contemplation of beauty of a high order produces in no small degree this elevating effect on the character…. The more prosaic our ordinary duties, the more necessary it is to keep up the tone of our minds by frequent visits to that higher region of thought and feeling, in which every work seems dignified in proportion to the ends for which, and the spirit in which, it is done…. There is, besides, a natural affinity between goodness and the cultivation of the Beautiful, when it is real cultivation, and not a mere unguided instinct. He who has learnt what beauty is, if he be of a virtuous character, will desire to realize it in his own life—will keep before himself a type of perfect beauty in human character, to light his attempts at self-culture.

In sum, religious culture can inculcate an aspiration to emulate moral perfection. These influences are directly related to character development and self-culture. Mill cannot consent to the precise moral norms that religion advocates; nevertheless, in later essays Mill

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50 Mill, *Inaugural Address*, pp. 254–245. It is important to note that in Mill’s later critique religion does not enjoy a monopoly on our access to the higher aesthetic plane; beautiful natural scenery can have the same effect. Nevertheless, Mill is appreciative that religion at least offers an alternative to the existing hegemony of money-getting culture—even if it was also complicit in that culture’s ascension.

51 Ibid.

52 Though it should be noted that Mill reserves special praise for the morality of Christ. For examples see Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 218; and Mill, "Theism," pp. 487–488. For the view that Mill took the sacrifice of Jesus for
argues that its advocacy of moral perfection at least sets it apart from the ordinariness and baseness of industrial life.

Hope and Cheerfulness: “The Domain of Supposed Reality”

The second part of Mill’s later argument highlights religion’s promotion of emotionally beneficial traits, such as “hope” and a “cheerful disposition.” Mill’s estimation of theological claims, nevertheless, is parsimonious and certainly not orthodox. He concludes that “[t]he whole domain of the supernatural” is neither a department of knowledge nor of belief, but rather of “simple hope.”

Even in acknowledging the inherent groundlessness of hope, should we not, Mill asks, allow its indulgence by those “to whom it yields comfort?” The imagination, Mill affirms, ought not to be allowed to disturb “the rectitude of the intellect.” But, nevertheless, supernatural imagery can play a primary role in “giving elevation to the character.” Mill goes so far as to observe that the decline in genuine religious convictions in his “age of weak beliefs” is likely further to impoverish humanity’s ethical imagination.

The social trend towards materialism and tedium weakens “positive beliefs” and “leaves the imagination of higher things less provided with material from the domain of supposed reality [i.e., the supernatural].”

In this context, any sources of hope and aspiration for improvement are invaluable. Mill argues that a life lived according the dictates of pure reason and empirical investigation is bound to be miserable and dull. Thus he remarks that “one of the chief blessings of life, a cheerful disposition” can be wrecked by the consistent self-application of our reasoning faculties to every aspect of our lives. Ambitious hopes and dreams can easily wither in the face of objective critical scrutiny; they are often found to be impractical, if not positively

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the happiness of mankind to represent the highest statement of utilitarian virtue” see Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism From Hume to Mill*, p. 184.

54 Ibid.
irrational. But it is a grand mistake, Mill thinks, to align cheerfulness with foolishness and common-sense with virtue. Optimism and aspiration are not necessarily enemies of reason and rectitude: it is not found in practice that those who take life cheerfully are less alive to rational prospects of evil or danger and more careless of making due provision against them, than other people. Similarly, the cultivation of supernatural hopes is not, to Mill, a crime against rationality:

[I]n the regulation of the imagination literal truth of facts is not the only thing to be considered. Truth is the province of reason, and it is by the cultivation of the rational faculty that provision is made for its being known always, and thought of as often as is required by duty and the circumstances of human life. But when the reason is strongly cultivated, the imagination may safely follow its own end, and do its best to make life pleasant and lovely inside the castle, in reliance on the fortifications raised and maintained by Reason round the outward bounds.

There is therefore room for a grand and active ethical imagination within a powerful and highly developed rationality: when imagination and reason receive each its appropriate culture they do not succeed in usurping each other’s prerogatives. Indeed, the “cheerful disposition” has an inspiriting influence on self-development. As Mill says, a hopeful disposition gives a spur to the faculties and keeps all the active energies in good working order. When the intellect intrudes on the legitimate province of imagination, it merely wrecks harmless illusions such as the hope of reunion with a departed loved one. More importantly, it defeats the notion of moral perfection in a divine or existent being that one might aspire to emulate. Without the cheerfulness and moral striving these hopes animate, the ethical imagination is impoverished, the intellect deprived, and our lives become grey and

58 Ibid., p. 485.
59 Ibid., p. 484.
60 Ibid. “It is not solely for the sake of a more enjoyable life that the habit is desirable of looking at things and at mankind by preference on their pleasant side; it is also in order that we may be able to love them better and work with more heart for their improvement.”
61 Ibid.
idle: "The imagination and feelings become tuned to a lower pitch; [and] degrading instead of elevating associations become connected with the daily objects and incidents of life, and give their colour to the thoughts."  

While ultimately illusory, hope in an afterlife can have the same beneficial effect.” Mil argues that the idea that we live on in some metaphysical higher realm has a much more inspiring psychological effect on one’s capacity for self-development than the strictly rational belief that the quest for self-improvement must necessarily terminate with the death of one’s material body. Mill’s speculation, bordering on rather bold metaphysics, is worth quoting at length:

"This hope admits the possibility that the art employed in improving and beautifying the soul itself may avail for good in some other life, even when seemingly useless for this. But the benefit consists less in the presence of any specific hope than in the enlargement of the general scale of the feelings; the loftier aspirations being no longer in the same degree checked and kept down by a sense of the insignificance of human life—by the disastrous feeling of ‘not worth while.’ The gain obtained in the increased inducement to cultivate the improvement of character up to the end of life, is obvious without being specified.

Such harmless indulgences, Mill argues, can comfort and console, in themselves beneficially within the range of sympathies of the well-developed character. But this is merely the facile element of their influence. The poetry of the supernatural can inspire, ennoble and, to a certain extent, empower. If these irrational hopes console and comfort without destroying one’s reasoning faculties, they are harmless indulgences; but if they facilitate the self-elevation of character and the improvement of society, they are among the highest and rarest social goods.

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63 Ibid., p. 485.
From these arguments, Mill concludes that the indulgence of hope with regard to the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death, while we recognise as a clear truth that we have no ground for more than a hope, is legitimate and philosophically defensible.\textsuperscript{64}

There are two important points to note from Mill's later critique. First, Mill directly associates the indulgence in supernatural culture with the elevation of the character and the improvement of society.\textsuperscript{65} Religion promotes moral striving and is a wellspring for emotional development and human flourishing. Second, Mill argues that the foray into the supernatural is not inimical to the highest development of the scientific faculties—reason, logic and analysis. Providing that the individual has highly developed capacities for severe reason, the cultivation of the imagination through supernatural poetics has no necessary tendency to pervert the judgement.\textsuperscript{66} Access to the supernatural is important because in Theism Mill appears to that supernaturalism has some beneficial effects in nourishing and developing emotional capacities that the secular Religion of Humanity, so ardently advocated in The Utility of Religion, could neither intensify nor reproduce.\textsuperscript{67}

For these reasons, Mill is ultimately ambivalent about the prospects for a secular religion in any organised or institutional sense. If the potential for the existing religions to

\textsuperscript{64} Mill, Theism, p. 485.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., p. 483.
\textsuperscript{67} For example: it cannot be questioned that the undoubting belief of the real existence of a Being who realizes our own best ideas of perfection, and of our being in the hands of that Being as the ruler of the universe, gives an increase of force to these feelings beyond what they can receive from reference to a merely ideal conception.” The rational naturalist account of the universe supplies a far truer and more consistent conception of Ideal Goodness.” However, the particular advantage of supernaturally sanctioned ideas like hope and divine perfection are not possible on this world-view. In this context, Mill does not mean to imply a distinction between believers and atheists. His distinction is subtler. He distinguishes between those who believe God is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good (those who are therefore drawn into moral contradiction,” given the existence of evil and earthly imperfection), and those who deny the omnipotence of the deity. Mill concludes: The power of the Creator once recognised as limited, there is nothing to disprove the supposition that his goodness is complete and that the ideally perfect character in whose likeness we should wish to form ourselves and to whose supposed approbation we refer our actions, may have a real existence in a Being to whom we owe all such good as we enjoy.” For the view that The Religion of Humanity’s ethical importance is of a largely intellectual and imaginative variety” see Colin Heydt, Narrative, Imagination, and the Religion of Humanity in Mill’s Ethics, p. 108, n. 30, passim.
promote moral striving can be harnessed, the gains of replacing supernatural religion with a secular morality might not be worth the loss. In the end, Mill concludes that the influences of religion on the character which will remain after rational criticism has done its utmost against the evidences of religion [which Mill has just done], are well worth preserving, and that what they lack in direct strength as compared with those of a firmer belief, is more than compensated by the greater truth and rectitude of the morality they sanction.\textsuperscript{68} 

**Reconciling the Two Critiques**

Reconciliation of the disparate strands in Mill's critique of religion first requires a brief exercise in contextualisation of Mill's reaction against Comte's reformist politics.

*Mill and Comte*

"Nature" (written 1853–54), "The Utility of Religion" (written 1854) and "Theism" (written 1868–70) were published by Helen Taylor as a single text—*Three Essays on Religion*—in 1874, but they were conceived and composed by Mill at different times.\textsuperscript{69} Of the three essays, "Nature" was written first. Mill had completed a substantial draft by August 1853. The essay was finally finished on Sunday 5 February, 1854 and never revised. Mill had been receiving advice and comment from Harriet Taylor-Mill in the intervening period. He incorporated some of her suggestions into the text, but the revisions and prose were all his.\textsuperscript{70}

Mill then indicates in February 1854 that he will begin a treatise concerning the differences in individual and national characters after completing "Nature." Harriet Taylor-Mill suggests instead that the Utility of Religion, [would] be one of the subjects you would have most to say on.” Mill responds that a few paragraphs will bring me to the end of all I have got to say on the subject” and asks his wife to fill it up.” Several of her suggestions are

\textsuperscript{68} Mill, "Theism," p. 488.
\textsuperscript{69} Mill died in 1873. For more detailed information on the composition of "Theism" see John Robson’s *Textual Introduction” in Mill, CW: X, p. cxxix, n. 34.
incorporated verbatim into the final version of "The Utility of Religion," which was completed on 5 April, 1854.\textsuperscript{71} Like "Nature," the draft of "The Utility of Religion" was never revised.

"Theism" belongs to a much later period. Although we cannot be as precise in dating this essay, Helen Taylor reports that it was written between 1868 and 1870, approximately fifteen years after its two companion pieces. She writes that "Theism" was not designed as a sequel to the two Essays which now appear along with it, nor were they intended to appear all together.\textsuperscript{72}

These dates are significant because they correspond with Mill's final turn against Comte's social vision. In 1848 Mill declares his support for Comte's "culte de l'Humanité," but also gives the first indication that he was concerned about the lack of liberty in Comte's positivist polity. At this stage, Mill views the Religion of Humanity as a \textit{theoretical}, rather than a \textit{political} idea. In a letter to John Pringle Nichol dated 30 September, 1848, Mill describes as realistic Comte's visions for a positivist future. Comte's "\textit{strange book}"—\textit{Discours sur l'ensemble du Positivisme} (1848)—is at least the first book which has given a coherent picture of a supposed future of humanity with a look of possibility about it, and with enough of \textit{feature} for the reason and imagination to lay hold of it by.\textsuperscript{73}

At this time, Mill's chief criticism of Comte is that he is \textit{resolutely} ignorant of the laws of the formation of character.\textsuperscript{74} This leads Mill to two prescient observations. First, Comte's science of character formation, such as it was, \textit{when} reduced to practice, would be


\textsuperscript{72} Helen Taylor, "Introductory Notice" to \textit{Three Essays on Religion} in Mill, CW: X, p. 371.

\textsuperscript{73} Mill, "To John Pringle Nichol," 30 September, 1848, CW: XIII, p. 738.

the most contrary to human liberty of any now taught or professed.”75 Second, Mill says –in all this, and most emphatically in all his doctrines about women, I think and have always thought him in a radically wrong road, and likely to go farther and farther wrong, and think his political writings (apart from his admirable historical views) likely to be mischievous rather than useful.”76

In 1848 Mill thought that Comte’s positivist psychology and sociology had the potential to be turned against liberty. He even expected Comte to take this path. But Mill managed to separate the Religion of Humanity from his concerns about a diminution of liberty, remarking only on “the ridiculousness…[of Comte’s] premature attempts to define in detail the practices of this cult.”77 Mill makes a distinction between Comte’s political vision and the Religion of Humanity.

Mill had been an admirer of Comte’s work in the 1830s and 1840s. Like Comte, Mill thought the methods of physical science were the correct model for moral and social science. He had been especially influenced by Comte’s theory of organic and critical stages in social history. However, Mill’s opinion soured when he read Comte’s most detailed application of positivist philosophy to political science, *Système de Politique Positive* (in 4 volumes, 1851–54). Mill was appalled by the total absence of individuality and liberty in Comte’s blueprint

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for a positivist society and later described it as “the completest system of spiritual and temporal despotism, which ever yet emanated from a human brain.”

In this work, Comte proposed that supernatural religion be replaced with a clerisy of positivist philosophers who were to be revered, deified and venerated with all the ritual of a religion. This religion would be given a naturalist, positivist and secular foundation, with science and reason for deities and the great philosophers for prophets. Once positivist social science had done away with supernaturalism and was entrenched in the institutions of the state, there was no need for freedom of thought and discussion. As Comte infamously, and with revealing naiveté, wrote, “there is no liberty of conscience in astronomy, chemistry, [and] physiology, in the sense that everyone would find it absurd not to believe with confidence in the principles established in these sciences by competent men.” Public access to ideas and debates would be limited to the 150 volumes Comte would reserve for the “Positivist Library”—no other texts would be required. Total social, economic, political and spiritual power would reside in the hands of a single High Priest of Humanity—Comte himself—who would delegate the day-to-day business of politics and public administration to a triumvirate of bankers. This was no distant utopian vision: he clearly thought it realisable and proposed a transitional 33-year phase that would usher in the positivist polity before the end of the nineteenth-century.

Mill complained that by quashing the freedom to challenge established social and political norms, Comte had simply replaced one despotism with another. More importantly,

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he had neglected the fundamental importance of self-culture to the well-being of the individual and society. In his *Autobiography* (1873) Mill writes that Comte’s Religion of Humanity stands [as] a monumental warning to thinkers on society and politics, of what happens…[when we forget] the value of Liberty and of Individuality.”

But the history of Mill’s gradual rejection of Comtean social engineering is more complex than this. Mill’s most explicit repudiation of Comte’s politics is found in *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, written in 1863–65 and published in 1865. Mill’s review is divided into two parts: Part One analyses Comte’s “early career” and focuses on Comte’s *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (1830–42, 6 volumes); and Part Two critiques the “later” Comte. The list of works Mill considers representative of the later Comte includes *Système de Politique Positive* (4 vols., 1851–54), *Synthèse Subjective* (1856) and five other texts. Excluding *Système de Politique Positive* (hereafter *System of Positive Politics*), discussed below, only one of the texts—*Catéchisme Positiviste, ou Sommaire Exposition de la Religion Universelle* (1852)—was published before 1854, when Mill was writing “Nature” and “The Utility of Religion.” Tabulating Mill’s citations to each of these works is revealing. Of the ten texts cited by Mill, *Synthèse Subjective* (1856, 20 references) and *System of Positive Politics* volume 4 (1854, 16 references) have the most citations. Together they comprise over half of the citations in Part Two of Mill’s *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (“The Later Speculations of M. Comte”). It is thus evident that these two texts are the primary focus of Mill’s critique of the “later” Comte.

Crucially for Mill’s appreciation of Comte, the fourth volume of Comte’s *System of Positive Politics* contains the most elaborate and detailed view of the positivist future state. When he read volume four, Mill’s attitude towards the Religion of Humanity underwent a

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82 Each volume of a multi-volume work has been counted as a separate text.
fundamental shift. A comprehensive understanding of Mill’s critique of religion requires that we ascertain precisely when this occurred.

In a letter to his wife dated 4 February, 1854 (at the time that he was writing "Nature" and "The Utility of Religion") Mill notes that he has read through another new volume of Comte.” He goes on to explain that “there is no fresh bad in it” and remarks on “the [curious] completeness and compactness of his theory of everything—and the perfectness, without flaw, of his self-satisfaction.” The editors of Mill’s letters included in the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* write that Mill is probably referring to volume four of Comte’s *System of Positive Politics*. This is a significant error. Volume four—which contains Comte’s application of positivism to political philosophy and his vision for the future organisation of society—was published in Paris in August 1854. In the preface to volume four, Comte writes that it had occupied in the writing six months of uninterrupted work (January 29–July 25 1854).” The preface is signed, using the Positivist Calendar, “Auguste Comte. 10 Rue Monsieur-le-Prince. Paris, 15 Dante, 66 (Sunday, July 30, 1854).”

These dates are significant for our understanding of the development of Mill’s views on religion. Mill could not possibly be referring to volume four of Comte’s *System* in the letter to his wife dated 4 February, 1854 in which he seems bemused by Comte’s minuteness, rather than appalled by his authoritarianism. At this time, Comte had been writing volume four for barely a week. Mill’s statement that Comte’s work contains “no fresh bad in it” does not refer to volume four of Comte’s *System*, in which the illiberal implications of the Religion of Humanity are most thoroughly articulated. Given this, it seems plausible that Mill is referring to volume three, which enunciates Comte’s philosophy of history (to which Mill remained sympathetic) and was published in August 1853. Mill therefore conceived and

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84 See textual note 4, CW: XIV, p. 149.
wrote “The Utility of Religion,” “Nature” and the Early Draft of the *Autobiography* (two of which contain positive estimations of Comte’s thought, and none of which is critical of Comte’s politics) approximately six months before volume four of Comte’s *System* was published in August 1854. Although he had detected a developing contempt for moral freedom in Comte’s politics and had personally rebuked Comte over the subjection of women to men in the positivist society as early as 1848, Mill could not have known of the final despotic extremism in Comte’s political positivism when he wrote these three important texts (which survive in their original composition). Mill’s early critique of religion and enthusiasm for the Religion of Humanity was developed and expressed before he came to view Comte’s reformism as “liberticide.” The more positive view of the existing religions in “Theism” and ambivalence about social reform expressed through personal correspondence and essays such as *Auguste Comte and Positivism* belongs to a later period in Mill’s thinking.

There is one more chronological matter to note before a number of important conclusions can be drawn. There are no repudiations of Comte as an illiberal thinker published before Mill read volume four of Comte’s *System*. The most emphatic denunciations are directed at the *System* itself and are found in *On Liberty* (written 1855–58), *Utilitarianism* (conceived as three separate essays in 1854, completely revised and re-written 1858–61), the *Autobiography* (with the positive section on Comte revised to include a critique in 1861 or 1870) and *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (written 1863–65).\footnote{86} But we can be more precise still about the timing of Mill’s final turn against Comte.

The first indication that Mill turned wholly against Comte’s politics is contained in a letter from Mill to Harriet Taylor-Mill dated 15 January, 1855.\footnote{87} Mill writes that 

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\footnote{86}{When Mill revised the *Autobiography* in 1861 and 1870 he completely re-wrote the 1853–54 section on Comte, adding approximately 1,000 words. The new section contains a terse repudiation of Comte’s politics.}

\footnote{87}{The term “wolly” is used because Mill had long ago objected to the place of women in Comte’s positive polity. He had raised this issue personally with Comte. It is interesting to note that Mill does not directly censure}
thing to write & publish at present would be a volume on Liberty. So many things might be
brought into it & nothing seems more to be needed—it is a growing need too, for opinion
tends to encroach more & more on liberty, & almost all the projects of social reformers in
these days are really liberticide—Comte particularly so." Volume three of Comte's System
was first published in August 1853 and Mill's correspondence suggests that he had finished
reading it by February 1854. Volume four was published in August 1854, so it is plausible to
speculate that Mill was probably reading volume four for the first time in January 1855. In
any case, Mill begins writing On Liberty at precisely the same time he first denounces the
liberticidal tendencies in Comte's positivist politics. The writing of On Liberty, then,
coincides with Mill's earliest recorded expression of horror at Comte's political vision, and is
framed within the context of Mill's new concerns about the illiberal or tyrannical tendencies
in nineteenth-century theories of social reform, "Comte's particularly so." Mill's
enthusiasm for Comte's Religion of Humanity belongs to an earlier period in his thought.

Conclusion

Mill's social critique presupposes assumptions about the importance of the autonomous self-
development of one's emotional faculties. After he became fully cognizant of the inherent
despotism in Comte's secular alternative to supernatural religion, Mill became more
appreciative of the role of religious experience in nourishing and cultivating the sentimental,
aesthetic and emotional faculties.

More precisely, Mill's reading of volume four of Comte's System of Positive Politics
some time between August 1854 and February 1855 consolidated his earlier opposition to

Comte in The Subjection of Women.
89 For the argument that On Liberty was written to militate the authoritarian tendencies left in Mill's Religion of
Humanity see Allan D. Megill, "J.S. Mill's Religion of Humanity and the Second Justification for the Writing of
however. Mill was worried about reform generally, not just Comte's religion of humanity. The Owenite
communities are a case in point.
Comte’s politics, and forced Mill to re-evaluate the possibility and desirability of rapid or wholesale social transformation. Mill had been gradually forming an opinion that Comtean social reform was fundamentally wrongheaded in the late 1840s. This trend was consolidated—though not created—when Mill discovered the “frenzy for regulation” and “inordinate demand for ‘unity’ and ‘systematisation’” in the social vision presented in Comte’s *System of Positive Politics* (1851–1854) and later works such as *Synthèse Subjective* (1856). Mill had not fully appreciated the total absence of liberty in Comte’s positivist vision until he read volume four of Comte’s *System of Positive Politics* in 1855, in which Comte proposes to reorganise society in alignment with positivist science and gives the most thorough and explicit formulation of his “theory of the future of man,” including the Religion of Humanity.

As “Utility of Religion” and “Nature” were written before this hardening in Mill’s opposition to Comtean reformism, they represent earlier stages in Mill’s thinking. These early essays preserve a glimpse into an earlier period in the development of Mill’s political thought when he was much more sanguine about the prospects for social reform. Nevertheless, Mill continued to argue throughout his life that Comte had at least proved that religion did not require a supernatural sanction to perform its moral service. He also continued to look forward to the Religion of Humanity’s “due ascendancy over the human mind.” But after he wrote “The Utility of Religion” in early 1854, Mill re-evaluated his own reformist agenda in

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93 Mill, “Theism,” p. 489. See also Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, p. 332, where Mill argues that “a religion may exist without belief in God, and that a religion without a God may be, even to Christians, an instructive and profitable object of contemplation.”
light of the illiberal developments in Comte's political thought—a liberticidal trend Mill
detected in reformist politics generally.

Mill maintained several aspects of his earlier critique in his later writings. For
example, he continued to excoriate prejudice, conservatism and asceticism where he found
them (e.g., in the Church of England, Calvinism and Catholicism). He always considered
theology a false path to knowledge. But in later essays Mill softens the call for a supersession
of Christianity by the Religion of Humanity suggested by his wife and advocated in —The
Utility of Religion.” Mill’s post-1855 works acknowledge the value of existing religious
culture as a modicum of emotional nourishment, a spring for moral perfection, a developer of
the imagination, and even a cultivator of the rational and speculative faculties. Such valuable
cultural assets are —well worth preserving.”94

Read alongside Comte's plans—the eradication of existing religion and the total
centralisation of political, social, economic, cultural and spiritual power—Mill’s more
sympathetic treatments of religious culture in later essays appear less a turn towards
conservatism or advocacy for Protestantism, than a pragmatic re-evaluation of the
possibilities for improving the existing structures and institutions that, realistically, did not
seem capable of eradication. The one constant in Mill’s critique of religion is the importance,
to individual and social well-being, of a simultaneous and harmonious self-development of
the emotional, creative and reasoning faculties. Mill admits that some forms of religion
already meet this emotional need, but he adds that the moral and emotional benefits come at a
high price. In addition to the consecration of conservatism in politics, asceticism in culture
and intuitionism in philosophy, the existing religions debase the intellect and stunt the

94 Mill, ¬Theism,” p. 488. Thus Berkowitz somewhat overstates the point when he writes that ¬Mill wished to
overcome Christianity…. Christianity, Mill argued, had lost its utility.” Peter Berkowitz, Virtue and the Making
of Modern Liberalism (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 159. By failing to appreciate the
contextual history of the composition of these pieces, and the changes in opinion such developments reflect,
Berkowitz implicitly presumes that Mill’s critique of religion did not move beyond the stage in which he
advocated the Religion of Humanity and charged religion with irrelevancy and moral turpitude.
development of the speculative faculties. The old religions might have elevated and improved human character, but only by requiring a torpid and inactive state of the speculative faculties. If the existing religions could provide for emotional development, Mill was prepared to accept and declare their importance—but not their necessity. Clearly evincing the great importance of emotional self-culture in his Moral Science, his final position is that Protestant theology might be a legitimate subject of imagination, & hope, & even belief…but not of knowledge.

According to an emerging interpretation, an inherent "urge" or "impulse" to be moralistic, paternalistic and coercive "infects" Mill's entire moral-political outlook. In this interpretation, Mill's moralised ideas of freedom and character development translate into domestic coercion and international imperialism. The foundations of Millian liberalism, it is argued, contain "an urge to dominate the world." This interpretation makes two central claims regarding the place and function of Mill's ideas of moral character and moral freedom in his political philosophy. First, Mill's entire thought is "inextricably linked to imperialism." Mill's ideas of character and freedom support an interventionist political theory in which people can be forced to live in conditions Mill thinks will maximise their moral development. This active moralism is perceived as contradictory to Mill's stated goal of promoting self-development and political liberty, amounting to a betrayal of the "liberal spirit." Second, it is argued that Mill's thought is a "perfect match" for contemporary...
liberalism, which shares its aims, justifications, and means with imperialism." Mill is assimilated into a tradition-based view of liberal thought in which he is said to share key presuppositions with thinkers such as John Locke, John Rawls and even Francis Fukuyama. Mill is viewed as a key member of a tradition of thought inherently committed to moral interventionism in the name of moral development.

Although the charge, considered in Chapter Six, that Mill used his ideas of character development and freedom to destroy Christianity can be dismissed, it is important to engage, as Mill’s sympathetic interpreters have not, with the core of the illiberal interpretation. This chapter makes two claims. First, the centrality of moral interventionism and imperialism in Mill’s political thought has been much overstated. To read Mill as an imperialist is a significant misrepresentation of the implications in his ideas of moral freedom and character development for his political thought. Mill’s gradual cooling towards morally prescriptive reformist visions (such as Comte’s Religion of Humanity) is reflected in his increasing ambivalence towards colonialism. Second, a careful consideration of Mill’s idea of sovereignty and doctrine of non-intervention reveals reluctance on his part to authorise

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7 According to Ryan, Mill spent much of his time at the East India Company (EIC) writing essays and portions of his books, rather than drafts of the instructions that were to go to officials in India.” Mill engages with imperialism at arm’s-length” and his thoughts on the subject amount to casual comments.” Ryan questions Mill’s enthusiasm for, or deep interest in, Britain’s imperial possessions” and suggests he was always more interested in the settler-colonies of Australia and New Zealand than with the imperial possessions in India and elsewhere. In Ryan’s view, Mill was uninterested in the empire as a subject of politics or ethics and thus “Mill was not a very interesting theorist of the imperial project.” Alan Ryan, Bureaucracy, Democracy, Liberty: Some Unanswered Questions in Mill’s Politics,” in Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (eds), The Political Thought of John Stuart Mill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 149–150. There is no mention of international or imperial politics at all in John Skorupski’s John Stuart Mill (London: Routledge, 1989). For the alternative view that Mill’s work at the EIC permeated his political thought see Eileen Sullivan, Liberalism and Imperialism: J.S. Mill’s Defence of the British Empire,” Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 44, No. 4, 1983, pp. 599–617; Abram L. Harris, John Stuart Mill: Servant of the East India Company,” The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1964, pp. 185–202; Lynn Zastoupil, J.S. Mill and India,” Victorian Studies, Vol. 32, No. 1, 1988, pp. 31–54; Don Habibi, The Moral Dimensions of J.S. Mill’s Colonialism,” Journal of Social Philosophy, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1999, pp. 125–146; and Melanie White, The Liberal Character of Ethological Governance,” Economy and Society, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2005, pp. 474–494.
coercion in the name of moral ideals. This casts doubt over the emerging interpretation of Mill’s thought as “inherently” or “inextricably” interventionist. 8

The first section of this chapter reviews the recent literature on the philosophical and political connection between liberal thinkers and the imperial project. Two core assumptions about Mill’s thought are questioned: first, that it is compatible with twentieth-century liberalism; second, that Mill’s defence of British colonialism leaves an indelible interventionist stain on his thinking in other areas. The second half of the chapter supplements this by demonstrating that moralised ideas about character development, moral freedom and liberal society have no necessary connection to Mill’s idea of state sovereignty. This highlights a deeper problem. Despite the wealth of criticism cited above, the relationship between Mill’s idea of moral character and his attitude towards bringing about the reforms necessary to maximise moral freedom and self-development remains unclear. An exploration of Mill’s doctrine of non-intervention brings the interplay of these two themes into sharper relief. In theorising the “principles of international morality,” Mill defends non-intervention and stability, rather than moralised conceptions such as “civilisation” or liberality. Mill argues that the conditions that best promote character self-development and maximise moral freedom (i.e., the spreading of “civilisation”) cannot be forcibly imposed. A study of Mill’s idea of non-intervention shows that he in fact used ideas about moral freedom to argue against intervention.

When seeking to understand Mill’s views on international matters one must keep in mind that as late as 1870 Mill had complained that there were “no rules or principles” laid down with sufficient authority with which the “moral entanglements” of international relations could be safely negotiated:

[T]here exists very generally a cowardly reluctance to look the fact in the face, and make provision for it, as one of the unavoidable inconveniences of an imperfect condition. People are afraid lest the force of recognised duties should be weakened, by admitting the liability of one duty to be overruled by another; and, though well knowing that this does happen, they prefer to be excused from giving their approbation beforehand to so unpleasant-looking a fact. The consequence is, that those who, having the responsibility of action, are forced to make for themselves some path through these moral entanglements, finding no rules or principles laid down for them but such as ignore instead of meeting the difficulties of the case, decide according to the dictate either of their selfish interests, or of some prevailing sentiment, which, if more disinterested, is not necessarily a truer guide.\(^9\)

Attempts to discern the "principles" of Mill's "theory" of international relations must therefore be approached with a degree of caution. Despite claims to the contrary, Mill did not articulate a "full blown theory of international relations," at least not at a level comparable to his ideas of self-development and moral freedom.\(^10\) Mill's essay "A Few Words on Non-Intervention" (1859) is his only direct contribution to the topic, and there is no comprehensive text underlying it in the way the *System of Logic* underlies his science of character formation and much of his "domestic" politics.\(^11\) The perplexed reader must therefore look directly to the *System of Logic* for what little conceptual clarification it offers on matters of international politics. Reading the *System of Logic* alongside "A Few Words on Non-Intervention" and Mill's newspaper articles on international affairs reveals that, far from being a rampant imperialist, Mill preferred stability and security to crusading moralism. Stability, rather than respect for moral freedom and the promotion of character development, is the basic pre-requisite for sovereignty in Mill's paradigm.

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\(^11\) The failure to ground their exegeses of Mill's thought, and his "philosophy of history" in particular, in the *System of Logic* is a major flaw of the illiberal interpretation. There is no reference to the *Logic* in Mehta's *Liberalism and Empire* nor in the works of Souffrant and Parekh, and only one footnote in Jahn's "Barbarian Thoughts," dismissing the *Logic* as "epistemological discussions (p. 600)," inexplicably unimportant to Mill's politics.
Liberalism and Imperialism: “The Liberal Syndrome”

The contention that liberalism contains an inherent license for interventionism is fuelling intense debate in the disciplines of history, international relations and political theory. According to what this thesis has termed the ‘illiberal’ or ‘moralistic’ interpretation—exemplified by the work of Parekh, Mehta, Jahn and Souffrant—a commitment to moral interventionism and imperialism is inherent to Mill’s thought: in Mehta’s words, ‘the urge is internal to it’; in Jahn’s, ‘the justification of imperialism…is an integral part of Millian political and international theory.’

Although the claims made by these scholars differ in substance and complexity, there is a general consensus of interpretation, which can be summarised into four main points:

1. Mill licenses intervention to impose civilisation (i.e., liberalism) on ‘barbarous’ and ‘savage’ societies through intervention (i.e., imperialism).
2. Noncivilised states are therefore not externally sovereign in Mill’s model.
3. Modern liberalism reproduces Mill’s tripartite classificatory schema (civilised/barbarous/savage) as a liberal/nonliberal dichotomy. ‘Nonliberal’ is merely the updated form of Mill’s ‘barbarous.’
4. A license to liberalise nonliberal societies by intervention is therefore inherent to modern liberalism, just as it is inherent to Mill’s liberalism.

In this interpretation, liberalism is understood as a coherent theoretical tradition of moral exclusion, which is based upon universalist normative contentions about human nature. Mehta argues that liberals make judgements about societies by locating them in a scale of historical development. The entrenchment of liberal values indicates a high level of civilisation. The problem is that for liberals these judgements represented broad

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12 Mehta claims that liberalism is not always imperial in action, but its imperial urge is nevertheless inherent. Mehta, Liberalism and Empire, p. 20. Emphasis in original. See also, Jahn, ‘Barbarian Thoughts,’ p. 613.

13 ‘With all people being born equal, free, and rational, birth…becomes the moment of an assured political identity.”’ Mehta, Liberalism and Empire, p. 49.
epistemological and normative commitments.” Liberals—especially Mill—demand that the retrograde become progressive,” and thus liberal thinking contains a fundamental commitment to being paternalistic.” Liberalism is marked by urges and impulses to reform the world,” which inevitably produce exclusionary strategies.” As Mehta asserts: “In the empire, this latent impulse—this urge to reform and progress—which otherwise so often remains obscured and contested behind a concern with rights and individual freedom, becomes virtually determinative and singular.” Mehta argues that Locke and Mill—as spokesmen for a coherent liberal tradition—exemplify the insidious exclusionism inherent to the liberal philosophical anthropology.” He sees the exclusion of peoples considered ‘backward’ or ‘barbarous’ as the theoretical core” of liberalism.

Specifically concerning sovereignty and intervention, Parekh argues that for Mill the right to non-intervention only applied to the relations between civilized societies.” Parekh too ascribes to Mill’s doctrine of non-intervention an exclusionary caveat: the right to non-intervention, like the right to individual liberty, only belonged to those who could make good use of it.” Thus, in agreement with Mehta, Parekh argues that for Mill it is the illiberal nature of ‘barbarous’ societies that nullifies their territorial sovereignty. Following Parekh, Jahn asserts that illiberal societies—by virtue of their illiberality and ‘backwardness”—have no claim to external sovereignty in the Millian paradigm: “It is this moral superiority of liberalism that provides the grounds not only for denying similar moral worth to nonliberals, but also for denying them equal rights of sovereignty and nonintervention.” Illiberality indicates an inferior stage of historical development and precludes sovereignty.

14 Mehta, Liberalism and Empire, p. 25, p. 105, p. 197.
15 Ibid., p. 80. Jahn repeats Mehta’s point, alleging the systematic nature of the exclusionary politics of the Millian paradigm: “Jahn, Barbarian Thoughts,” p. 617.
16 Ibid., p. 48, p. 50, p. 52.
17 Parekh, Decolonising Liberalism,” p. 87–88.
19 Ibid., p. 180. The scope of this thesis does not allow for a full consideration of the place of Mill’s philosophy of history in his Moral Science. Here it is possible only to point out that the contention that Mill’s political
concludes that “liberal justifications of intervention are based on the nature of nonliberal societies in general, rather than on their actual behaviour.” These claims justify the suppression of non-liberal practices within liberal or ‘civilised’ communities.

In this interpretation, the centrality of colonialism and imperialism—with their necessary commitment to intervention and subjugation—is roundly and explicitly affirmed. The crucial point made by these scholars is that moralistic interventionism in central to all of Mill’s thinking in politics, ethics and social science. Souffrant argues that an “attitude of interference is inherent to the body of Mill’s political work.” First, Mill’s “understanding of colonization” is “consistent with his moral, social, and political theories.” Second, “Mill’s philosophy of international affairs is closely related to and is in fact an extension of his social and political philosophy.” Therefore, “Mill’s views on international affairs are best thought is based on an “implicit philosophy of history” (Mehta, Liberalism and Empire, p. 102; Jahn, Barbarian Thoughts,” pp. 610–611) is at odds with Mill’s own account of the “Inverse Deductive or Historical Method” of social science in the System of Logic. Mill explicitly argues that political science is not to be deduced from historical laws of the succession of states of society.” He argues that “it is an imperative rule never to introduce any generalization from history into the social science” (Mill, Logic, p. 915; see also “Difficulties of the Direct Deductive Method in the Social Science.” Ibid., pp. 898–900). Mill is dismayed at “the most erroneous generalizations [that] are continually made from the course of history” (Ibid., p. 917). Elsewhere, he reports that “is my decided opinion formed on mature consideration, that the importance of history as a source of political knowledge has been greatly overrated…. [T]he importance of history in a political point of view is inconsiderable” (Mill, “The Use of History,” p. 392, p. 394). Moreover, Mill consistently affirms that “not only is history not the source of political philosophy, but the profoundest political philosophy is requisite to explain history. …History is not the foundation, but the verification, of the social science…the usefulness of history depends upon its being kept in second place” (Mill, “Sedgwick’s Discourse,” pp. 44–45). Generalisations regarding political arrangements, as Mill makes clear, must be deduced from Ethology and the Laws of Mind, and not from historical sociology, which in fact plays a verificatory and not an inductive role. Historical analysis at best reveals merely the most general and unreliable empirical laws which cannot, on their own, be of any use to political philosophy. Its role is as a testing ground for ethological principles. “The succession of states 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” (Mill, Logic, p. 914). This was the source of Mill’s criticism of Comte’s and Sedgwick’s sociology. Comte’s politics were “essentially consisting of generalisations from history, verified, not originally suggested, by deduction from the laws of human nature.” He thus had Moral Science backwards. For Mill, Moral Science must be based on psychological and ethological laws, not a “philosophy of history”: “The actions and feelings of human beings in the social state, are, no doubt, entirely governed by psychological and ethological laws: whatever influence any cause exercises upon the social phenomena, it exercises through those laws (Ibid., p. 897).” Mill’s clear position is that historical science requires “constant verification by psychological and ethological laws.” Politics is deduced from Ethology and psychology, not history or sociology (Ibid., pp. 889–898, p. 917; Mill, Sedgwick’s Discourse,” pp. 44ff).


understood when analysing his attempted justification of colonization.”

Parekh agrees: “Millian liberalism was developed against the background of British colonialism.” As he colonial experience was not marginal to Millian liberalism but penetrated its core and shaped its self-definition…the Millian liberal could not avoid being a missionary, a stern pedagogue, a civilizer at large, a global guru.”

According to this interpretation, Mill stands alongside Locke and Bentham as a progenitor of modern liberal internationalism and as an ancestor of contemporary liberal imperials. Thus Mehta compares Mill to Francis Fukuyama, considering Mill one of the major intellectual precursors” to the latter’s end of history” thesis and a forerunner to western intolerance of states such as Iran and Cuba. Jahn too considers Fukuyama exactly in line with Mill’s argument.” In making this argument Jahn affirms Mehta’s contention that modern liberalism—indeed the entire liberal tradition—is explicitly Millian. According to Jahn, “Mill and contemporary liberals [such as Rawls and Beitz] deny equal rights to nonliberal or noncivilised states on exactly the same grounds.” Mill’s notion of sovereignty, which excludes noncivilised” and nonliberal” peoples, is perfectly mirrored in contemporary liberal thought.” The point is made explicitly:

[T]he political consequences unfolding from liberal imperialism show an uncanny resemblance through the ages. From the involvement of Victorian Britain in India, through liberal foreign policies during the Cold War and since its end, the

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23 Parekh, Decolonising Liberalism,” pp. 92–94.
24 Mehta, Liberalism and Empire, p. 214. For a summary of some similar views see Bart Schultz Mill and Sidgwick, Imperialism and Racism,” Utilitas, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2007, pp. 104–130, p. 108. John Gray also exhibits a similar view: “is in J.S. Mill…that (on all views) we find the liberal syndrome of ideas most explicitly and recognisably articulated. With Mill, one is in the same company that includes Dworkin and Rawls, among others.” While Gray acknowledges that liberalism is a very complex tradition, containing recessive and dialectical moments,” he affirms in the end that “we can still identify a matrix of ideas, recognizable by all or most liberals, and by their critics, as constituting the liberal syndrome…[which is] found in J.S. Mill, and echoed in virtually all subsequent liberal writers.” John Gray, Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 286–287.
25 Jahn, Barbarian Thoughts,” p. 616.
tendency toward interventionism is inseparable from general liberal beliefs in the nature of nonliberal societies.\textsuperscript{26}

For Parekh, the “Millian legacy” is “Eurocentric, narrow, missionary and dogmatic.” Indeed, “Millian liberalism represents the British and European self-consciousness during the heyday of imperialism, and bears the deep imprint of an age in which the liberal way of life and thought exercised unchallenged intellectual and political hegemony over its defeated rivals.” The crisis of the liberal conscience is dramatically asserted:

To be a Millian liberal is to take a condescending and paternalistic view of nonliberal societies. Millian liberalism is inherently bipolar: all societies for it are either liberal or non-liberal, and the latter are by definition illiberal and unworthy of human beings. It is also inherently restrictive in the sense that liberal values and principles are to apply only to civilized people. It is underpinned by what I might call a Manichean theory of two worlds, one is an area of light, the other that of darkness, one is perfect and without blemish, the other irredeemably evil, and each governed by radically different principles and norms.\textsuperscript{27}

According to the illiberal interpretation, then, Mill’s thought can neither be disentangled from its supposedly intrinsic imperialism nor serve as a foundation for contemporary liberal thinking.

\textit{Mill and the Liberal Traditions}

Some recent scholarship has provided a more nuanced account of the history of liberalism and Mill’s standing within it. Duncan Bell, for example, argues against Jahn and Mehta that liberalism is not a philosophically or politically coherent tradition. He warns against “conceiv[ing] of ‘liberalism’ as a homogenous body of thought stretching from the seventeenth century into the present and speaking with one dominant voice,” most frequently

\textsuperscript{27} Parekh, “Decolonising Liberalism,” pp. 95–102, p. 92.
that of Mill or Locke. Deborah Boucoyannis argues that liberalism as a tradition of international thought has been badly misinterpreted. She has pointed out the divergence of utilitarian liberalism, furthered by Mill, Bentham, Herbert Spencer (to an extent) and the Manchester School, and the "classical version of Liberalism," represented by Adam Smith, Locke, and Machiavelli. It is a mistake to conflate the "classical" and "utilitarian" strands of liberalism, as they "reflect...two separate traditions" of opposing philosophical foundations." In this spirit, Alan Ryan has argued that any attempt to interpret liberalism as a monolithic tradition is met ultimately with "embarrassment":

It is easy to list famous liberals; it is harder to say what they have in common. John Locke, Adam Smith, Montesquieu, Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill, Lord Acton, T.H. Green, John Dewey and contemporaries such as Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls are certainly liberals—but they do not agree about the boundaries of toleration, the legitimacy of the welfare state, and the virtues of democracy.... They do not even agree on the nature of the liberty they think liberals ought to seek. Ryan also makes a point of noting just how awkwardly Mill, let alone others such as Locke, fits into the liberal "tradition":

It is a matter for regret that commentators have been so eager to assimilate Mill's ideas to those of mainstream twentieth-century liberalism that they have not seen what a very awkward ally of twentieth-century liberals he is.

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Of course, there are obvious differences. Like Bentham, Mill rejects natural rights theory; his epistemology cannot support the contractarianism of Hobbes and Locke; he considered himself a socialist; and his defence of individual liberty is based on utilitarian ethics. On the other hand, there are some categorically liberal elements in Mill’s international thought. Brown points out that Mill was an early advocate of national self-determination. It is argued that Mill, like Adam Smith, was a believer in what E. H. Carr called the ‘laissez-faire’ doctrine of the harmony of interests—that the strengthening of trade relationships and economic integration would facilitate peaceful relations. This is not to make a definitive declaration on what liberalism is; it is sufficient to point out that Mill adhered to positions other liberals have found morally pernicious, nonsensical or bizarre.

Millian Melancholia and the Evolution of Liberal Attitudes to Empire

Even if Mill were representative of the liberal international tradition, it is far from clear that an interventionist urge is inherent to it or to Mill’s particular brand of liberalism. According to Bell, this is at odds with the historical record. Richard Cobden and Herbert Spencer, two of Mill’s liberal contemporaries, were scathing and vitriolic critics of empire, as were the New liberals,” L.T. Hobhouse and J.A. Hobson, a generation later. It was also the case,” Bell argues, that heated opposition to imperialism (although rarely to all

34 Mill, Autobiography, p. 239.
37 Miller, “John Stuart Mill’s Theory of International Relations,” p. 500; Williams, Liberalism and War, pp. 21–22.
facets of the empire) continued to emanate from within the liberal ranks.” Thus we ought not to assume “that Victorian society was infused with an imperial spirit.”

This reflects a shift in opinion about the legitimacy of empire that began, at least in ‘liberal’ discourse, in the middle of the nineteenth century:

The standard mid-Victorian liberal line was sceptical of what came to be known during the 1870s as ‘imperialism,’ a mode of aggressive and militaristic adventurism associated traditionally with Caesarist tendencies in France, but also increasingly with Disraeli’s Eastern policy. Liberals often defended particular visions of the empire, but professed to hate imperialism. Just as there was no imperial logic to liberalism, so the relationship between utilitarianism and empire is more ambiguous than is sometimes recognized…. [T]here was no necessary connection between the philosophy and the political project.

Influenced by the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion and the Morant Bay uprising in 1865, ‘liberal discourse of empire became subject to mounting suspicion.” In particular “the main tenets of the liberal, civilising mission of the colonial state…became more tentative in…[their] moral and political aspirations.”

This shift is evident too in Mill’s thought, if only in his changing attitude towards the efficacy and practicability, rather than the legitimacy, of empire. In October 1865 Governor of Jamaica Edward John Eyre declared martial law in response to a violent demonstration at Morant Bay in which the local courthouse was burned and eighteen people, including the chief magistrate, were killed. In response, British soldiers killed 439 black Jamaicans, flogged more than 600 (including women), and burnt more than 1000 homes. The leaders of the rebellion were court-martialled and hanged, as were others whose involvement was

doubtful—such as George William Gordon, who was arrested in Kingston and transported to Morant Bay where martial law overrode the usual legal procedures.\footnote{See Julie Evans, \textit{Edward Eyre: Race and Colonial Governance} (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2005), pp. 132–137; Rande Kostal, \textit{A Jurisprudence of Power: Victorian Empire and the Rule of Law} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 12–14; and Bernard Semmel, \textit{The Governor Eyre Controversy} (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1962), p. 13.} In 1865 Mill became Chairman of the Jamaica Committee, whose purpose was to prosecute Eyre. Mill was deeply affected by the Eyre affair (an ―abomination‖) and by the ultimate failure of the criminal suits brought against Eyre.\footnote{Mill, ―To William Fraser Rae,‖ 14 December, 1865, CW: XVI, p. 1126.} According to Katherine Smits, these experiences led Mill to the conclusion that ―imperial rule inevitably subverts…its progressive potential‖ and leads to the rebarbarization of imperial rulers.\footnote{Smits, ―John Stuart Mill on the Antipodes,‖ p. 2, p. 14.}

Mill evinced a common predilection for conceiving of the empire in metaphorical terms as a ―safety-valve‖ for social, economic and political pressures in Britain.\footnote{See Sullivan, ―Liberalism and Imperialism,‖ p. 609; Wm. Roger Louis, \textit{Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez and Decolonization} (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 914, n. 7; Bell, \textit{The Idea of Greater Britain}, p. 263, p. 142.} As the Irish economist and British MP Robert Torrens put it, a well-regulated system of colonisation acts as a safety-valve to the political machine, and allows the expanding vapour to escape before it is heated to explosion.\footnote{As cited in Patrick Brantlinger, \textit{Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 114.} And yet towards the end of his life Mill began also to exemplify a late-Victorian re-evaluation of the way this mechanism operated in the colonies. While Mill continued to believe that the colonies opened up extensive new trade and commercial networks,\footnote{Kevin Kenny ―The Irish in the Empire,‖ in Kevin Kenny (ed.), \textit{Ireland and the British Empire} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 97.} by the mid to late nineteenth-century commentators on empire became more sceptical. It became a popularly held belief that the typical British emigrant or overseas official was not, as Mill argued in the late 1860s, of the highest moral character. Kevin Kenny notes bluntly that ―migration provided opportunities for younger sons.‖ Bell’s account is even more revealing:

\footnote{Bell’s account is even more revealing:}
Emigration was looked upon, on the one hand, as a safety-valve for social problems, and on the other, as a means of escape for greedy and ambitious young men, and for the less talented sons of the aristocracy. The colonists...were frequently scorned, viewed as at best lucky wretches, and often as rogues.47

Mill seemed to arrive at this position somewhat later than colleagues such as Edward Gibbon Wakefield,48 but, nevertheless, by 1869–1870 he too was expatiating on the moral deficiencies of the raw young Englishmen” in the colonies. Revolted by the British public’s acceptance of Eyre's brutality, Mill expresses a sceptical and suspicious view of the empire and its administrators:

Nothing can be more laudable than…inspiring greater respect for the people of India in the minds of those who are appointed to govern them. That respect for the most part exists in the experienced men who know the natives from a long course of service India; but nothing can be more disgusting than the feelings & demeanour towards them of numbers of the raw young Englishmen who go out & I am afraid this is an increasing evil….49

But the common English abroad—I do not know if in this they are worse than other people—are intensely contemptuous of what they consider inferior races, & seldom willingly practise any other mode of attaining their ends with them than bullying and blows.50

Indeed, Mill’s correspondence from this period expresses the “most deep rooted distrust” of the motives and capabilities of English officials and settlers, whose “insolence” towards the native populations” Mill considered a “disgrace.”51

48 Wakefield had claimed in his 1849 work A View on the Art of Colonization that colonists are in fact…inferior, low, unworthy of much respect, properly disliked an despised by people of honour here, who happen to be acquainted with the state of society in the colonies.” As cited in Bell, The Idea of Greater Britain, p. 142.
The degree to which this affected Mill’s overall defence of empire is contested, however. Pitts argues that it did not amount to a serious revision of his position. While Mill now wrote of the “overbearing and insolent [English] settlers” and while the Eyre controversy “deepened Mill’s concern about [the] persistent injustices of colonial rule,” his response fell short of a thoroughgoing interrogation of the premises and systemic failures of British rule over populations that Mill, like most of his countrymen, considered civilisationally inferior.” Bell too writes that while Mill appeared genuinely perturbed…he pulled back from arguing that colonisation was inherently cruel.” Yet Bell dissents from Pitts’s conclusion. Bell argues that Mill’s optimistic colonial “romance” gave way to a more disenchanted, anxious stance,” leading ultimately to melancholic colonialism.” Mill’s final position was marked by despondency.”

In broad agreement with Bell, Smits argues, against Pitts, that Mill did not approach the Eyre case as an isolated instance of abuse. Instead, he “saw the Jamaica disaster as the product of colonial rule, linked to other practical failures of the imperial dream of progress.” According to Smits, “by the end of his life, Mill was forced to acknowledge, however briefly, that realities of power…subverted any hopes for progress in the paternalistic government of other peoples.” It is clear that the waning of Mill’s belief in the efficacy and practicability of colonial rule during and after his experiences in the Jamaica Committee (1865–1869) reflects the general shift in liberal attitudes towards empire late in the

52 Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 151. This general view is also expressed in Don Habibi, “The Moral Dimensions of Mill’s Colonialism,” p. 141. Mill was certainly outspoken when he perceived abuses of British power, but he did not doubt the legitimacy of British hegemony over non-Europeans.” Both Habibi and Pitts cite a letter to David Urquhart written in 1866 in support of their claims that Mill is concerned mainly with the rule of law, and is not interested in defending freedom or liberty. See Mill, “To David Urquhart,” 4 October, 1866, CW: XVI, p. 1205.


nineteenth-century. It also exemplifies the gradual solidification of Mill’s belief, explored in Chapter Six, that “almost all the projects of social reformers in these days are really libertinism.”56 While the tensions in his thinking remained unresolved, Mill’s own position had changed markedly after 1858.57 The trajectory in which his re-appraisal of the colonial project seemed to be heading at the time of his death pointed to a sceptical position more attuned to the possibility that violence and injustice may be symptomatic of the tendencies any system of moral coercion or subjugation produces.

### Legitimacy

Although the apparent cooling of Mill’s colonial “romance” is now attracting attention, his views on intervention, sovereignty and legitimacy remain neglected.58 These ideas must be clarified to understand the connection between moral ideals and intervention in Mill’s political thought. Firstly, it is worth pointing out that Mill does not use the terms legitimacy and sovereignty. Therefore, there is an inevitable degree of anachronism in ascribing to his thought their twenty-first-century meanings and connotations. Nevertheless, Mill does explore the moral claims a government might make in its own defence. It is clear that for Mill a legitimate government pursues the interests of the people.59 These sentiments are first mooted in Mill’s review of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835). What is important is not that people themselves govern, but that they have security for good government.”60 Mill argues that the people must have the power to remove the government in cases where their

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interests are not pursued, but they should not govern directly. This is the only purpose for which it is good to entrust power to the people." Mill earlier described this power as the sovereignty of the people.

His point in this context is that absolute government (in this case Monarchism) can be internally legitimate, though not necessarily desirable. Absolutism is not of necessity a violation of the sovereignty of the people, which does not always require expression through democratic institutions. Legitimacy—the sovereignty of the people—does not consist in participation in the administration of the political community, but in the representation of interests. The sovereignty of the people is not the idea that the representatives of the people are to the people in the relation of servants to a master, and that their duty is merely to ascertain and execute the popular will.” Instead, the proper object of comparison is the office of a guardian, who manages the affairs of his ward, subject only to his own discretion, but is bound by a severe responsibility to exercise that discretion for the interest of his ward, and not for that of himself individually.” The sovereignty of the people therefore asserts simply that people are the source of all legitimate power.” Mill was clear that legitimacy had little relation to the idea of representative government, which he came to regard as a question of time, place, and circumstance” rather than an absolute principle.”

More importantly, Mill considered internal legitimacy an issue discrete from external sovereignty. Mill’s position is that the internal legitimacy of foreign states is ineffable to outsiders. Only the people concerned can determine the legitimacy of their government because they are the best judges of their own good. As Mill wrote to James Beal, one country, even with the best intentions, has no chance of properly understanding the internal

61 Mill, "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [I]," p. 72.
62 In an essay critiquing British misconceptions of French politics Mill asks intemperately, "are they so ignorant, both of France and of common sense, as not to know that the sovereignty of the people does not mean republicanism?" Mill, "Prospects of France [IV]," p. 149.
63 Mill, "Prospects of France [IV], pp. 149–150.
64 Mill, Autobiography, p. 177.
affairs of another."65 The interests of a national collective, the pursuit of which determines
the legitimacy of its government, is, like that of an individual, ineffable to others because, as
an observer at one of Mill’s 1865 election speeches reported, he thought every nation was
the best judge of its own affairs.66 This position has implications for the idea of intervention:

There is much to be said for the doctrine that a nation should be willing to assist its
neighbours in throwing off oppression and gaining free institutions. Much also
may be said by those who maintain that one nation is incompetent to judge and act
for another, and that each should be left to help itself, and seek advantage or
submit to disadvantage as it can and will.67

Beitz detects a link between Mill’s conception of internal legitimacy and the anti-
paternalism of On Liberty and Utilitarianism.68 Mill’s prohibition on intervening for an
idea” is, in part, based upon the assumption, central to his liberalism and also to his
utilitarianism, that the individual is the proper judge of his or her own personal good.69 In
affirmation, Carol Prager argues that Mill viewed the autonomy of individuals and states
through the same prism...[and] used the same justification for ruling out interference with
individuals and nations.”70 As the national good is ineffable to foreigners, there can be no
practical or logical connection between the legitimacy of the government and external
sovereignty. Only the subjects of a state can determine whether their government is pursuing
their best interests. Walzer’s maxim, per contra, is Millian in sentiment and logic: states can
be presumptively legitimate in international society and actually illegitimate at home.”71

65 Mill, “To James Beal,” 17 April, 1865, p. 1033.
70 Prager, Intervention and Empire,” pp. 626–627.
71 Michael Walzer, “The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics,” Philosophy and Public Affairs,
Vol. 9, No. 3, 1980, p. 214. Mill’s international thought permeates Walzer’s approach. For example, Mill’s
Sovereignty

If Mill’s idea of sovereignty is not derived from considerations of legitimacy it must have its basis elsewhere. There are two requirements for admission to Mill’s “community of nations”: evidence of Mill’s idea of domestic socio-political stability (explored below); and obedience to international law. In the *System of Logic*, Mill identifies stability as the key component for statehood. For Mill, a *stable* state, which is neither “civilised” nor “barbarous,” is a *sovereign* state.

Civilisation and Barbarism

The distinction between the “civilised” and the “barbarous” is a common theoretical device and is not exclusive to Mill, nor to liberal thinkers. Indeed the idea of a *return* to “barbarism” is prominent in a wide range of analyses of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Most notably, Hannah Arendt emphasised the fragility of civilisation and the ease with which (even in the heart of Europe) it could be replaced by barbarism.” From a different perspective, Slavoj Žižek develops a theme which preoccupied the earlier work of George Steiner: the close connection between a highly articulated “culture” and a violent, destructive “barbarism.” Žižek formulates the idea of *Kulturbarbarismus*, adding “primitivism,” “savage” and “culture” to the matrix, and styling Nazism as “the greatest barbarism of our time.” Likewise, John Gray, a critic of teleological liberalism and of Mill, suggests that “civil society” is existentially threatened by a new “barbarism” — modernist fundamentalisms and

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73 Though of course it did not represent a homogenous theoretical approach.
75 E.g., George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture* (London: Faber, 1971).
atavistic ideologies,” which seek to subjugate civil society,” including commissars or Mullahs, Nazis or clerical fascists.”

It is clear that liberalism is not unique in utilising ideas about civilisation’ and the possibility of a return to, or victory, of barbarism, conceived as civilisation’s past. These categories are in fact deployed in disparate and multifarious ways by thinkers from a range of theoretical and ideological perspectives as different as those of Žižek, Arendt and Gray; and they do not always evince precise conceptual categories or historicised theories of social progress.

Mill considers civilised nations sovereign and argues that the rule governing relations between civilised nations ought to be non-intervention. To instigate war with a civilised nation (i.e., a European power) or to intervene to promote an idea—such as liberal democracy—is criminal.” Mill did, as the illiberal interpretation suggests, exclude barbarous societies from the same protections. We know from A Few Words on Non-Intervention” that a barbarous society has no rights as a nation.” A barbarous society is not a state, therefore it is not subject to international law. Instead, it is protected by the universal rules of morality between man and man.” The principle of non-intervention does not apply to relations between civilised states and barbarous societies. Barbarous societies are therefore not sovereign. Mill provides three reasons for denying sovereignty to barbarous and savage societies: they are incapable of respecting international laws and treaties; they are aggressive, unable to reciprocate non-intervention; and they have not got beyond the period during

77 Gray, Post Liberalism, p. 328.
79 The text herein adopts the language of Mill’s civilised” and barbarous” dichotomy for the sake of clarity and to maintain textual context. Of course, this is not intended as an endorsement.
80 Mill, Non-Intervention,” p. 118.
81 Ibid., p. 119. Emphasis in original.
which it is likely to be for their benefit that they should be conquered and held in subjection by foreigners.”

The first two of these clauses are straightforward. They are claims about the likely behaviour of barbarous societies. However, the last clause presents a complication. In addition to introducing a controversial moral concept (“improvement”), it does not indicate the point at which a state actually becomes sovereign; it states only that a barbarous state is not sovereign. In addition, Mill only fleetingly elucidates, and inconsistently applies, his ideas of barbarism and civilisation, and the precise role they play in his thought is unclear. Apart from some historical examples from the period of the Roman Empire, Mill does not name the societies he considers barbarous. This word and its derivatives are used freely and inconsistently throughout his writing without any apparent continuity of meaning.

Despite these ambiguities, it is often assumed that these concepts are outlined in an early essay, Civilisation (1836). However, Mill’s discussion of civilisation and barbarism occupies only two pages in this piece. They are hardly mentioned in the rest of the essay, which is in fact an extended critique of the state of English society, and the exclusivity of the Oxbridge universities and English public schools. In Civilisation, Mill’s remarks amount to a bare and abstract account of civilisation as the negation of barbarism. Mill conflates barbarism and savagery and uses them almost as synonyms. A savage society is described as “a handful of individuals, wandering or thinly scattered over a vast tract of country.” Savages do not cooperate “except in war,” and they do not “find much pleasure in each other’s society.” Only a small minority owns property and the majority are soldiers, dependants or

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83 For example, Mill uses it to describe English law before Bentham codified it (“Austin on Jurisprudence,” 1863, p. 168), Polish society under Russian rule (“Poland,” 1863, p. 1203), the subjugation of women to men (The Subjection of Women, 1869, pp. 261–262), and the Confederate States (“the barbarous and barbarizing Power”) during the American Civil War (“The Contest in America,” 1862, p. 141).
85 Mill, “Civilisation,” p. 120ff.
serfs. Savagery resembles Hobbes’s state of nature: “In savage life there is no commerce, no manufacture, no agriculture…little or no law, or administration of justice; no systematic employment of the collective strength of society to protect individuals against injury from one another; every one trusts to his own strength or cunning.”86 Conversely, civilisation is a dense population…dwelling in fixed habitations, and largely collected together in towns and villages.” It is rich in the fruits of agriculture, commerce, and manufactures” and its members rely on social arrangements” for their security and for the protection of their property. Rather than involving moralised ideals of the good life, civilisation” in this essay is defined expansively as a basic level of cooperation and civility sufficient to prevent anarchy, violence and the dissolution of the body politic: Wherever…we find human beings acting together for common purpose in large bodies, and enjoying the pleasures of social intercourse, we term them civilised.”87

Unacceptable as these categories may appear to those using a contemporary moral compass, they do not tell us when a society has got beyond the period during which it is likely to be for their benefit that they should be conquered and held in subjection by foreigners.”88 The problem remains: in terms of a right to sovereignty (that is, a right to non-intervention), where does Mill draw the line? We know that civilised states are sovereign and barbarous states are not, but at what point does a society come to be admitted to the community of nations”? We must look elsewhere for an idea of what might satisfy Mill’s development requirement.89

87 Ibid. p. 120.
89 A full study of Mill’s international thought would need to take into account his views on nationality and what Mill calls Political Ethology” (i.e., national character; see Mill, Logic, p. 905), and their connection to his idea of national self-determination, neither of which can be explored in this thesis. For further information on these complex topics see Georgios Varouxakis, Mill on Nationality (London: Routledge, 2002); and Paul Smart, Mill and Nationalism: National Character, Social Progress and the Spirit of Achievement,” History of European Ideas, Vol. 15, No. 4–6, 1992, pp. 527–534.
Stability

Although he never explicitly articulates these conditions, in the System of Logic Mill quotes a long passage from his own essay on Coleridge, which professes certain "circumstances" to be necessary, but perhaps not sufficient, for political stability.90 The Logic was reprinted seven times during Mill's life (the last in 1872, the year before his death), so its authority as a source of his political epistemology is beyond question.91 Mill argues that the requisites of stable political union...may be considered...as conditions of the existence of the complex phenomenon called a State.92 Although Mill is again ambiguous, these "requisites" are more specific than his idea of barbarism, and they may provide an insight into the social qualities required for a socially "dynamic" rather than "static" state. The three "principal" conditions for political stability and statehood are cooperation, loyalty and social cohesion, or in Mill's words: a "system of education" that inculcates discipline and subordination to the interests of the collective, the feeling of allegiance or loyalty," and a strong and active principle of cohesion among the members of the same community or state."93 Subsidiary requisites are: the rule of law, obedience to government and the presence of public authorities. Though only "empirical laws," these conditions so regularly coalesce with stability that the relationship between them is a "scientific truth." They "have been present in every society that has maintained a collective existence."94 But they are evident only after "habitual submission to

90 Mill, Logic, pp. 920–924.
92 Mill, Logic, p. 920.
93 Ibid., pp. 921–924. By social cohesion Mill does not mean nationality, in the vulgar sense of the term; a senseless antipathy to foreigners; indifference to the general welfare of the human race, or an unjust preference of the supposed interests of our own country; a cherishing of bad peculiarities because they are national, or a refusal to adopt what has been found good by other countries." He simply means a principle of sympathy, not of hostility; of union, not of separation.... [A] feeling of common interest...that their lot is cast together" (p. 923). See Varouxakis, Mill on Nationality for an extensive exposition of Mill's idea of nationality.
94 Mill, Logic, p. 920.
law and government has been firmly and durably established.” For example, where there is no system of education — the natural tendency of mankind to anarchy re-assert[s] itself.”

The requisites are also irrespective of internal legitimacy. They are, as Mill’s phrase suggests, conditions crucial to political — stability” and — permanent political society.” The stable society of the Logic is distinct from the barbarous society of Civilisation. In fact, in the Logic a society bereft of the requisites for stability resembles a state of barbarism. The absence of stability is marked by anarchy, disorganisation, selfishness, civil war and, finally, despotism. Such a society is likely to become — the prey of a foreign invader.”

But a stable society is not necessarily a civilised society. Stability is a necessary, but not a sufficient requirement of civilisation. As expounded in the System of Logic, Mill’s requisites for stability do not include democratic government, respect for individual liberty, individual rights, republicanism, secularism, federalism or any form of equality or egalitarianism. The omission of much of the key components on the liberal agenda is deliberate. It was noted that if a governing body pursues and secures the interests of the citizenry over which it presides, it has a moral claim to internal legitimacy. Mill infamously argues that this does not of necessity involve democracy, nor liberal society. Mill’s stable society need not be a liberal or — civilised” society. For example, one of the essential components of a — stable political union”—loyalty, — something which people agreed in holding sacred”—is not confined to any particular form of government…whether in a democracy or in a monarchy, its essence is always the same.” The object of loyalty might be a god, a monarch or a constitution. Looking forward, Mill speculates that loyalty may attach itself to the principles of individual freedom and political and social equality, as realized in

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96 Ibid., pp. 922–923.
institutions which as yet exist nowhere, or exist only in a rudimentary state." But this is a hope, not a requirement.

By contrasting the *System of Logic* with *Civilization*, a developmental stage emerges which is beyond barbarism but is not civilisation. Indeed, in the *Logic* civilisation is expressed as a *process*, rather than a *state* of society. Mill appeared to dissent from his otherwise sympathetic views on Comtean historical sociology by arguing that the path from civilisation to barbarism is not to be conceived as a linear or singular mode of progress. Instead, of one monolithic moral and social developmental stage called *civilisation*, Mill suggests that there are multiple *civilisational processes*, encompassing a seemingly open-ended number of developmental paths:

Is it not clear that...England and France are examples of the *advance of civilisation* by two different roads, & that neither of them has, nor probably ever will, pass through the state which the other is in? It is the lower animals which have only one law, that of their instinct. The order of the development of man's faculties, is as various as the situations in which he is placed. ...M. Comte has had all his views of history warped & distorted by the necessity of proving that civilisation has but one law, & that a law of progressive advancement; how it blinds him to all the merits of the Greeks & Romans (& the demerits of the middle ages) because there was improvement in some things at such periods, he thinks there must have been so in all: why not allow that while mankind advanced in some things, they went back in others?

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99 Mill's measurement of the "state of society or the state of civilisation at any given time" implies that civilisation is an ongoing and multifarious *process*, rather than a static state of development. Mill, *Logic*, p. 912.
100 In the *Logic*, Mill had been clear in his discussion of Social "Dynamics" and Social "Statics" that "progress" from one historical "state" to another meant "change" not "moral advancement." 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." Mill thinks there is a general tendency (a low order empirical law) for society to improve. But this is merely his "belief." See Mill, "The Progressiveness of Man and Society," in *Logic*, pp. 913–915.
101 Mill, "To Gustave d'Eichthal," CW: XII, p. 37. Mill's idea of civilisation and barbarism, and their relation to his theory of social progression, have been chronically misunderstood, even by Mill's sympathetic interpreters. In direct contravention of the position expounded in the above passage from the *System of Logic*, Baum argues that Mill develops his own linear theory of human progress according to which people advance from savage to
Most importantly, there is no evidence to suggest that Mill’s exclusion of barbarous states from the principle of non-intervention applies also to stable states. In fact, Mill’s contrasting of barbarism with stability seems to confirm that it does not apply. Mill’s requisites for statehood and stability can be interpreted as a more detailed account of the level of development beyond which a state ought to be left to its own devices and protected by the law of non-intervention. A state can in principle be admitted to the ‒eommunity of nations” without acquiring any of the qualities liberal thinkers, including Mill, consider imperative to the health of civil society and to the well-being of the individual. This perhaps explains Mill’s somewhat unsympathetic statement that it is ‒an inviolable principle that an enslaved people should be left to work out their own deliverance.”\textsuperscript{102} It also explains Mill’s occasionally indifferent attitude to the spread of liberal democracy and his prohibition on intervention in its name.

**Stability and Liberalism in Mill’s Model of Non-Intervention**

The importance of stability, as opposed to the spread of civilisation or liberalism, is clearly expressed in Mill’s essay ‒A Few Words on Non-Intervention,” his only direct contribution to international relations theory. Mill’s self-professed motives for writing this essay were: Lord Palmerston’s conduct in the Suez Canal Company crisis of 1858; Continental misperceptions of the aims of English foreign policy; and a desire to elucidate the ‒true barbarian to civilised states of societies…. [H]e expects all societies to go through the same stages of social development so that his theory of freedom will eventually become universally applicable.” Bruce Baum, *Rereading Power and Freedom in J.S. Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 58–59. Nevertheless, Mill did venture one possible continuity: ‒experience does say, that every step in improvement has been so invariably accompanied by a step made in raising the social position of women, that historians and philosophers have been led to adopt their elevation or debasement as on the whole the surest test and most correct measure of the civilization of a people or an age. Through all the progressive period of human history, the condition of women has been approaching nearer to equality with men. This does not of itself prove that the assimilation must go on to complete equality; but it assuredly affords some presumption that such is the case.” Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, p. 276. \textsuperscript{102} Mill, ‒The Spanish Question,” p. 374.
principles of international morality,” on which he had mused briefly in his defence of the French Provisional Government of 1848. The question this essay addresses is:

that of interfering in the regulation of another country’s internal concerns; the question whether a nation is justified in taking part, on either side, in the civil wars or party contests of another: and chiefly, whether it may justifiably aid the people of another country in struggling for liberty; or may impose on a country any particular government or institutions, either as being best for the country itself, or as necessary for the security of its neighbours.

Mill proceeds to offer a superficially realist defence of non-intervention, which he thinks ought to be a general rule governing relations between sovereign entities. Complementing the general rule, the essay also offers what can be described as a dichotomous model of just intervention. Here, Mill argues that moralised ideas such as civilisation, moral freedom and self-development cannot be promoted through intervention.

Revolution

First, there can be no just intervention where there is no pre-existing internal conflict. However, an existing domestic struggle may suffice as a prerequisite for intervention. In the event of such a conflict, Mill requires that it must be determined whether the conflict is internal—between native rulers—or whether it is a rebellion against a foreign despotism. The rule applicable to the former is non-intervention. A state must neither assist nor retard foreign revolution, irrespective of its perceived justness: “We as a country ought not to intervene in the domestic, in the purely internal events which occurred in any particular country, whatever our sympathies might be.” The reason is that free institutions and

105 Presumably, where no struggle between government and governed exists, there is prima facie a case for non-intervention, not just on grounds of self-determination, but also in keeping with Mill’s individual-centric conception of the good.
respect for individual liberty cannot be transplanted or gifted; they must be *earned*. Mill argues that the exportation of liberal ideas—representative government in particular—is a conceptual and practical impossibility:

The only test possessing any real value, of a people’s having become fit for popular institutions, is that they, or a sufficient portion of them to prevail in the contest, are willing to brave labour and danger for their liberation. I know all that may be said, I know it may be urged that the virtues of free men cannot be learnt in the school of slavery, and that if a people are not fit for freedom, to have any chance of becoming so they must first be free. And this would be conclusive, if the intervention recommended would really give them freedom. But the evil is, that if they have not sufficient love of liberty to be able to wrest it from merely domestic oppressors, the liberty which is bestowed on them by other hands than their own, will have nothing real, nothing permanent. No people ever was and remained free, but because it was determined to be so; because neither its rulers nor any other party in the nation could compel it to be otherwise. If a people—especially one whose freedom has not yet become prescriptive—does not value it sufficiently to fight for it, and maintain it against any force which can be mustered *within* the country, even by those who have the command of the public revenue, it is only a question in how few years or months that people will be enslaved.  

The sentiment conveyed in this passage from *A Few Words on Non-Intervention* was probably first conceived in the 1830s, when Mill was writing on French politics—a topic that exerted an indelible influence on his thought. Though written almost thirty years apart, the continuity of its argument with the following two passages—from 1831 and 1837—is so striking it is worth quoting them in full:

[T]he improvement of a nation is not advanced, but retarded, by popular institutions imposed upon it by foreign force…. It is not in the power of any one to affirm, with probability, that a nation would be benefitted by a constitutional government, until it puts forth its strength and seizes one; for, whatever be the forms of a government—unless it be vigorously upheld by a preponderance of the

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physical and intellectual strength of the nation itself, sufficient to overmatch all
domestic attempts at its overthrow, it must, as the condition of its existence, be
carried on, substantially, in the spirit and with the machinery of a despotism.\textsuperscript{110}

...but we have no faith in the government of the few, even when they speak in the
name of the many, nor do we believe in the stability of representative institutions
when the people, who are to be represented by them, do not care sufficiently about
them to fight for them. Nobody will long enjoy freedom when it is necessary for
another to assert it for him.\textsuperscript{111}

\textit{Counter-Intervention}

The second situation Mill considers is that of a people struggling against a foreign yoke, or
against a native tyranny upheld by foreign arms.” In this case, the reasons [for non-
intervention] themselves do not exist.” Intervention in this situation is to redress…[the]
balance when it is already unfairly and violently disturbed.”\textsuperscript{112} Mill develops the idea of
counter-intervention:

If freedom cannot be established by foreign force, it does not, therefore, follow,
that by foreign force it should be allowed to be crushed.\textsuperscript{113}

Intervention to enforce non-intervention is always rightful, always moral, if not
always prudent. Though it be a mistake to give freedom to a people who do not
value the boon, it cannot but be right to insist that if they do value it, they shall not
be hindered from the pursuit of it by foreign coercion.\textsuperscript{114}

\textit{Prudence}

The qualifier “prudent” in Mill’s view of intervention is significant. Mill is careful to divorce

\textsuperscript{110} Mill, \textit{The Prospects of France},” p. 299. In this context, Mill is defending the French (War Party,” which he
says is not committed to quixotizing through all Europe, giving liberty to nations by the sword.” Instead, true
to the inflexible rule” of non-intervention, Mill says it stands for counter-intervention in cases of foreign interference.

\textsuperscript{111} Mill, \textit{The Spanish Question,”} p. 374.

\textsuperscript{112} Mill, \textit{Non-Intervention,”} p. 123.

\textsuperscript{113} Mill, \textit{The Spanish Question,”} p. 374.

the morally justifiable from the politically wise. Conceived from a wider perspective, his contributions to international philosophy are imbued with a fear of, and a desire to, prevent at whatever cost, total war between the European powers. Even when intervention is morally justifiable, as Mill argues it was to support the Polish insurrections of 1831 and 1863 and the Hungarians in 1848, the principle of non-intervention must be upheld for two reasons. First, intervention on behalf of a belligerent whose cause is considered just might result in total war (as indeed occurred in 1914 and 1939). Here, Mill’s emphasis on security is paramount. Second, a revolution must be allowed to run its course, whether or not the cause is considered just. If the principle of non-intervention is disregarded, popular revolutions like those of France in 1848, which Mill defended, could be put down with foreign assistance according to the particular international alliances of the time.  

‗Prudence‘ is a dominating theoretical device in Mill’s model of non-intervention. Mill offers an ostensibly realist position when he argues that violations of sovereignty will lead to chaos, disrespect for international morality, and, in a climate of fierce competition between the rapidly industrialising European powers, total war. For this reason, he introduces the notion of prudence, which involves preventing such a conflict at all costs, even if the cost is the international growth of liberal society. For example, on the issue of treaty obligations, Mill argues:

If a lawless act, then, has been committed in the present instance, it does not entitle those who imposed the conditions to consider lawlessness only, and to dismiss the more important consideration, whether, even it is was wrong to throw off the obligation, it would not be still more wrong to persist in enforcing it.  

Any clause in Mill’s doctrine of non-intervention that permitted British intervention to

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115 In fact, Mill argues that even in the more backward countries of Europe any revolution, any bursting of the bonds by which all the energies of the people are now cramped and paralyzed, must be an improvement, must be the commencement of a new era.” Mill, “Poland,” p. 1203.
promote liberal institutions would have authorised war against the “three robber Powers,” Austria-Hungary, Prussia and Russia, on behalf of subjugated populations (the Hungarians in 1848, the Polish in 1831 and 1863, for example). This kind of intervention “for an idea” is what Mill wants to prohibit. Mill’s imperative is that, “when a struggle breaks out anywhere between the despotic and the democratic principles, the powers should never interfere singly; when they interfere at all, it should be jointly, as a general European police.” Thus liberal principles are sacrificed to the security, or, one might say, the stability of the international community. Though Mill’s reasoning appeals to the collective good, rather than state self-interest, his imperative is realist in orientation: respect the domestic arrangements of sovereign states. A state should not intervene in the domestic affairs of another on behalf of the well-being of the other state’s citizens.

Applications

In engaging with the most troublesome and vexing political realities of his time, Mill applied his theoretical positions on sovereignty, legitimacy and intervention to real political problems. Although Mill was active in many of these debates, it is impossible adequately to explore more than a few cases here. In 1815 the Congress of Vienna partitioned Poland between the empires of Prussia, Austria-Hungary and Russia. In November 1830 there was rioting against Russian rule in Warsaw. Britain and France considered assisting the beleaguered Poles. By 1830, Mill had been reporting on French politics in the Westminster Review and other publications for some time. Predicting that it would lead to war between the powers, Mill was “shocked and disgusted” that the French were considering intervening. According to Mill, they had “scattered to the winds…the most sacred rights of independent nations”—that of non-intervention. Mill sees this “unheard of disregard of every principle

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119 Mill, “French News [7],” p. 215. His argument was that the French government was simply looking for an
of international morality” as a threat to civilisation. Intervention in this case is a hindrance to the spread of free institutions:

When once the sword shall be drawn, and the five hundred thousand French soldiers, now under arms, shall, with a successful general at their head, be overrunning Europe, it is quite impossible to foresee how long a period the progress of civilisation, and that of good institutions all over the world may be stopped, or even for how large a space it may be thrown back.\textsuperscript{120}

Mill feared a large-scale European war if the French attempted to defend Poland. To compound matters, the death of Benjamin Constant in December 1830 (―a misfortune to the world‖), had robbed the French parliament of maturity and clear-thinking.\textsuperscript{121} Yet Mill was equally disgusted by the result of non-intervention in Poland (the uprising was suppressed). Two years later, in 1832, he commented bitterly that ―England and France allowed Russia to swallow up Poland.‖\textsuperscript{122} But Mill remains philosophical. His final position is that counter-intervention to protect free institutions or independence is not always justifiable:

Europe did not interpose when Russia annihilated Poland; when Prussia, Austria, and Russia extinguished the Republic of Cracow [in 1846]; or when a second Bonaparte mounted the throne of France.\textsuperscript{123}

In this case, moral considerations are secondary to the security of Europe. As Mill wrote to Henry Chapman in 1849, even when the despots [Prussia, Austria-Hungary and Russia]…will probably succeed with the aid of Russian troops in putting down democracy for a time everywhere except in France,” it is not always just to resort to war.\textsuperscript{124} There was a strong moral case to assist the subjugated populations of Poland, and to counter the 1830 excuse to intervene to defend —their own frontiers,” or, worse, for territorial gain. See also Varouxakis, ―John Stuart Mill on Intervention and Non-Intervention,‖ p. 63.
\textsuperscript{120} Mill, ―French News [14],‖ p. 259
\textsuperscript{121} Mill, ―French News [7],‖ p. 214.
\textsuperscript{122} Mill, ―French News [51],‖ p. 423.
\textsuperscript{123} Mill, ―Treaty Obligations,‖ p. 344.
\textsuperscript{124} Mill, ―To Henry Samuel Chapman,‖ 28 May, 1849, CW: XIV, p. 32.
Austrian intervention in Modena, but Mill appeals to collective security and the prudence of upholding non-intervention:

This [Polish and Italian self-determination] would have been in itself the most eligible course, most comfortable to the principles of sound international moralists; but as it would have implied a European war and its attendant evils, evils far greater than any good which could have been done to Poland or Italy, we think this course was very rightly avoided.  

Mill’s position on the 1863 Polish insurrection against Russian rule further develops this view. He defended the uprising, but stopped short of sanctioning intervention. Writing in the *Penny Newsman*, Mill explicitly argues that Polish independence would ―let in the light‖ of civilisation through the establishment of political liberties and the influx of foreign investment:

It would bestow a free press, freedom of public discussion, representative assemblies, national education. It would let in the ideas of civilised Europe; and not the ideas only, but the industry and capital also; and before these combined influences, the barbarism, which has been prolonged till now chiefly by the benumbing influence of foreign bondage, would rapidly pass away.  

Despite these benefits to civilisation, however, Mill does not call for the British or the French to counter the Russian occupation. In short, although Mill thinks the Polish insurrections would strike a blow for civilisation, he refuses to licence coercion or intervention in its name. In these debates, Mill warned against sacrificing security or sovereignty to moral ideals such as liberality and the spread of civilisation. It is this argument against intervention in the name of free institutions or socio-political development that animates ―A Few Words on Non-Intervention.‖

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Conclusion

If Mill is to be considered the archetypal representative of liberal thought—even if understood as a non-unified tradition—the claim that liberalism contains an inherent and imperial "urge" or "impulse" to intervene is problematic. First, there is no necessary connection between moralised ideas (such as moral development, civilisation and liberal society) and internal legitimacy or external sovereignty in Mill's doctrine of non-intervention. Second, Mill argued persistently against intervention, and in his highly conditional model of just intervention, international security, rather than the imposition of civilisation in non-liberal or barbarous societies, is his priority.

Mill's doctrine of non-intervention is dominated by pragmatism, expressed through the idea of "prudence." In fact, Mill advocated non-intervention as a higher priority than spreading liberal institutions, even in situations where there is a clear moral case for intervention. As Walzer summarises: "Looking at the despotic regimes of Europe, Mill hopes for regime change, but he does not pin his hopes on the British Royal Navy (the nineteenth-century equivalent of the U.S. Air Force) but on the energy and commitment of ordinary people in the countries the despots rule."127 "Prudence"—a synonym for "security," or perhaps "utility"—is the ultimate arbiter on questions of intervention.

It may be impossible to sympathise with Mill's hope that the British Empire could be benevolent, or to accept the way in which he appeared to divide up the world into "civilised" and "barbarous" spheres.128 But this does not mean that the emerging interpretation of Mill's

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128 "After all, it is in the essence of imperial power that the sword does not remain in the scabbard." David Runciman, Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond (Princeton University Press; Princeton, 2008), p. 180ff. As Runciman explains, George Orwell's "Shooting the Elephant" provides the canonical enunciation of the need for imperial authority to be founded on a demonstrated willingness to use violence. When Orwell's authority as a colonial officer was tested, he found that he was forced to commit a violent act: "I had got to shoot the elephant."" See also Mark Tunnick, "Tolerant Imperialism: J.S. Mill's Defence of Empire," in idem, J.S. Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 355-381.
thought as inherently interventionist is justified. This interpretation holds that there is, in Mill’s thought, an intrinsic urge and moral licence for intervention and compulsion in all political spaces, domestic and international. Such a view comes at the expense of neglecting the increasing scepticism and melancholia in Mill’s views on colonialism, and ignores the fact that for many liberal theorists imperial spaces did not constitute part of a single political field."\textsuperscript{129} This is not to deny that Mill adopted moralised positions in defending the British East India Company. But it is significant that moral ideals, such as moral freedom, liberal society and civilisation, are secondary to more pragmatic aims, such as stability and security in Mill’s engagement with nineteenth-century international politics. Mill’s concepts of civilisation and barbarism are indissolubly separate to the political sphere in which his theory of intervention operates.\textsuperscript{130} As such, there are several problems with the interpretation that Mill’s liberalism inherently tends towards intervention because it contains moralised conceptions of character development and human freedom.

Mill’s shifting attitudes towards colonialism and the absence of moral ideas in his theory of non-intervention have clear implications for understanding the role of character development in Mill’s political thought. Indeed, when read alongside Mill’s repudiation of Comtean reformism, the absence of moralised ideas in his engagement with debates over intervention affirms that Mill became increasingly sceptical of, and eventually rejected, the idea that a radical reforming of social and political life was the best way to promote moral freedom and character self-development. Mill’s theory of non-intervention relies, in part, on the idea that freedom, moral development and the conditions in which they thrive are not qualities that can be exported or enforced. Mill's position could hardly be clearer: –The

\textsuperscript{129} Bell, “John Stuart Mill on Colonies,” p. 37.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
attempt to establish freedom by foreign bayonets is a solecism in terms.” While Mill’s political philosophy is based on Ethological claims about character formation and normative claims about the importance of self-development, it is clear that Mill was unwilling to force people to live in the conditions that best promote moral freedom and thus his “ideal standard of character.” Indeed, Mill argues that intervention to promote such moral principles is “criminal.” This position is clearly articulated in the context of a debate over the possibility of exporting liberal values to non-liberal societies: “To go to war for an idea, if the war is aggressive, not defensive, is as criminal as to go to war for territory or revenue; for it is as little justifiable to force our ideas on other people, as to compel them to submit to our will in any other respect.” Mill’s position is that compulsion in the name of moral development is both impossible and impermissible. In the final paragraph of On Liberty Mill explicitly reaffirms this position: “I am not aware that any community has a right to force another to be civilised.”

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131 Mill, “The Spanish Question,” p. 374. There is some doubt whether Mill is the sole author of these words. See Miller “John Stuart Mill’s Theory of International Relations,” p. 505. The bibliography of Mill’s writings in the Collected Works credits “an unidentified collaborator” with co-authorship of the piece. Nevertheless, Miller is right to suggest that “its general tone is consistent with his [Mill’s] ideas.”
CONCLUSION

Mill’s idea of character development is expressed by organic metaphors, providing a contrast to the mechanistic determinism of Hobbes, Bentham and Owen. To become a morally free and self-developing person is to become "a living thing," rather than a "steam-engine." In Hobbes’s naturalist moral psychology, human nature is as free as a river governed by the force of gravity, free to flow unimpeded only within its banks, not in an ability to shape or transcend the conditions in which it exists. For Bentham and Owen, the individual is a "machine." For Mill, however, "human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the 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."

The idea of utilising "inward forces" in moral self-development is best understood as an argument against the determinist thinking that prevailed in Mill’s intellectual milieu. By defining moral freedom in terms of virtuous character development, Mill is attempting to re-instate the importance of emotional self-culture in Moral Science. In so doing, he addresses the deeper problem that the empiricist tradition’s determinist psychology implicitly, if not intentionally, fostered coercive and thus illiberal political philosophies.

Mill’s moralisation of freedom and character development in this project cannot be viewed as simple rhetoric. His statement added to the 1868 edition of A System of Logic that "none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free" makes a substantive point: conceiving of human nature as inert or passive fails to recognise the power of self-

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1 Mill, On Liberty, p. 263.
2 Of course, this was the same charge Mill levelled at intuitionist thinkers such as William Whewell.
formation.” Such a view inevitably devalues the legitimate place of self-culture in moral development, and tends to political and social oppression. Eroding the moralised foundation of Mill’s ideas of moral freedom and character development thus obscures the intentions behind Mill’s political philosophy. Mill was not interested in abstracting morals from politics, nor in articulating a negative or purely political liberalism. His project was to trace political maxims to their first principles in Ethology and psychology. This was part of a wider attempt to defend, against the prevailing views in the traditions of empiricism, naturalism and utilitarianism, the importance to moral and social development of the inner life of the human being.3

The wave of Mill scholarship that began in the 1980s and 1990s purposefully aimed to exonerate Mill from the prevailing view that he was an unsystematic and incoherent thinker. In some cases, this has been secondary to attempts to revive or update aspects of Mill’s liberalism so that it addresses contemporary problems.4 This required that Mill’s political philosophy be purged of its unfashionable moralism in order to contribute to what Charles Larmore calls a liberalism come of age,” or to what Bruce Baum calls a critical sociology of freedom.”5 This kind of recuperation of Mill’s thought has come at the expense of misconstruing the intent behind Mill’s conflation of a particular view of self-development with virtue and freedom. By dismissing or downplaying the moralism evident in Mill’s position in an attempt to fortify his liberalism, Mill’s sympathetic interpreters in fact

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4 For example, Baum’s primary aim in Rereading Power and Freedom is to “draw upon John Stuart Mill’s political philosophy…to contribute to a critical sociology of freedom” that incorporates the insights of post-modern thinkers. In Baum’s view, an adequate sociology of freedom” must extirpate moralised conceptions of freedom, which are “deeply problematic and illiberal.” Bruce Baum, Rereading Power and Freedom in J.S. Mill (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 3, p. 15, p. 29, p. 267. Interpreting Mill’s thought is described as a second aim.” Emphasis added. Similarly, Cowling’s aim in Mill and Liberalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, second edition, 1990) is to defend the “conservative spirit” and assert “a conservative moral order.” Cowling explicitly states that “Mill and Liberalism…is a contribution to Conservative belief” and “an anti-liberal defence of authority,” rather than an objective study of Mill’s thought (pp. xlii–xliii).
stimulated a reaction against Mill, so that he is now often conceived as a systematically illiberal thinker. However, the debate between the critical interpreters and the sympathetic interpreters operates on an implicit presupposition—common to our time but foreign to Mill’s—that political philosophy cannot appeal to positive moral foundations or to physical science for its justification without being implicitly coercive. Once this ideological presupposition is removed a clearer and very different picture of Mill emerges.

Throughout the texts studied in this thesis, Mill makes substantive moral arguments in which he appeals to an “ideal standard of character” to describe and define “moral freedom.” Mill’s sympathetic and critical interpreters have misunderstood this position in two ways. First, Mill’s aim was not to enforce a moral ideal. His goal was to combat the illiberalities of his own time by restoring the legitimacy of emotional self-development in political philosophy. Second, it is not clear that the conflation of indicative qualities such as freedom and normative ideas such as virtue inherently leads, as both the sympathetic and critical interpreters implicitly assume, to moral coercion and political exclusion. Mill certainly did not hold this view. Despite his ongoing commitment to radical politics, when considered alongside his increasingly “melancholic” attitude towards colonialism and his stability-focused doctrine of non-intervention, the developments in Mill’s views on the place of religion in modern society indicate an increasing scepticism towards social engineering based on controversial moral ideals such as freedom, civilisation or, indeed, moral character. In these fields, Mill is concerned with self-development and with limiting the kinds of intervention that might stifle it.

Mill’s ideas of moral character and moral freedom are best understood as a reaction against determinism’s morally paralysing and politically coercive implications. Mill’s perspective therefore differs significantly from that of contemporary liberals. He assumes that the best way to safeguard “moral and intellectual” liberty is to articulate the kind of
comprehensive “philosophy of man” that contemporary liberals abjure. 6 Mill’s aim to reformulate and incorporate romantic insights regarding self-development and internal culture into an enlightenment epistemology was, in fact, an attempt to temper the illiberalisms of radical politics, utilitarian philosophy and British empiricism. Mill attributed the illiberal political philosophies of Hobbes, Bentham, Owen and Comte to a failure to theorise correctly about Ethology. By attempting to articulate a consolidated Moral Science that grounded political and moral philosophy in Ethology and psychology, and by formulating a science of character formation in which self-development is central, Mill thought he was providing the basis for a robust defence of human freedom and political liberty. Contextualising Mill’s Moral Science therefore highlights the more general problems with the implicit assumption, guiding much contemporary Mill scholarship, that holistic or psychological approaches to political philosophy are inherently coercive and thus unacceptable. Whatever the merits of such an assumption, Mill, no less than his contemporaries, would have found the idea of divorcing politics from morals bizarre, indefensible and possibly dangerous. In Mill’s view, a political philosophy that has no coherent foundation in Ethology or psychology is often determinist and oppressive.

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