COMPREHENDING THE POLITY

JOHN STUART MILL AND THE UTILITY OF THE WHOLE

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Government

By

Maureen Strain Steinbruner, M.P.P.

Washington, DC
January 10, 2011
COMPREHENDING THE POLITY
JOHN STUART MILL AND THE UTILITY OF THE WHOLE

Maureen Strain Steinbruner, M.P.P.

Thesis Advisor: Gerald M. Mara, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This study presents a theory about John Stuart Mill’s idea of the polity. The analysis traces Mill’s concept through key works, showing how he was attempting to develop an understanding of the processes that co-constitute political units, patterns of human behavior, and forms of social organization. It focuses on his commitment to a naturalist ontology and epistemology, his view of humans as in and of nature, yet uniquely capable of rational self-discipline and other-regard. What Mill was trying to do becomes more intelligible in the context of 21st century humanistic and scientific views that see orders of things – atoms, species, selves, cultures – as composed, made functionally unitary by circumstances. Mill’s political positions read as consistent in a framework that relates individual utility to a distinct but not independent utility of the whole. Mill proposed a method of investigating this relationship as reflected in characteristic patterns of thought and behavior, a method – political ethology – that has much in common with contemporary inquiry into the role of group variation in the evolution of human minds and cultures. Mill’s theorizing provides a model on which disparate discourses can draw to contest understandings of the nature, process and phenomenon of political unitization, for both analytic and normative purposes.
for
Ed Strain, Ellen Coulman Strain
Helen Garvey O’Meara, Bob O’Meara
and
my grandchildren
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments..................................................................................vii
Introduction: The Polity as Episteme........................................................................1
  Reasons for Bringing the Polity Back In  4
  Epistemological Consistency and the Logic of Co-existence  8
  Mill’s Method vs. Mill’s Truth  11
  Overview of the Argument  19
Chapter I. The Nature and Cultivation of Human Agency.................................36
  Mill’s Life Plan: The Cultivation of Human Agency  41
  Agency and Nature: The Art of Cultivation  48
  Powers of the Inner World I: The Cultivation of Instincts  55
  Powers of the Inner World II: The Cultivation of Thought  60
  Bentham and Beyond: The Social Foundation of Motives  75
  Character: The Missing Link  87
Chapter II. Polity Constitution and the Formation of Character......................92
  Coleridge: The Culture of the Inward Man  97
  Culture and the Polity  101
  The Logic of Character: Thinking as Predicate to Acting  112
  Mill’s System of Logic: How We Should Think  118
  Toward a Theory of the Polity: The Logic of Character Formation  133
  Ethology: The Science of Character Development  138
  Uniformities of Co-Existence  146
  The Polity as a Structure of Intelligibility  150

v
Chapter III. The Nature of Co-Existence ..........................................................159
  The Criterion of a Good Form: Matching Character to Interests  162
  The Nature of Interests and Their Relationship to Facts  172
  Interests and Will: The Logic of Harmonization  187
  Interests and Identity: The Basis of Harmonization  189
  Interests and Individuality: The Costs of Harmonization  201
  Rational Subordination and the Utility of the Whole  215
Chapter IV. The Evolution of Co-existence .......................................................223
  From Eternity to Here, Now, Us: Changing Perspectives  225
  Evolution and the Nature of Human Agency  231
  Evolution, Culture, and Characteristic Behavior  240
  Evolution, Cultural Adaptation, and Group Coherence  251
  The Evolution of Political Order and the Utility of the Whole  258
Conclusion: The Polity and the Paradox of Progress ....................................272
  Evaluating the Argument  272
  Assessing Philosophical Coherence  275
  Critiquing Key Elements  277
  Undertheorized Issues, Omissions and Contested Concepts  285
  Summary Thoughts on Implications  289
Bibliography ..........................................................294
No one today reads John Stuart Mill as a political theorist in the way they read Darwin as a theorist of evolution, or Freud as a theorist of the human psyche. That, I contend here, is a mistake. Mill was a significant theorist of the polity whose contribution to comprehending it as both process and phenomenon was and remains profound. This dissertation represents an effort to re-examine Mill’s proposal for a science of “political ethology,” to clarify what he meant by that, and to say why and how it should be seen as significant. The project was prompted in part by curiosity about political puzzles encountered during my career as a participant in the U. S. policy process. For example, despite conventional wisdom, American political discourse often seems to indicate the presence of a widely shared common view of what government is for. Similar justificatory arguments are used by contending interests, both in supporting and in opposing government action. Opinions expressed in focus groups as well as the public and private statements of public officials are couched in terms that prioritize the protection of individual rights. Yet the same citizens and leaders, pragmatist, conservative liberal, and libertarian alike, also call on similar corporate themes – ‘American’ values, American ‘exceptionalism,’ the ‘country’s’ economy, the ‘American’ way of life – to trump rights justifications, when arguing against a proposed government policy as well as in support of one.
Could this apparent consensus about the terms of political argument be real, I wondered, and if so, how has it come about and what does it mean, if anything, in relation to our understanding of politics more generally? When as a graduate student I first read John Stuart Mill’s *Logic of the Moral Sciences*, its contents seemed to suggest a possible theoretical framework in which to approach puzzle like these. Here was a noted political philosopher – author of *On Liberty*’s canonical defense of freedom of thought and individuality – hypothesizing that individuals and polities co-constitute each other, suggesting that it is in the nature of “bodies” politic and their institutions to establish “common systems of opinion” in order to persist as units. Mill was insisting that common systems of thought affect all of what we do as individuals, and how we do it, that what makes a “body politic” hang together as a unit is somehow causally related to characteristic individual ways of thinking and acting.

Mill hypothesized, moreover, that the forming of discrete political societies somehow has played a role in the evolution of human society toward greater cooperation, more material well being, and greater exercise of individual freedom in the pursuit of happiness. His further claim was that this hypothesis could be verified by clarifying the psychological processes involved in collective character formation, then testing the findings against what history shows about the progression of characteristic behavior toward larger forms of social organization and more individuality.
Mill’s theory advanced a more than trivially interesting non-contractarian proposition about the nature of the relationship between political organization, individual reason, and human social orders. In principle, this seemed a proposition that contemporary political theorists and historians as well as social scientists might take seriously as a focus for debate about politics, individuals, and society. Among Mill scholars, however, I found no one who, having examined the argument in detail had not concluded some or even much of it to be philosophically unsound or logically unpersuasive. Further, after taking a lot of care in laying out the concept, Mill himself had declined to pursue its development. But it seemed to me the critiques were making too much of some of Mill’s methodological statements, while overlooking the importance of other things he was asserting. Meanwhile, in Mill’s later work he demonstrated his ongoing belief in his theory, developed and tested, or not.

This study represents the results of an effort to understand Mill’s commitment to his unfinished project by taking a fresh look at its place in his life and thought in the context of a changing system of opinions. In what seems to be what Mill would have characterized as a transitional state of the human mind, a shift can be observed in many streams of thought, away from seeing things as absolute and fixed, as either wholes or parts, toward an understanding of “things,” whether atoms, genes, organisms, human personalities, or ethnicities, as inherently composite, ephemeral, and contested as to degree of functional or phenomenological, unity.
I set out to try to evaluate Mill’s theory, and its place in his work and thought, with my understanding of this transition as explicit context. Whether it was appropriate and useful to do this must be for readers to judge as they consider, critique, and evaluate the results. Though amounting to a radical reconsideration of Mill’s theory as to context, it is one based primarily on an examination of old evidence, material culled from familiar texts, re-organized, and reevaluated. I do, however, introduce some concepts and terms not usually found in discussions of Mill. For example, I emphasize Mill’s use of the word polity and analogs like social body and nation, and I explain why agency is an apt word for Mill’s idea of what constitutes the condition of “rational freedom,” and why autonomy generally is not. My interpretation of Mill’s use of the term interest is unconventional, as is my suggestion that Mill’s utility of the whole is not the same as either average or aggregate utility. I also attempt to establish parallels between Mill’s political theorizing and contemporary scientific theories about the evolution of social organization, the mind, and human cultures, arguing that is what Mill would have advised.

In spite of these departures from the familiar, however, there is much in recent Mill scholarship that resonates with what is here, including John Skorupski’s interpretation of Mill’s philosophy as grounded in naturalism, Bruce Baum’s reading of Mill’s “rational freedom” as involving the idea of “amusingness,” Terence Ball’s reconsideration of Mill on character formation; David E. Leary’s documentation of Mill’s influence on the development of social psychology and cultural anthropology as
disciplines; Georgios Varouxakis’ interpretation of Mill’s idea of “nation”; and, Gal Gerson’s exploration of the relationship between Mill’s theorizing and Darwin’s.

I have to leave detailed comparisons and contrasts to these and other works on Mill for another day, as well as much of my own critical evaluation, and any extended assessment of the implications of my interpretation, both theoretical and practical.

*****

In this study, as Mill might put it I have had the benefit of “light from many minds,” including not least Mill’s own amazing intellect, and the work of a vast and diverse contingent of thoughtful Mill scholars. I am profoundly grateful as well as indebted to all those cited herein as well as to innumerable others who have influenced my thinking, whether I know about that influence, or not. The project has had a long genesis, with contributions made along the way by far too many individuals to list comprehensively. This brief summary acknowledges the most important only, beginning with the members of my dissertation committee.

To Gerald M. Mara, my tremendously patient, knowledgeable, and generous mentor, I owe a great respect for the discipline of political theory, as well as initial acquaintance with its substance, range, depth, and complexity; awareness of the diverse insight of classical Greek political thought, and a detailed exposure to arguments in the philosophy of social science. He also introduced me to the value of critical exegetical comparison between works of apparently unrelated thinkers as a method of gaining interpretative insight. R. Bruce Douglass taught me to value, and to
begin to understand, the hermeneutic tradition as a family of related but distinct methods of interpretative comprehension. He introduced me to some of its most influential practitioners and their disputes. Most important for purposes of this dissertation were his instruction in the distinct arguments of contemporary liberalism and in how to interrogate these and opposing positions. From Richard Boyd I learned to value intellectual history as a distinct methodological practice within the field of political theory. He showed me how arguments evolve in the context of particular times and places, with respect especially to the 18th century broadly considered, and the Scottish Enlightenment. He helped me appreciate the importance of tracing the ancestry of ideas cultivated within, transported between, and often hurled as weapons across the various boundaries that tend to segment discourse; and, he emphasized the purpose, to provide insight into current issues how we are addressing them.

I can’t thank these three accomplished tutors enough for lessons applied and those yet to be applied in my study of Mill, and for their personal support, in the form of critique as well as approval. I am also indebted to other Georgetown faculty for introducing me to concepts I used in framing initial thoughts about this dissertation, in particular Patrick Deneen; George Carey; Kathleen MacNamara; Andrew Bennett; Robert Lieber; Daniel Nexon, and Charles King. I am solely responsible for any defects in the way I have used these lessons and concepts.

I am particularly grateful also to Gregory Weiner, once fellow student now PhD., for his insights, friendship, commiseration, and counseling services in matters
intellectual and practical during our joint experience as ex-practitioners learning to think and to teach formally, critically, and normatively.

Personal thanks for thoughts and conversations that have contributed directly to the development of this project are due especially to David R. Steinbruner and Gregory E. Steinbruner; also, to Ruth Greenspan Bell, Joseph C. Bell; and Carol F. Stoel. Friends whose scholarship has been influential include James C. Baxter; Elaine D. Baxter; Charles R. Gallistel; Frank Levy; J. Andrew Spindler; and John D. Steinbruner. I also want to acknowledge mentors, colleagues, and friends from my time working on U.S. federal and state government policy who taught me to look at things political in new ways, including among others: Walter Heller, Edmund S Muskie; Hale C. Champion; L. Kirk O’Donnell, Madeleine K. Albright, Leon Panetta, Stanley Greenberg, Peter Hart, Mark Mellmann, Celinda Lake, J. B. Penn; Andrea Panaritis, Thomas B. Vallely, Eric B. Schnurer; Ira Forman; Michael J. Petro, Paul Grogan, Susan Bailey, Ted Sergi, John Drew, and Helen G. O’Meara; also Professors James L. Medoff and Stanley B. Katz; and, Michael J. Spirtas, PhD.

The seeds of conceptual influence on this project were planted long ago by faculty teaching at the JFK School of Government at Harvard University in the masters in public policy program, including Graham K. Allison, Richard Neustadt, Howard Raiffa, and Thomas B. Schelling, among others. Also important was the general studies program offered to undergraduates at Stanford University in the early
1960s and the diverse curriculum taught by the Sisters of Charity, B.V.M., at St. Paul’s High School in San Francisco in the late 1950s.

A big debt of gratitude for additional encouragement and practical and moral support is owed to many others, including Helga and Bill Butler; Sarah B. White, Roan Conrad, Ann Spindler, Derry & Greg Craig, Armin Rosencranz and Robbie Engelmann, Dan and Vicki Lewis, Greg and Mary Jane O’Meara, Susan Goodwillie Stedman is owed to others not already mentioned; Mary Ellen Hoy and Jim Keller; Ken and Penny Jameson; Kathy Swartz, and Tom and Katherine Carroll.

Finally, I am most grateful to my sons, David and Greg; to my daughters-in-law, Gilda Genoves and Tami Stronach; to Joe and Ruth and Aunt Kate; and, to the rest of the Strain family and to the O’Meara clan, for their extraordinary love and generosity over the years. My sincere thanks to all, mentioned or unnamed, to whom I owe so much.
Goethe’s device, “many-sidedness,” was one which I would most willingly, at this period, have taken for mine.¹

INTRODUCTION
The Polity as Episteme

This study presents a theory about John Stuart Mill’s idea of the polity – that he had such an idea, what that idea was, how and why he was attempting to develop it, its centrality to understanding his many diffuse works as coherent, and its relevance both to political science and to contemporary political liberalism. These claims about Mill’s theorizing rest on three premises. First, what Mill was trying to do has become intelligible in a 21st century context of contending ontological and epistemological views about the nature and order of things in a way that it was not in the 19th century – that is, in philosophical terms, he was ahead of his time. Second, as seen in a current context, Mill’s conceptualization of the condition of political unitariness, its requirements, and its consequences for individuals and groups appears as a grounded, consistent theoretical approach to comprehending the natural basis of social organization and its complex relationship to human possibilities. Third, therefore, Mill’s attempt at a political theory can and should be taken seriously as providing the elements of a plausible, although partial, foundation on which to build an

understanding of the nature of political union for both analytic and normative purposes.

There are several hurdles to clear in making this case, both evidentiary and interpretative. Some arise because of the diverse ways Mill presented his thoughts, the diversity of the sources he drew on, and the diverse agendas that have motivated attention to his normative political thought in particular – not to mention the sheer volume of his work. This diversity and volume both severely burden anyone who attempts to trace out connections between his motivations and his ontological and epistemological premises, on the one hand, and his normative arguments and prescriptions, on the other. To make a case for the centrality of Mill’s conception of the polity to his personal life project it is it nonetheless necessary to attempt at least a preliminary sketch of these connections as they relate specifically to the idea of political incorporation, in spite of the absence of attention to that idea otherwise to be found in Mill scholarship.² There is much in recent work on Mill to support specific elements of the argument: that he was on the trail of a philosophically coherent, internally consistent construct that could do for the human sciences what Darwin’s theory about evolution did for biology; that is, provide a plausible hypothesis about how circumstances, both internal and external to the individual, contribute to the

² In one recent compendium, there are twenty-six major index entries starting with the term political, most of which have multiple sub-entries. Only one of the entries, political society, and none of the sub-entries, hints at the concept as an abstraction. See Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras, eds., J.S. Mill’s Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
occurrence of adaptive change in characteristic traits over time. None of this scholarship, however, deals specifically with Mill’s insistence on seeing the process of polity making and policy maintaining as central to human development, nor does it attempt to associate this insistence directly with his commitment to naturalism. The significance of this commitment, and his consistency in applying it to all aspects of his thought, have for many years been largely absent from assessments of his thought. Mill’s philosophical naturalism and his preoccupation with biology and evolution in particular, have recently begun to draw more systematic attention, but this attention has not yet extended to his views on political incorporation. A recent turn of theoretical interest in the role of group coherence as an adaptive force in human cultural evolution prompts and facilitates such an extension.

---


4 Mill used this term, although infrequently compared with “political body,” “social union,” etc. It is used here because he did not conceive of a unit of political organization as something co-extensive with the nation-state, nor as an equivalent for “state” understood as “the government.” As will be seen, the choice is deliberate, meant to suggest that Mill was working with a concept more or less analogous to the one under examination by Aristotle, but as a generic, not as a term for a specific state form, e.g., “city-state,” or “nation-state.” See discussion of terms “state” vs. “community” in relation to “polity” in the introduction to *The Politics of Aristotle*, Peter L. Phillips Simpson, trans. (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), xxiii-xxvii.

5 The term “naturalism” is used here to refer to that aspect of Mill’s ontological position placing humans within nature and the meaning of his term “rational freedom” in relation to that position. Chapter I, “The Nature of Agency,” expands on this point and its implications as central to the argument against aspects of interpretations of Mill that use terms such as “autonomy” as synonymous with Mill’s use of “liberty.”

6 The differences between ontological and epistemological readings and political readings are important here. The latter tend to focus solely on Mill’s resistance to naturalism as deterministic regarding human possibilities, or on his other polemical arguments, such as those opposing the idea of God or nature as a source of undeniable moral dicta. See, for example, articles by Peter Singer and Donald Winch in George Verouzakis and Paul Kelly, eds., *John Stuart Mill -- Thought and Influence: The saint of rationalism*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 168-169 and 64-65.
Reasons for Bringing the Polity Back In

The argument here is meant to raise the possibility that, by overlooking or purposively ignoring Mill’s engagement with the concept of political union and its naturalist philosophical foundations, contemporary political discourses, both positive and normative, are missing something important in Mill as to his understanding of the complex relationship between liberty and governance. The evolution of naturalism since Mill’s time, as well as developments in the social sciences, are bringing these systems of opinion, to use a Mill term, toward a view of that relationship that is closer to Mill’s, not more divergent from it. This convergence provides a new context for understanding the significance of Mill’s view of the contribution of political union to human progress. This same context, however, also helps to expose some of the paradoxes inherent in Mill’s dedication to progress as an ideal... The theory of multi-level selection has opened the door to systematic consideration of the maintenance of inter-group cultural differentiation as a factor contributing to the evolution of the human brain, human sociality and innate human dispositions to engage in other-regarding behavior. Multi-level selection posits that socially enforced variety in group-characteristic behaviors – cultural distinctiveness – can and sometimes does outweigh within-group behavioral variety in determining adaptation. What drives this toward

---

the political, not merely the social, is the idea that between-group distinctions can arise when separation between and behavioral consistency within groups are maintained over time. To the degree these are enforced, either by circumstances or by rule, together the combination can lead to adaptive selection taking place between and among groups as groups. Ironically, the implication is that group selection has contributed significantly to an increase in human individuality and human agency, relative to, say, that of primates. This seems to be what Mill thought, as well. He could not see how that could work. He looked for answers in the development of characteristic behaviors, as that development is affected by the circumstances surrounding the maintenance of stable social units as units.

There is a long-recognized aporia in Mill’s political thought having to do with his dual privileging of society and person, in his defense of liberty as well as more generally. To dismiss this aporia as a product of Mill’s confusion, or to take it as evidence of philosophical inconsistency – as many if not most readings of Mill have long tended to do – is to miss its significance. It is better understood as a central element of an undeveloped positive political theory, a theory meant to take account of what he saw as the essential features of political association that function as an instrument in the development of human capacities to manage nature. Mill saw that in the process of maintaining a society as “a” society in which individuals co-exist as a self-understood distinct unit – whether a Highland clan or a nation-state – individual behaviors are inevitably and necessarily brought into motivational harmony of
thought, feeling, and practice by and in support of a framework of systemically integrated institutions. He understood this process of social constitution to have been an important factor in contributing to the development of human individual agency over time.

Three passages from Mill’s *Considerations on Representative Government*: and two from the *Logic of the Moral Sciences* together illustrate the point. 1.) “It is what men think that determines how they act.”8 2.) “Government is ...great influence acting on the human mind.”9 3.) “[T]he most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves”10 4.) “The laws of national (or collective) character are by far the most important class of sociological laws...; the character which is formed by any state of social circumstances ...is also a fact which enters largely into the production of all the other phenomena.”11 5.) “There is no social phenomenon which is not more or less influenced by every other part of the condition of the same society.... There is, in short, what physiologists term a consensus, similar to that existing among the various organs and functions of the physical frame of man.... and constituting one of the many

---

9 CW XIX, 392.
10 CW XIX, 390.
analogies which have rendered universal such expressions as the ‘body politic’ and ‘body natural.’”

These are all statements that can be and have been contested as to their independent validity. The discussion here is intended simply to show how for Mill their validity was not determined independently but rather holistically. They are integral elements of his paradigm of human nature. This paradigm is rooted in his particular view of human nature. It is consistent with and underlies his interpretation of utilitarianism. The primary conceptual link between political constitution and individual agency is to be found in the idea of the cultivation of a particular character, or characteristic way of being. A point to be made here, in addition to developing the idea of what Mill understood the nature and sources of effective human agency to be, how deeply and intrinsically social they are, is the extent to which he also believed that constituting individual agency through the development of a particular kind of character is one of the central things polities do, by virtue of whatever it is that makes polities particular – that is, both cohesive and distinct. This is not to say that he argued, in effect, that character constitution is the central thing polities are for. His view of the purpose of polities was one in which he saw them as ordering individual social behavior so that it constructively takes account of the wellbeing of others within a framework of specific circumstances.

---

12 LMS, 899.
13 This distinction is analogous to saying the purpose of a university is education; a central task executed in carrying out this purpose is establishing a curriculum.
Epistemological Consistency and The Logic of Co-existence

The central hypothesis proposed here is that Mill perceived the organization of human society into distinguishable political “bodies” – authoritative, functionally integrated communal living units – as a natural phenomenon, natural in the sense that these units are formed by humans whose bodies and minds Mill understood to be in and of nature as a whole. He saw this phenomenon of political unitizing as having a strong causal association with the development of individual human agency through the cultivation of particular, characteristic ways of being based on common habits of thought/action/feeling. He perceived the cultivation of particular ways of being in the world to be a factor – ultimately the chief limiting condition – in the development of individual agency over time. Most importantly, he conceived of agency as representing not autonomy but rather a socially conditioned, reason enabled ability to manipulate the forces of nature, from a position within nature, for a purpose, the forces of nature understood as including the natural force of egoism.14

The harmonization of purpose required for the structure of co-existence that he understood the polity to represent, he believed would be realized primarily, or most profoundly, through the sharing of basic conceptions and information about the nature of the world and the way to be in it effectively. He saw a collectively instantiated

---

14 Mill used the term agency to indicate a locus of motivated action, not as in moral agency strictly. See, for example, his comments on government vs. individual agency in Coleridge, CW X, 156.
“common system of opinions”\textsuperscript{15} as forming the necessary connection between a political community, or “stable political union,”\textsuperscript{16} and its lasting presence in the world, on the one hand, and the prevailing collective character of its participants that distinctively conditions their agency possibilities, on the other. He perceived, and attempted to develop a theoretical framework to explain, a causal relationship between the particularization of political unions – the constitution of individual societies as such – and particular patterns of human behavior. He understood this relationship to have played an important role in what he saw as a longer-term historic trend of change in the human condition, and he confessed to wanting to see that trend as one of “improvement,” or “a tendency toward a happier and better state.”\textsuperscript{17}

The purpose of this re-examination of Mill is to argue that, as here interpreted, his understanding of the nature of political unitization, and his view of how to develop and test that understanding, together provide a useful processual basis for engaging contemporary debates about the nature of nation-states. The case for usefulness rests on two propositions. First, Mill’s conception of the necessarily character-constitutive nature of political union, and his argument about how to comprehend it, could serve as a bridge between contemporary interpretive and naturalist discourses about the political. Second, this is possible in principle because Mill employed terms and used

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{LMS}, CW VIII, 926.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{LMS}, 920.
\textsuperscript{17} He noted here explicitly that “the words Progress and Progressiveness” are in this context not to be understood as “synonymous with improvement and tendency to improvement.” \textit{LMS}, 913.
constructs that are meaningful in relation to what those discourses have become since Mill’s time. The defense of both of these propositions rests in the first instance on a claim about the centrality of naturalism to Mill’s philosophy, both as to ontology and to epistemology, and about the nature of his naturalism. The assertion is that Mill’s naturalist position framed his understanding of the concept of liberty, his views about the nature of the polity, and his particular form of utilitarianism, as well as his positions about how humanity should pursue an increased understanding of these related features of human life. They are distinct features, according to Mill, but not separate features, to be understood, necessarily, within a single interpretive framework.

Mill believed that his view of the importance of political organization to human development would be supported eventually by a particular scientific approach to the study of human history, an approach he called political ethology. He insisted that such an investigation could only proceed on the basis of what he called inverse deduction, whereby observations of systematic change over time in forms of social organization and related patterns of thought and action ultimately would be explained by an independently derived theoretical understanding of the nature of human psychology. Essentially, he argued, we should look at how characteristic social patterns have changed in what we understand to be a specific cumulative direction, and assume this to be both cause and effect of changes in individual behavior. To understand how change in characteristic patterns of social behavior comes about, he
believed, it is necessary to understand what affects characteristic behavior, to understand the interaction of human nature, or human psychology, with “circumstances,” including especially the nature of a given society and the circumstances that constitute it as a society. Mill was interested in knowing how a given society’s perceived particularity and the characteristic particularity of individual behavior are related. He believed the confirmation *ex post* of a linkage between understandings about social facts, and especially an observed (posited) change in social facts, would have to be explainable by reference to validated theories of psychological facts. Equally, however, he insisted on the necessity of establishing and testing hypotheses about how the processes involved in the functioning of a polity and those involved in the formation of individual character intersect in the instantiation of particular psychological and social facts.

**Mill’s Method vs. Mill’s Truth**

The object of this exercise is to provide an interpretation of Mill’s view of the concept of political unitization as forming an essential element of his overall philosophy. This is intended as only a first step in evaluating the plausibility of the concept as a matter of political theory, both explanatory and normative. Stipulating that the two cannot be as tidily sorted as Mill sometimes argued, this effort may be

---

18 This way of stating what Mill believed runs counter to the idea that Mill was an extreme methodological individualist. That is one of the claims about Mill the analysis here aims to undermine, in favor of the view that he although he could be doctrinaire on the point, in practice he was something altogether more interesting: a methodological synthesizer.
seen as aimed primarily at contributing an additional perspective to existing explanations of Mill’s philosophy. This perspective differs from other recent reinterpretations of Mill in its emphasis on his preoccupation with processes and problems of political cohesion; in its representation of Mill’s definitions of agency and interest; in its ascription to Mill of a concept of “meta-interest” associated with a discrete “utility of the whole”; and in its reference to trends in contemporary science. Is it consistent nonetheless with many parts of more recent reassessments, while contradicting other parts of those same reassessments.

There is a lingering perception that Mill was not really a “real” philosopher at all, but rather a pragmatic though idealistic “public intellectual,” interested solely in “the problems of the real world.” as biographer Richard Reeves put it approvingly.\textsuperscript{19} “Mill was not the kind of philosopher who sat in a silent study, engaged in the painstaking construction of theoretical systems, according to which society should be remoulded; he was not in this sense a ‘systematic’ thinker.”\textsuperscript{20} This perception is not shared by contemporary scholars who have recently studied Mill’s philosophy. At least two, Alan Ryan and John Skorupski, argue that his philosophy gains in coherence and credibility in a post-20\textsuperscript{th} century context, but the import of this work seems to go

\textsuperscript{19} Richard Reeves, \textit{John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand} (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), 3. Reeves’ biography is very thoroughly researched, but it is meant to tell the story of a political actor. Reeves does not consider Mill’s philosophical arguments on their own merits. For example, at 167: “From a 21\textsuperscript{st} century perspective, Mill’s philosophy of knowledge creation looks dated, even conservative.”

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
largely unheeded, especially by those focused on Mill’s political advocacy. As a practical matter, most elements of Mill’s abstract thought are no longer treated seriously in political discourse. His analyses of economics, social science, and ethics, are generally considered outdated, and so is much of his political philosophy, especially his consequentialism, with its associated rejection of “the idea of abstract right as a thing independent of utility.”

With respect to the philosophical foundations of contemporary political liberalism, except in the eyes of a few dedicated Mill scholars, his theoretical work is viewed by his critics as well as his admirers as representing something of a dead end in the evolutionary branching of liberalism as a political philosophy. As Revere suggests, Mill tends to be valued today for his statements of value – with works such as *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* taken largely on their own merits as

---


22 Joseph Raz provides a contemporary argument for liberty that is not grounded in the idea of an abstract individual right. His approach includes the claim that “personal autonomy depends on the persistence of collective goods,” an idea that the discussion here will attribute also to Mill, except with respect to agency, not autonomy. This Raz passage is from *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 250.

23 Mill’s advocacy of welfare socialism, and his perfectionism more generally, are positions that are not outside the contemporary liberal pale, but they do represent a contested claim to liberal legitimacy. The liberalism of F.A. Hayek, for example, shares a great deal with Mill but arrives at an entirely opposite conclusion with respect to the function of the polity. The parallels and contrasts between the two that relate to epistemology in particular are relevant to the claims about Mill being made here. A discussion of Hayek’s position can be found in Lawrence J. Connin, “Hayek, Liberalism and Social Knowledge,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique*, 23, no. 2 (1990): 297-315. For a critique of Mill as prototype for liberalism as a philosophy, see, for example, John Gray, “What is dead and what is living in liberalism.” In *Post-liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (NY and London: Routledge, 1993), 283-328.
cogent arguments for the principle of individual freedom *qua* principle, simply. At the same time, Mill’s development of circumstantial justifications for slavery, despotism, and colonialism and his seemingly ethnocentric characterization of what constitutes ‘barbarism’ – all as much grounded in Mill’s philosophical understandings as are his pleading for tolerance and humanistic egalitarianism – are rejected outright, on principle.

This appears to be changing, however. Recent scholarship directed at reevaluating aspects of Mill’s political thought in the context of contemporary liberal norms, like more specifically philosophical work, reinforces the impression that interrogating Mill carefully today, as opposed to 50 or 100 years ago, provokes generally positive judgments on grounds of depth and relevance, if not consistency or conformance to all of today’s liberal commitments. The breadth, scope and variety of Mill’s writings, taken as a whole, constitute a rich set of resources for the effort, even as the diversity of the contents continues to contribute to the impression that Mill’s political arguments lacked a coherent philosophical foundation.

---


In no small part, this is because in many respects Mill’s thought is more consistent with early 21st century perspectives than with those of the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries. In his introduction to the 1987 edition of *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, Ryan described the original, first published in 1970, as a “work of propaganda,” in that “its aim was to show Mill as a much more systematic thinker than had previously been thought, and in particular to present his *System of Logic* as a key to ambitions which give a unity to all his thought.”

Moreover, in the new Preface, Ryan called attention to a number of issues on which his criticisms of Mill subsequently gave way to approval. He attributed this change to “a more careful attention to Mill that has made him seem intellectually more impressive than hitherto,” and also to a change in the ‘philosophical climate’ in which “logical and epistemological naturalism has ceased to be as unpopular as it was in the 1960s.”

This reconsideration of Mill’s preoccupation with political unitization as a phenomenon is similarly intended: to examine his arguments on the subject with a view to revealing their place in his overall philosophy, and to do so in a context which reflects elements of a contemporary philosophical climate which has undergone significant developments, with respect to naturalism in particular, even since Ryan

---

27 Ryan, *Philosophy*, x. Ryan concludes, “Mill is more understandable and more impressive when he is read with a greater concern for his own view of what he was doing. The *Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* was sympathetic to its subject, but there are many places where it would have been better if it had been more so.” *Philosophy*, xxi. The first edition was published in 1970. In his study of Mill’s philosophy published two years after Ryan’s second edition, John Skorupski claimed Mill’s positions as “live positions in current philosophical thought....they have not been more so at any time this century, or even since his death.” Skorupski, *Mill*, 4.
wrote in the late 1980s. The focus is different from Ryan’s, moreover. The subject here is not Mill’s philosophy, *per se*, but rather his positive political theory, *per se*, as grounded in that philosophy. According to Ryan, Mill’s philosophical system “is in its broadest extent an account of human rationality in the areas of scientific explanation and moral action.” On his reading of Mill’s philosophical views, the point of moral action, or ethics, is “to maintain social life,” because there are individual goals which it is “the purpose of social life to leave us free to pursue.”

The discussion here will attempt to make a different case: that Mill’s primary philosophical purpose was to develop an account of human rationality in the area of scientific explanation as a contribution to rational political action. The idea is to take seriously Mill’s claim that it is the function of political unitization to make possible social life, that it is *particular* societies that provide individuals with the particular motivations and habits of thought and action that are realized as human happiness. That this is Mill’s claim can be seen by re-examining at its roots his view of what that function represents, and how he thought his claim should be evaluated.

Any attempt to evaluate the plausibility of Mill’s positive theory of the nature and significance of political unit constitution would have to be many-sided. First it would require critical attention to missing or underspecified pieces – especially the theorizing of conflict and resistance, and attention to material facts and material

---

power. Each of the philosophical elements – naturalism, utilitarianism, the epistemological assumptions – need to be interrogated in their uniquely Millian formulations. Taken as a whole, then, how plausible does it look compared with alternative naturalist or utilitarian theories? Beyond the exercise of comparison carried out here with respect to particular aspects of contemporary naturalism related to theories of human evolution, some additional thoughts about what this might involve are provided in the concluding chapter.

As to validity, or truth value, the issue is not so much compared to what but rather how to judge. The only form of validation possible consistent with Mill’s own terms would be the provision of evidence produced by the still-missing science of political ethology – the science of “national” or collective character formation. Such a science would have to be grounded in empirically supported theoretical understandings of the processes involved in constituting discrete, holistic, characteristic behavior-determining groups. These theories would include psychological, sociological, and cultural explanations integrated with theories about how particular systems of law and morality are adopted and reconciled with each other in the process whereby groups are integrated and distinguished from other groups. As to other, non-naturalistic standards of judgment, one that seems relevant is Richard Rorty’s, not inconsistent with Mill’s naturalism but distinct.\(^{30}\) Do we seem to learn

---

something interesting about ourselves and others from Mill’s interpretation of the role of the political in human life that we don’t see without it, but that yet seems authentic and consistent with other things we believe?

Mill waged a lifetime fight against the idea of moral intuitionism. He insisted that science could provide an estimate of the likely consequences of specific behaviors, but only experience and collective human judgment could provide evaluation. Yet Mill also acknowledged and even emphasized the power inherent in shared systems of thought – including epistemological as well as religious paradigms – to affect experience as well as valuation and judgment. He believed that it is the politically organized sharing of thought – not centrally organized, but politically organized – that ultimately translates ideas into characteristic actions, both individual and collective, both good and evil. As he commented of Darwin, Mill himself never pretended that his doctrine was proved....He has opened a path of inquiry full of promise, the results of which none can foresee. And is it not a wonderful feat of scientific knowledge and ingenuity to have rendered so bold a suggestion, which the first impulse of every one was to reject at once, admissible and discussable, even as a conjecture?31

31 System, S CW VII, 499.
Overview of the Argument

The core thesis has three parts. First, more than has been generally recognized, Mill was concerned with asking “what makes a polity?” because he perceived an important bidirectional relationship between the making and keeping of particular polities as distinct and coherent entities, on the one hand, and the co-development of social organization and individual human agency, on the other. Second, his complex, multi-layered, and recursive theoretical model of this relationship was not only consistent with both his utilitarianism and his individualism; it formed the necessary link between them. Third, the “multi-sided,” method he proposed for validating his theory of human development – in effect, an integration of history, cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology, and the physical sciences – is more than coincidently analogous to contemporary themes in the scientific understanding of human evolution, which increasingly take account of the bidirectional role played by group-making and group-keeping in the adaptive development of mind, society, and culture.

The nub of the ontological argument is that Mill perceived humans as part of nature – unusual in the degree of the species’ capacity to act on nature purposively, but nonetheless in and of nature and subject to its inherent constraints. He perceived political units as phenomena constituted through the interaction of circumstances with groups – that is, circumstances affecting the experiential distinctness of groups as groups. In this view, polities are human groups self-defined as groups by virtue of
perceived circumstantial distinctions from other groups. In the case of the nation-state, Mill refers to that unifying distinction in psycho-social (that is, in cognitive/affective/behavioral) terms suggesting a concept of collective identification. “A portion of mankind may be said to constitute a Nationality if they are united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between them and any others – which make them co-operate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be government by themselves or a portion of themselves, exclusively.”

Collective identification in this view is connected to inter-related feelings of attachment, perceptions of distinction, and shared attitudes about the social basis of legitimate jurisdiction. Mill did not see particular group distinctions as primordial, as given once and for all. He was, however, taking them as psychologically constitutive, and asking, “Where does this collection of related feelings, perceptions and attitudes come from?” His answer, posed preliminarily as a theory to be developed and tested empirically, was: from circumstances giving rise to conscious and non-conscious convictions about commonality – and, especially, the circumstance of prior political association. “This feeling of nationality may have been generated by various causes.... identity of race and descent.... [C]ommunity of language, and community of religion.... [G]eographical limits,” etc.; but “the strongest of all is identity of political

---

32 Considerations, CW XIX, 546. From chapter titled “Of Nationality as connected with Representative Government.”
The “political antecedents” Mill cites consist in a shared recollection of circumstances perceived to have been experienced by the group as a distinct group – i.e., a sense of a common history, distinct from the history of other groups. Governments, as distinguished from nations, or more generally, polities, Mill saw as instituted by the voluntary actions of individuals, or voluntary interactions among individuals. “Let us remember, then, in the first place, that political institutions...are the work of men; owe their origin and their whole existence to human will.... In every stage of their existence they are made what they are by human voluntary agency.” They are made, Mill says, for the benefit of particular groups, on the basis of a perceived commonality of being or condition.

Without government, the perceived commonality cannot be represented as action in the world. The connection between “nationality” and government, Mill implies, is intrinsic; the fact of government, instituted by human will, is constitutive of the phenomenon of action-relevant distinctive groupness, realized in distinctive patterns of individual behavior; the latter both depend on and also are necessary to, the former.

33 Ibid.
34 A logical extension of Mill’s argument is that the interaction between circumstances and groups could, in principle, both unmake and remake, constitute and dissolve individuated political units, and Mill saw this. “Experience proves that it is possible for one nationality to merge and be absorbed in another....” Considerations, 549. In all, though, he did not give much attention to dissolution. He saw the process as going, on balance, in one direction over the long course of human history.
35 Considerations, 375.
By what means does government carry out its constitutive function? Primarily for Mill, the means are epistemological: framing a common system of opinions about appropriate action. This is government influencing the human mind, acting to improve the virtue and intelligence of the people – or, he felt, acting so as to maintain the body politic in the same position. The alternative, of polity maintenance, is not simply leaving it alone; it also involves acting to sustain existing ways of thinking in common and being in common, through resistance to institutional change and especially change in those institutions that affect the development of character, or dispositions. Again, this is not what Mill thought governments should do; it’s what he believed, on philosophical grounds, that government does.

Governments constitute particular peoples as political units through their framing of distinct ways of acting; agreement to act in the form of a unit is predicated on a perceived (as in felt; experienced) commonality of being or condition and, therefore, of interest, requiring a shared sense of how to act – according to what rules of reasoning, and which moral and legal standards. Government means regulation, all the way down. Regulation, in turn, is the necessary condition of an advanced human agency, of what Mill called “rational freedom.”

Mill was saying, in effect, that the self we recognize as a person – as a distinct individual who can act as an autonomous moral agent – is so by second nature. Each

---

36 This term is from Mill’s *The Subjection of Women*, hereafter *Subjection*, CW XXI: *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*, 336.
individual forms his or her own particular character within a specific framework of thought and action. Such frameworks, or contexts, provide the accessible options and the necessary recipes for how to be in the world. Innovation and criticism are possible, in fact desirable, but only on the basis of and in relation to socially proffered and significantly holistic structures of meaning.\textsuperscript{37}

The object here is, first, to show what Mill was up to in his philosophical consideration of the nature of political union by calling attention to its relationship to his view that human nature is part of nature, and to his self-adopted life goal of acting as a “reformer of the world” in pursuit of happiness for all humanity; and, further, to show the relationship of both to his views of what constitutes human agency and how it is attained.

Second, the analysis excavates the details of Mill’s concept of a necessary co-constitutive relationship between the formation of particular political units and the formation of characteristic patterns of motivation and behavior – the predicates of agency – and the epistemological considerations he associated with this concept of co-constitution.

Third, this study locates the causal premise for co-constitution in Mill’s idea of an interest as including an element of facticity, and the related idea that institutions

represent recognition of that facticity as socially comprehended in and by particular polities, providing the means necessary to the realization of specific interests.

Finally, examples are provided of conceptual trends in contemporary evolutionary theory resonant with each of these points about Mill, as to both concepts and methodology, especially with respect to the import of group differentiation in natural selection and the resulting impact on the evolution of modern humans.

Chapter I: The Nature and Cultivation of Human Agency

The argument turns on an interpretation of Mill’s understanding of human agency, both what it represents and how it is achieved, given what he understands about human nature. The discussion develops the case that his conception of agency was derivative of his belief that humans are in and of nature, and yet importantly distinguishable in two ways from much or all of the rest of “sentient creation.”\(^{38}\) The ability to employ an understanding of the laws of nature in affecting one’s circumstances is the essence of agency for Mill, including knowing why and how to manage one’s own desires.\(^{39}\) Human agency for Mill consists in the capacity for self-conscious, informed action, but not strictly in relation to self-interest; human happiness intrinsically includes an emotional connection to others. Further, the attainment of higher forms of happiness intrinsically involves having the benefit of a

\(^{38}\) The phrase is from *Utilitarianism*, CW X, 214.

\(^{39}\) A beaver building a dam is in principle as much an example of this general formulation regarding the setting of natural forces against each other as is Odysseus having himself lashed to the mast, except that Odysseus is seen as a more self-conscious agent.
vast foundation of cumulative human experience and knowledge on which to build one’s own capacity. In this sense, there actually is no such thing as a strictly autonomous *agent*. Agency is a condition of society.

Mill connects the development of agency to a process of cultivation, a process involving the self and a particular society in the co-constitution of a specific form of individual character, the well-ordered self. For Mill, society and its institutions are necessary to discipline, theory, and knowledge of right action. Mill insisted on the need for testing ideas about right action, even or perhaps especially, ideas embedded in ancient institutions. The proper standard, according to Mill, is always purpose. What are we trying to accomplish? But identifying purpose is not sufficient. A necessary further question is: What evidence do we have that this proposed action will attain its purpose, or that this existing institution does any longer indeed deliver the intended result? Mill appreciated Jeremy Bentham for his contribution to methodologically careful assessment of the institution of British law as to its functionality, but faulted him for failing to take account of society’s role as a tutor in purposes and right action.

*Chapter II: Polity Constitution and the Formation of Character*

In the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mill found the needed analytic complement to Bentham: the idea of constitutive institutions as resources for thought and feeling, and thus the repository of the social determinates of motivation. Culture and education, *Bildung* and cultivation, structure and edification, are all constructs in
some degree associated with the idea of form and forming. A particular form, or construct, serving as a distinct, defined, and delimited frame, however pliable or porous, is implied in the idea of constituting. As education, broadly construed, culture embodies and transmits particular ways of thinking and acting for a particular polity.

How politics relates to culture is a critical question for Mill’s project. Basically it would seem that he believed politics makes culture, in the sense of defining the boundaries and manner of acceptable thought and action – distinguishing a specific, distinct group of people by virtue of their characteristic ways of thinking and acting. Mill credited Coleridge with applying a Germanic philosophy of history to an analysis of “the culture of the inward man,” culture having contributed to the “gradual evolution of humanity” through “systematic co-operation” as embodied in the social institutions of a given polity. He insisted that the generalities of human social behavior are only realized as particular forms, just as the generalities of human psychology are only realized in individuals. Education, “in its largest acceptation” as the social transmission of particular patterns of thought and action, is a necessary condition of the continuing existence of a political body as an entity, hence the idea of

---

40 Coleridge, CW X, 143 The phrase “systematic co-operation” is from a passage in which Mill is referring to Coleridge on the “State” specifically. The connection between culture and the “evolution of humanity” (Mill’s words) was made earlier in the essay, at 139-140.

41 “Education....in its largest acceptation...comprehends even the indirect effects produced on character and on the human faculties, by things of which the direct purposes are quite different, by laws, by forms of government, by the industrial arts, by modes of social life; nay even by physical facts not dependent on human will; by climate, soil, and local position. Whatever helps to shape the human being, to make the individual what he is, or hinder him from being what he is not—is part of his education.” This passage is from Mill’s Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews, 1867, CW XXI, 217.
constitution as a co-coordinative feature.\textsuperscript{42} Mill adopted from August Comte the idea that particular societies have systemic features, that there is an observable correspondence among knowledge, culture, industry, social structure, form of government, laws, and customs -- a “consensus” – within any politically organized social body.\textsuperscript{43} In agreeing with Comte’s premises about the required “uniformities” of social “co-existence,” Mill associated patterns of behavioral disposition with the existence of distinct political units and with the practices seen as necessary to realizing certain kinds of interests and not others. Where, however, Comte looked for grand trans-cultural trends in history, Mill attended to those trends associated with the coherent particularity he observed to characterize political entities. He speculated about whence this particularity arises, and why it changes when it does.

To address this set of related propositions empirically, Mill developed the conception of a social science that would track changes in patterns of social organization, thought, and behavior over time, then link these changes to hypotheses about individual psychology that could be verified through appropriate processes of inference, as laid out in his \textit{System of Logic}. This led to Mill’s well-known argument that psychological theories about how individuals acquire characteristic ways of thinking and acting should constitute a science, called “ethology.” Beyond that, and in

\textsuperscript{42} For this thought, Mill explicitly acknowledged Herder in an early draft of the \textit{Autobiography} (not in the final version). The scale and nature of his debt to German philosophers, including Fichte and von Humboldt, deserves attention in relation to the argument here, but goes well beyond the scope of this study. The same must be said about his debt to numerous other, non-Continental thinkers.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{LMS}, CW VIII, 912.
essence surrounding it, would be a set of theories concerning “the causes which determine the type of character belonging to a people or to an age,” called “political ethology.” Finally, Mill argued, there would be a set of theories about what causes change in cultures, a theory of social dynamics attuned to particularization. What changes culture changes the individual as to characteristic behavior, or ways of thought and action. What, then, changes culture? Mill’s answer was political action, based on the social transmission of thought, realized as a change in characteristic behavior within a society.

Chapter III. The Nature of Co-existence.

The key to social change for Mill is an alteration in the social comprehension of interest, or a change in theories about how to realize interests, interests being the presumed relationships that exist between humans and the objects and conditions in the world around them that are thought to conduce to happiness. Mill saw an irreducibly social aspect to the content of knowledge in general, and to the interpretation of human interests and the instruments of their achievement in particular. He also employed the term interest in a way that implied an irreducibly universal aspect in relation human happiness – all goods may not be goods equally to all humans, but goods are goods and harms are harms as experienced by humans as humans.

---

44 See LMS, CW VIII, for lengthy discussions of both terms. Ethology is now applied to the study of characteristic animal behavior.
Mill saw claims of rights as inherently and inevitably adjudicable only within the framework of particular societies – that is, within polities, arguing that moral claims are to be understood as implying moral obligation with reference to a specific society. The implication is that only that society can determine which claims to honor. Further, there is the question of whose claims must be honored, and who is accordingly obligated. Mill suggested that this is determined by virtue of “fellow-feeling,” or a sense of identification. This may be experienced subjectively, but it is not in principle subjectively determined. Claims are rendered intelligible – and, in principle, therefore, enforceable – by an acknowledgement of the feeling of an identity interest among a delimited group of individuals. This feeling of identity of interest, the interest of an extensive self in effect, arises as a result of perceived past commonality, or a perceived history of co-existence.

In Mill’s model, roughly, there are two primary loci of interest determination. One is for the identification of what is necessary or desirable, systemically, for a whole society. The other represents the nexus of many different more or less independent loci of overlapping and separate, sometimes incompatible or competing individual interests.45 There will be an inevitable tendency to get them to conform because to a considerable extent all relevant individual interests are dependent for their existence on the functional success of the social body, which in turn is dependent on significant consistency in systems of thought and practice.

45 And, in principle, sub-group interests.
In *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*, Mill addressed some of the key problems raised by his conception of agency, its social sources, and its political and ethical requirements, as they applied to two political questions with which he was concerned, tolerance, and gender equity. The proportion of argument in both texts devoted to social interests is telling. Mill understood all interests to be matters of social determination, in the end, including what form of individuality is permitted to persist, and social determination as significantly dependent on social thought. He believed social thought could be improved best through a disciplined process of verification open to broad contest. In this context, *Considerations on Representative Government* can be seen as an effort to articulate a causal logic associating the possibility of improvement in human thought with the effects of a particular political form. Is there a form, Mill inquired, that when conditions permit, is epistemologically optimal with respect to harmonizing the interests of individuals with the interest of the whole – the interests of the whole being those relating to both order (“the preservation of all kinds and amounts of good which already exist”), and progress (“the increase of” kinds and amounts of good). A representative democratic polity he suggested would constitute a framework conducive to the effective harmonization of individual and collective thought about ends and instruments – again, subject to certain pre-existing conditions. These conditions are an acceptance of the concept of authority – obedience to rationally grounded social prescription – and a felt mutuality of

---

existential condition determining the social boundaries within which authority can be established rationally.

Mill’s ideal of social organization was one in which human interests would come to be understood as irreducibly mutual in realization, but also, he believed, the possibility of that realization would come to be seen as largely dependent on the maximization of functional individuality as the best way to arrive at good judgments about the relationship between circumstances and interests. Seeing the polity as an episteme, structured to make the most of different perspectives rationally integrated, provided the justification for some of Mill’s more controversial constitutional recommendations, such as the argument for a public ballot. 47

Chapter IV: The Evolution of Co-existence

To understand Mill’s conception of the path of human development it is helpful to see what has become of his arguments about “a social science.” Contemporary evolutionary theory “in its largest acception” (to borrow a Milleanism) aspires to provide exactly the sort of unifying framework for systematic investigation of the experienced world – including societies, and minds – that Mill expected to emerge. That framework is essentially processual, contingent, and ultimately (although not locally) indeterminate. It has evolved, as it were, beyond things and events, single causes and effects, toward probabilities and populations, evolving universes as well as evolving species and evolving societies. The “history of

man,” as Mill envisioned, is starting to “take in the whole of past time, from the first recorded condition of the human race,”\textsuperscript{48} where “recorded” now includes recorded within genetic make-up as much as in words, images, memories, and practices.

In a number of different scientific fields, interest has been growing in the concept of group constitution as both variable process and phenomenological condition of significance in the evolution of human intelligence, behavior, culture, and social organization. In the form of an argument for a multilevel interpretation of how natural selection works, the gist of the idea holds that processes involved in engendering and maintaining group coherence, under specific circumstances, can and do play a role in fostering the transmission of adaptive genotypic and phenotypic behavioral characteristics, including altruism, across populations and ultimately the species as a whole.

Mill averred 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.”\textsuperscript{49} Four broad sets of ideas grounded in evolution theory appear to be especially resonant with Mill’s intuitions about the existence of a relationship between political cohesion and the development of human agency via the construction

\textsuperscript{48} LMS, CW VIII, 927-928.
\textsuperscript{49} LMS, 932.
of “national characters.” These claims deal with a posited co-evolutionary relationship between increases in human intelligence and in the size of stable human groups; the significance of culture in human evolution; the role of group selection in evolution in general and especially in the evolution of human culture and human societies; and, theories about the role of the political in driving group selection and, in consequence, the further evolution of sociality.

The thrust of these claims taken together – noting that all are to one degree or another subject to considerable scientific debate and dispute – is to provide a naturalist justification for Mill’s view of the significance and role of the political in the development of an advanced human agency.

In its current form as a hypothesis attempting to offer a complex description of the relationship between circumstances and individual and group variation in the development of human capacities, this turn in evolutionary theory approximates Mill’s idea of a science of “political ethology,” in method as much as in its fundamental premises about humans and nature. It is generating premises about the dynamics of group coherence that parallel Mill’s in many ways.

Chapter V: Conclusion: The Polity and the Paradox of Progress

Some preliminary thoughts about how Mill’s theorizing might be evaluated and critiqued are provided in a concluding chapter, along with suggestions about the relevance of that theorizing, as here interpreted, to contemporary political discourses. A serious interrogation of the theory as a coherent whole would be a monumental task.
It would involve a new look at how he revised naturalism, utilitarianism, and “philosophical history” to fit together within his interpretive context, and new assessments of the impact on each as a doctrine in which to ground normative political theory. Further, to the extent Mill’s paradigm is seen as coherent, the nature of its underdevelopment becomes more evident. For example, Mill under theorized conflict, was dismissive of the material, and valorized rationalism uncritically. He also failed to resolve his own ambivalence about using “progress” as a value term, rather than as a descriptor of directionality. Critical evaluation of whether attention to these issues supports or undermines Mill’s theory would be essential in estimating its value as theory.

As to applications, Mill’s many-sided conception could provide a point of departure for more systematically integrating political theory with social science, to the benefit of both. This approach would look at a society and its institutions, and characteristic individual dispositions, as representing both processes of consensus formation and arenas for contest. The model could incorporate both history and feelings of identification into the study of political unitization. Questions to be pursued in this framework might include, for example, how economic and political factors involved in the dynamics of international migration interact with the psychology of group identity and forms of political constitution to affect feelings of national affiliation.
For political theorists in particular, to understand Mill in the context of his naturalistic commitments is to see more clearly the many-sidedness of his “theory of life” and the contingent view of individuality in which it was grounded. Mill perceived in the nature of humanity a necessary and inevitable interdependence among the thought/action/feeling processes that constitute regimes, societies, and individuals. This perception poses a contradiction to ideas such as the neutral state. It offers a functional interpretation of what is ”natural” about natural rights and natural law that implicates the requirements of co-existence, inevitably, in their determination. This joins questions regarding individual liberty, necessarily, to questions regarding the interests of “a” society as a whole, and thus a joint determination of the good as well as the right. Mill’s political theorizing suggests that the requirements of rational freedom and co-existence are more interdependent and challenging than we might like them to be, and more problematic than he foresaw. Those who accept Mill’s premises and their implications might consider them as the foundation of a “many-sided” liberal alternative to contemporary political liberalisms, one that can confront the paradoxes of progress in ways that Mill did not.
“It thus appears that we must recognise at least two principal meanings in the word ‘nature.’ In one sense, it means all the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers. In another sense, it means, not everything which happens, but only what takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency, of man.”

“Human nature and human life are wide subjects, and whoever would embark in an enterprise requiring a thorough knowledge of them, has need both of large stores of his own, and of all aids and appliances from elsewhere. His qualifications for success will be proportional to two things: the degree in which his own nature and circumstances furnish him with a correct and complete picture of man’s nature and circumstances; and his capacity of deriving light from other minds.”

CHAPTER I
THE NATURE AND CULTIVATION OF HUMAN AGENCY

This chapter explores the foundations of Mill’s philosophical position with respect to the nature of individuals and society – of human nature and human life – as a preliminary step to defending the claim that he understood political organization as a necessary precondition to, or causal factor in, the development of human individual agency. It will make the case that as a central premise of the philosophical framework within which he pursued his life’s work, Mill early on evidenced a specific conception of human agency – what he called “rational freedom” – which he saw as a socially and psychologically cultivated capacity to affect the natural order from a position within that order. Agency as Mill conceived it contributes under appropriate
circumstances both to the enhanced realization of the positive aspects of human nature, and also to the instantiation of those social structures and practices which produce such enhanced realization. Mill, it will be argued, grounded his political theory on an assumption of the existence of an intrinsic and necessary bidirectional causal relationship between characteristic individual ways of thinking and acting, and politically organized social forms – an essential and inescapable process of co-constitution. He derived this conception from the elements of what he considered to be an irrefutably naturalistic ontology.

Mill’s naturalist utilitarian syllogism regarding agency can be outlined approximately as follows. Human motivations are diverse, but inherently all imply a desire for happiness that translates into intermediate ends, or ‘interests’ – that is, things and conditions in the world conducing to increased pleasure and decreased pain, the former construed by Mill as occurring for humans especially in the form of “higher” or “nobler” pleasures. The nature of human interests has expanded and diversified over historic time, as the species’ capacity for agency has increased and been transformed through social interaction. The transformation that matters is from a ‘primitive’ (i.e., early) agency of “savage independence,” to the advanced agency of “rational freedom.” These terms are juxtaposed here, not by Mill himself. Yet, in

---

*Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, CW XXXI: Miscellaneous Writings, 198, and Baum’s discussion of Mill’s conception of power in *Rereading*, 72 ff.

*As noted, Mill used the term “rational freedom” in *The Subjection of Women*. The concept of “savage independence” appears several times in *Considerations*, in *Utilitarianism*, and in an April 25, 1834 commentary on the Irish question, “Repeal of the Union,” CW VI, *Essays on England, Ireland, and the*
spite of some difference in the contexts in which he deploys the two concepts, if they are read against the background of his overall philosophical position, they appear to provide the definitional endpoints of his assumed spectrum of human agency. Access to rational freedom is found only in politically developed societies, where resources and understandings are extensively shared and strict egoism is curtailed, so that complex cooperation can co-exist with effective individual autonomy. The necessary and appropriate curtailment of egoism is accomplished through a combination of external constraint, social interpretation, and internal self-conditioning.\footnote{In this model there are parallels to Foucault, among others. It is neither a narrowly behaviorist nor a radically individualistic conception. Compare, for example: “[Foucault] vehemently rejects [the possibility that] autonomous subjects, at least in principle, could found and rule themselves uninfluenced by others. Agents are creative beings; it is just that their creativity occurs in a given social context that influences it.” Mark Bevir, “Foucault and Critique: Deploying Agency against Autonomy,” \textit{Political Theor}, 27, no. 1 (1999): 67.} The specific characteristics of a given combination are established within particular polities.

The central proposition explored in this chapter is that Mill’s ontology was deeply naturalistic; that this ontology, along with the explicitly social epistemology he derived from it, provided him with a model of human nature that, among other important features, generated a particular conception of agency that differs in key respects from the idea of individual autonomy that informs and motivates much contemporary political liberalism and its view of Mill.\footnote{Again, as an example: Baum credits Mill as having a conception of autonomy as a condition of ‘completely free’ agency,” but critiques Mill for a culture-bound failure to grasp “how religious and cultural traditions and identities are sources of meaning and value \textit{as well as} media of power and domination.” Baum, \textit{Rereading}, 36. [Emphasis in original.] Aside from the fact that Mill used the
elaborated view of mankind as an integral part of the natural world, a species among other species but one with unique cognitive and social capacities. Emotion and instinct, biology and psychology, morality and the evolutionary development of society and culture are all explicitly contemplated within his paradigm of human nature. The capacities for rational judgment, for experiential learning, and for logical, critical, and theoretical thinking are important components of that nature for Mill, but not more so than the capacities of fellow feeling and self-control. Mill’s individual agent is a product of both self and society. Agency produces and reproduces itself within a context determined significantly by the features of those social forms constituted as functional social wholes – polities, in effect – that enact both culture and history.\(^7\) The realization of agency is contingent on the degree and kind of epistemic authority expressed by the cultural framework of a given polity.

This conception does not easily lend itself to analysis in terms of dichotomies or oppositions – man vs. nature; the individual vs. society; authority vs. liberty; or, for that matter, state as distinct from society or nation as distinct from state – nor to term ‘autonomy’ only when referring to political groupings, not individuals, this assessment misses the complexity of Mill’s understanding. As will be seen, Mill was hardly indifferent to the import of feelings of identity, and the significance of culture as a primary constitutor of meaning.

reductionism, of which Mill is often accused. Mill was committed to a view of humanity that locates the person, and mankind in general, within a comprehensive framework of an interactive material and extra-material, or ideational, matrix of forces (i.e., a structure), in which different loci of force — including, importantly, the individual as a locus of volition — are involved in constituting a self as a particular agent with particular, to an extent unique, characteristics.

All of this is implicated in what Mill described as his own personal project, or ‘life plan,’ one developed over time through his experiences, intellectual, social, political, professional, and emotional. That chosen life plan was nothing less than a commitment to increasing the happiness, or the utility, of the human race in its future entirety, by developing a theory of human nature to serve as the basis for guiding political action. An assessment of two works not generally considered central to Mill’s philosophy provides the context for this interpretation of his core philosophical positions. They are the Autobiography, published posthumously in 1873, and “Nature,” also published posthumously in 1874, as the first of Three Essays on Religion, but conceived and written in the 1850s as a freestanding work.

---

8 See, for example, Karl Popper, The Poverty of Historicism (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), passim. As Ryan has noted, Popper in effect accuses Mill of both reduction and holism. Ryan, Philosophy, 158.

9 The phrase regarding choice of a “life plan,” is from On Liberty, CW XVIII, 262.

10 Evidence places the development of Nature as a distinct work sometime between 1850 and 1858, with an original draft around 1854. See Robson’s Textual Introduction, CW X, cxxvi.
Mill’s Life Plan: the Cultivation of Human Agency

At the beginning of the section of the Autobiography which deals with the period of mental turmoil he experienced as a young adult, Mill described his early conception of himself as having “what might truly be called an object in life: to be a reformer of the world.”\textsuperscript{11} By his own testimony, Mill’s philosophical and political endeavors were driven by nothing less than the determination to improve the lot of the human race – to increase its overall utility, as it were. At the beginning, as he was entering the years of early adulthood as described in the famous ‘crisis’ passages of the Autobiography, he perceived this grand motive and the connection he felt it to have with his own happiness, or individual utility, to be total, and relatively straightforward.

From the winter of 1821, when I first read Bentham, and especially from the commencement of the Westminster Review, I had what might truly be called an object in life; to be a reformer of the world. My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object.\textsuperscript{12}

This self-conception encountered serious difficulty, he relates, when a mildly depressive mood turned into something more serious when he confronted a sudden realization that it might be possible to solve the world’s most serious problems, as he understood them, but that this result would lead him to despair, not to happiness. It seemed to him then that, under such circumstances, the purpose of his own existence

\textsuperscript{11} Autobiography, CW I, 137.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. In 1821, Mill was 17 years old.
would be vitiated. With this thought, “the whole foundation” of his life “fell down.”

A life empty of grand and significant purpose did not seem to be a life that could contain happiness-generating activity.

All my happiness was to have been 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.

Mill diagnosed his condition (at least as he saw things years later) as arising from a gap or really a misdirection, in his education. He perceived he had been trained by his father and his father’s associates, including Bentham, to regard moral training – meaning, for Mill, the development of appropriate motivations toward the objects conducing to utility, or happiness – as a matter primarily of exposure to the right kind of evidence-based argumentation on the one hand, along with a process of reward and punishment designed to incentivize appropriate behavior. Together, these would create motivational “associations of the salutary class.” Mill now concluded this was too simple. Humanly constructed, or strictly artificially based feelings, could not withstand the force of analysis. To focus the force of analysis on an object is to “wear away the feelings.” Associations reflective of causal connections actually to be found in nature would be reinforced by analysis and testing, but those based on what Mill felt he had been trained by his father’s associationist psychology to regard as ‘artificially’ constructed via a system of rewards and punishments would give way.

13 Autobiography, 139. The crisis, according to Mill, occurred over the winter of 1826-27.
14 Ibid.
15 Autobiography, 141.
The very excellence of analysis (I argued) is that it tends to weaken and undermine whatever is the result of prejudice; that it enables us mentally to separate ideas which have only casually clung together: and no associations whatever could ultimately resist this dissolving force...Analytic habits may thus even strengthen the associations between causes and effects, means and ends, but tend altogether to weaken those which are, to speak familiarly, a mere matter of feeling. They are therefore (I thought) favourable to prudence and clear-sightedness, but a perpetual worm at the root both of the passions and of the virtues; and above all, fearfully undermine all desires, and all pleasures, which are the effects of association, that is, according to the theory I held, all except the purely physical and organic; of the entire insufficiency of which to make life desirable, no one had a stronger conviction than I had.  

He tells of his rescue from a deeply morbid state beginning with another sweeping realization, the experience of having a strong emotional response to reading a passage of Marmontel’s Memoirs, in which the author as a young boy discovers meaning for his own life in the acceptance of responsibility for his family on the death of his father. With his own feelings stirred by this, he saw himself as at least still having a capacity to feel happy, to be ‘charmed,’ and thus still with something to live for. He further interpreted the cause of the feeling as having to do with the idea of living one’s life – and finding satisfaction and happiness in – the pursuit of objects for their own sake, not as means to the attainment of a generalized state of happiness.

---

16 Autobiography, 141-143.
17 As Ryan observes, after Freud, a reader is certain to reflect on Mill’s relationship to his own father, but personal psychology is not the point here; it is, rather, to provide foundation in Mill’s assessment of the sources of his ontology for his later interpretations of what he saw as political and social facts. Ryan elsewhere discounted the impact of ideas about emotions on Mill’s view of philosophy, as compared with the commitment to setting ‘mental associations’ against the real world to test their validity. See Alan Ryan, "Introduction." In Utilitarianism and Other Essays: J. S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England and New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 30-38. The claim here, in contrast, is that although Mill strongly rejected intuitionism as adequate ground for belief, he saw this as distinct from the question of emotions and the associations that elicit them.
Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way. The enjoyments of life (such was now my theory) are sufficient to make it a pleasant thing, when they are taken en passant, without being made a principal object. Once make them so, and they are immediately felt to be insufficient.\textsuperscript{18}

The recovery of spirit this episode represented he describes as being significantly reinforced some time later by encountering a volume of Wordsworth’s poems,\textsuperscript{19} in which he found the idea of ‘cultivating’ the capacity for positive feelings by contemplating the beautiful. Here he experienced a powerful resonance in himself with the expression of “not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty.”\textsuperscript{20} His interpretation of Wordsworth rescued him by suggesting that feelings could be so strengthened by cultivation – by focused contemplation – connecting the emotional experience of the inner self to objects of worth, and that these associations could be reinforced to the point where they could not be dissolved analytically.

I now learnt by experience that the passive susceptibilities needed to be cultivated as well as the active capacities, and required to be nourished and enriched as well as guided. I did not, for an instant, lose sight of, or undervalue, that part of the truth which I had seen before; I never turned recreant to intellectual culture, or ceased to consider the power and practice of analysis as an essential condition both of individual and of social improvement. But I thought that it had consequences which required to be

\textsuperscript{18} Autobiography, 145-147.
\textsuperscript{20} Autobiography, 151.
corrected, by joining other kinds of cultivation with it. The maintenance of a due balance among the faculties, now seemed to me of primary importance.\textsuperscript{21}

One value of this second, related discovery for Mill was that it provided alternative sources of possible happiness to be found in a world relatively free of privation and struggle, the kind of world to which he had originally dedicated himself and his personal ambitions. Importantly though, this alternative source of happiness would be supported and reinforced by the kind of material and social improvements to which he had been dedicated. “In [the idea of the feelings as cultivated], I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which had no connexion with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind.”\textsuperscript{22}

Mill’s reflection on what the initial episode of revelation meant to him at the time suggests that he came to see both its effect – a severe emotional blankness and a consequent motivational devastation – and the eventual proximate means of the cessation of the effect – his personal revival of feeling and then his discovery of the cultivation of ‘higher’ pleasure through ‘imagination’ – as having had a profound and deeply formative impact on his “opinions and character,” leading him “to adopt a

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Autobiography}, 147.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Autobiography}, 151. If this seems a bit too convenient, it must be noted it is a widely held vision of the good life.
theory of life, very unlike that on which I had before acted.”

As he parsed it out in the *Autobiography*, this new theory of life, which would serve as the foundation for his future work, included in addition to the importance of feelings and their cultivation as a central feature of human psychological satisfaction, the related conception of happiness as obtainable only indirectly.

Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. The only chance is to treat, not happiness, but some end external to it, as the purpose of life. Let your self-consciousness, your scrutiny, your self-interrogation, exhaust themselves on that; and if otherwise fortunately circumstanced, you will inhale happiness with the air you breathe, without dwelling on it or thinking about it, without either forestalling it in imagination, or putting it to flight by fatal question.

In the *Autobiography*, Mill assessed the effect on his entire life and work of these developments to have been profound. “The cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed.”

Moreover, with respect to another “part of the truth” he had seen before, he says this expansion of his fundamental premises about human character did not turn him from but rather gave him a “greatly increased interest in, the common feelings and common destiny of human beings.” Importantly, he found in himself the comprehension that engaging the ‘sympathies’ effectively would not interfere with the functionally important use of the analytic faculties to comprehend the world.

---

23 *Autobiography*, 145.
24 *Autobiography*, 147.
25 Ibid.
The imaginative emotion which an idea when vividly conceived excites in us, is not an illusion but a fact, as real as any of the other qualities of objects; and far from implying anything erroneous and delusive in our mental apprehension of the object, is quite consistent with the most accurate knowledge and most perfect practical recognition of all its physical and intellectual laws and relations. The intensest feeling of the beauty of a cloud lighted by the setting sun, is no hindrance to my knowing that the cloud is a vapour of water, subject to all the laws of vapors in a state of suspension.  

Mill thus saw himself as being able to re-dedicate himself to the happiness of mankind, now understanding that such happiness is a function of the capacity of human beings to new-model themselves as agents with a complete array of appropriately cultivated intellectual, moral, emotional and aesthetic capacities. The object of his renewed ambition was nothing less than the cultivation of human nature itself. The means to this object would be the construction of a ‘science of man’ that could provide the basis of a new ‘Art,’ a technology of human happiness.

My new position in respect to my old political creed now became perfectly definite. If I am asked what system of political philosophy I substituted for that which, as a philosophy, I had abandoned, I answer, no system: only a conviction, that the true system was something much more complex and many sided than I had previously had any idea of, and that its office was to supply, not a set of model institutions, but principles from which the institutions suitable to any given circumstances might be deduced.

The office of political philosophy should be to supply the principles for designing institutions, and this premise would provide justification for developing

---

27 Autobiography, 157. He starts out concerned about analysis interfering with enjoyment, yet he concludes enjoyment does not have to interfere with analysis. Not a contradiction, but telling. Mill came to rationalism first as an important philosophical commitment, and never abandoned it, or even questioned it to any significant degree as at least an ideal to be approached, however imperfectly.

28 Autobiography, 169.
practical programs of reform, an agenda for a philosophic radicalism.\textsuperscript{29} Mill would continue the active pursuit of this extraordinarily ambitious agenda until the end of his life, characterizing his political activism as radically philosophical in that it followed “the common practice of philosophers – that is, [those] who when they are discussing means, begin by considering the end, and when they desire to produce effects, think of causes.”\textsuperscript{30} By his own testimony, the effect to which Mill was committed was the improvement of the human race, and thus a normative vision of what would constitute improvement of necessity would be central to the overall project. Equally central for Mill, however, would be the need for an ontological conception of what humans are, and thus what they can be – in effect, an understanding of the nature of human nature.

The first question in regard to any man of speculation is, what is his theory of human life. In the minds of many philosophers, whatever theory they have of this sort is latent, and it would be a revelation to themselves to have it pointed out to them in their writings as others can see it, unconsciously moulding everything to its own likeness.\textsuperscript{31}

**Agency and Nature: The Art of Cultivation**

Before turning to a detailed argument as to what Mill saw as the key features of human agency and the process by which he saw agency as being acquired, it is necessary to locate the idea of human nature in the context in which Mill understood it, as reflecting an ontological claim that humans are uniquely capable of manipulating

\textsuperscript{29} For a useful discussion of Mill’s understanding of this term, its roots, and how it was reflected in his political activity in particular, see Frederick Rosen, “The Method of Reform: Mill's Encounter With Bentham and Coleridge.” In Urbinati and Zacharias, *Mill's Political Thought*, 124-144.
\textsuperscript{31} *Bentham*, CW X, 94.
the natural order to their advantage from a position within that order, and that the development of this capability is both product of and contributor to an extensive human sociality.

Some of the main features of this understanding are reflected in virtually all of Mill’s major works. These features include most fundamentally the idea of nature as characterized by various forces operating in regular, generally repeated patterns; the belief that all experience is mediated through our materiality; and the proposition that the patterns of nature are discernible, in principle, to systematic investigation, and can be formulated as causal laws by a self-conscious human intelligence that is itself a phenomenon of the natural order, albeit a unique phenomenon. Importantly, Mill’s model centers on the idea of a special human ability to share thought, and therefore knowledge that can be used to affect the course of human fate so as to increase overall human utility. Important to Mill’s conception is the idea of a ‘higher’ human utility, comparable to what might be called “quality of life.” It includes a capacity for the happiness derived from an unselfish other-regard rooted in emotion.

Mill’s premises placing man in nature and asserting that we humans are both of it and yet in a special position vis à vis its constraints are laid out most clearly and specifically in *Nature*. In this essay, Mill’s stated purpose is to argue against the idea that human beings should look to features of the extra-human portion of the

---

32 Mill’s phenomenalism is discussed by both Ryan and Skorupski. See especially Ryan’s *Philosophy*, 91ff, and Skorupski, *Mill*, 221ff.
33 See above, note 9, page 41, regarding the question of when this essay was published.
natural world for moral guidance. It is a polemical argument organized around an ontological claim.\textsuperscript{34} Mill begins the essay with the assertion that, although “‘Nature,’ ‘natural,’ and the group of words derived from them or allied to them in etymology, have at all times filled a great place in the thoughts and taken a strong hold on the feelings of mankind,” the terms have acquired diverse meanings “different from the primary one,” and have become “entangled in so many foreign associations” related to deep and powerful feelings that the result is a constant misapplication of the term, leading to “false philosophy, false morality, and even bad law.”\textsuperscript{35} He expresses regret that Plato did not leave posterity the benefit of a dialogue on the subject, dissecting with his exemplary method the use of this particular important abstraction, because so much confusion over the term has ensued over the centuries.\textsuperscript{36} Mill determines to take up this essential semiotic task.\textsuperscript{37}

He begins by addressing the idea of the nature of a phenomenon as referencing “the ensemble or aggregate of its powers or properties: the modes in which it acts on other things (counting among those things the senses of the observer), and the modes in which other things act upon it; to which, in the case of a sentient being, must be

\textsuperscript{34} In an overview of Mill’s works, Ryan discusses the \textit{Three Essays on Religion} within a chapter whose topic is “Mill’s assessment of the place of religion in social and individual life.” This can be misleading; as Ryan notes “[\textit{Nature}] sets out Mill’s analysis of the nature of the material world in a more complete and straightforward fashion than any other essay....” Alan Ryan, \textit{J.S. Mill}, (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 219.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Nature}, CW X, 373.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} See also \textit{Book I: Of the Necessity of Starting with an Analysis of Language} and \textit{Book II: Names}, in \textit{System}, CW VII.
added its own capacities of feeling, or being conscious.”

The general abstraction, Nature, then, references “the aggregate of the powers and properties of all things. Nature means the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them; including not only all that happens, but all that is capable of happening; the unused capabilities of causes being as much a part of the idea of Nature as those which take effect.” Mankind has been able to examine various phenomena to ascertain patterns of apparently invariant conditions associating particular phenomena with one another, and these conditions “when they can be expressed in general propositions” are the Laws of Nature. In its “simplest acceptation,” Nature is “a collective name for all facts, actual and possible; or (to speak more accurately) a name for the mode, partly known to us and partly unknown, in which all things take place.”

This use of the term “Nature” is to be distinguished from the application whereby it represents something different from “Art,” or the things or phenomena produced intentionally by humans and characterized as “artificial.” “Art is but the employment of the powers of Nature for an end. Phenomena produced by human agency, no less than those which as far as we are concerned are spontaneous, depend on the properties of the elementary forces, or of the elementary substances and their compounds.” Moreover, “even the volition which designs, the intelligence which contrives, and the muscular force which executes” the movements instantiating

---

38 All passages in this paragraph are from Nature, CW X, 374.
39 All passages in this paragraph are from Nature, 375.
artificial phenomena, whether material or conceptual, “are themselves powers of nature.” Mill summarizes his conclusion that it appears there are “at least two principal meanings” in use of the word nature.

In one sense, it means all the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers. In another sense, it means, not everything which happens, but only what takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional action, of man.\footnote{Ibid.}

Mill’s conception of the meaning of the terms voluntary and intentional is a topic that will be considered in detail in a subsequent chapter, as constituting, in addition to the idea of man within nature, an essential element of his understanding of the idea of effective human agency. Here, however, it is worth noting an elaboration of his position as he gave it in a two-part article published in the \textit{Edinburgh Review} in 1859.

Whether \textit{organisation} [emphasis added] alone could produce life and thought, we probably shall never certainly know, unless we could repeat Frankenstein’s experiment; but that our mental operations have material conditions, can be denied by no one who acknowledges what all now admit, that the mind employs the brain as its material organ. And this being granted, there is nothing \textit{more} materialistic in endeavoring, so far as our means of physiological explanation allow, to trace out the detailed connexions between mental manifestations and cerebral or nervous states.\footnote{From J. S. Mill, \textit{Bain’s Psychology} hereafter \textit{Bain}, CW XI, 339-373), 348. Mill begins this analysis and critique of his friend Alexander Bain’s work with a long explanatory discussion of the \textit{a priorist} and \textit{a posteriorist} philosophies of mind. He lays out the two positions in detail, and makes clear his own objections to associationist reductionism, especially with respect to the concept of volition: “The mind, however, is active as well as passive...” See \textit{Bain}, 354.}

Several features of this passage, and those that follow it, offer a clear view of Mill’s epistemology and ontology working in tandem. The facet of nature
characterized by the word organization is foundational for Mill, as is the need for philosophy to take account as best it can of the phenomena of the natural world, in order to achieve human improvement.

[How far any of the nobler phenomena of mind are really constructed from the materials of our animal nature, it is certain that, to whatever extent this is the fact, it ought to be known and recognised. If these nobler parts of our nature are not self-sown and original, but are built or build themselves up, out of no matter what materials, it must be highly important to the work of the education and improvement of human character, to understand as much as possible of the process by which the materials are put together. [Emphasis added.] These composite parts of our constitution (granting them to be such) are not for that reason factitious and unnatural. The products are not less a part of human nature than their component elements. Water is as truly one of the substances in external nature, as hydrogen or oxygen; and to suppose it non-existent would imply as great a change in all we know of the order of things in which we live.]

For the most part, the remainder of Nature is devoted to defending the proposition that the attainment of good in the world is primarily an exercise in the voluntary and intentional overcoming of the spontaneous course of human as well as non-human nature. Mill posits as a generally accepted view the idea that man’s ability to manage the basic physical elements of nature – draining marshes, creating shelter from storms, mining the earth – is an unquestioned good. “[T]he ways of Nature are to be conquered, not obeyed...her powers are often toward man in the position of enemies, from whom he must wrest, by force and ingenuity, what little he can for his own use, and deserves to be applauded when that little is rather more than might be

\[42\] Bain, 349.
expected....” He then turns this proposition into a claim that the natural order not only is something that inherently must be controlled and regulated if man is to benefit, but in addition, that its essential character is one of constant destructiveness, and provides no model for a human conception of the good as applied to desirable human behavior. “Nature impales men, breaks them as if on the wheel, casts them to be devoured by wild beasts, burns them to death, crushes them with stones like the first christian martyr, starves them with hunger, freezes them with cold....” Nature in its natural state exhibits regularity and thus, potentially, predictability in the behavior of individual forces and processes, and in the patterns of particular structures, but these forces and processes and structures interact with each other violently and – as a function of complexity – in a contingent if not inherently unpredictable way. It is the human species alone that has the capacity to exercise self-conscious voluntary intention in bringing nature under control for its own benefit.

Most importantly, Mill argues that humans also must bring their own nature under control. Mill’s conception of what this problem of control entails is not a simple one, but again, central to Mill’s view is the assumption that for most of those

---

43 Nature, CW X, 381.
45 This idea, of the results of individual causes, or elements of nature, being regular and predictable, but their action in combination being significantly unpredictable, was articulated more elaborately in The Logic of the Moral Sciences. See especially discussion in Chapter III of LMS, “That There is, or May Be, a Science of Human Nature,” and Chapter VI, “General Considerations on the Social Science, CW VIII, 844-848 and 876-878.
46 The problematic embedded in the idea of “voluntary” is obviously central here. See discussion of Mill’s concepts of will and character, in Chapter III, below.
natural human qualities that have to be controlled or changed; the only path to accomplishing this is a social one – in some cases, moreover, it is achieved only through social organization.

Powers of the Inner World: I. The Cultivation of the Instincts

In *Nature*, Mill initially takes an extreme position with respect to the idea of natural instincts, suggesting that it is almost invariably necessary to overcome or at least manage them if good is to be achieved. “Allowing everything to be an instinct which anybody has ever asserted to be one, it remains true that nearly every respectable attribute of humanity is the result not of instinct, but of victory over instinct; and that there is hardly anything valuable in the natural man except capacities – a whole world of possibilities, all of them dependent upon eminently artificial discipline for being realised.”

Mill illustrates the point with a discussion of two virtues, one he suggests is thought to be characteristic of man in an ‘uncivilized’ state – courage – and another – cleanliness – that he argues most clearly distinguishes between human beings and “most of the lower animals.”

Courage, he says, far from being natural, represents the overcoming of what is indeed a core natural instinct, that of fear. While different individuals appear to exhibit different degrees of an innate ability to overcome fear and proceed in the face of danger, and this variation can be

---

47 The phrase “powers of the inner world” is from *Nature*. See epigraph to this chapter, and note 1, at page 37, above.
48 *Nature*, 393.
49 *Nature*, 394.
extreme, more so than other distinctions of natural temperament, nonetheless “consistent courage is always the effect of cultivation.”  

Cleanliness, similarly but more obviously to Mill, represents a significant triumph over instinct. “Assuredly neither cleanliness nor the love of cleanliness is natural to man, but only the capacity of acquiring a love of cleanliness.” Children, he suggests, and “the lower classes of most countries, seem to be actually fond of dirt.”

Mill here draws a distinction between these cultivated virtues and others like them as inherently self-regarding, and those he calls the “social virtues.” The self-regarding virtues would include, for example, in addition to courage and cleanliness, the ability to delay gratification in the present in order to obtain a greater benefit at some time in the future. He characterizes the social virtues by contrast as those by which individuals control their selfish instincts for the benefit of others or to benefit the group as a whole, counting veracity, for example, as one of these. In this discussion, Mill draws a distinction between the idea of an instinct of sympathy between an individual and a specific set of others, a feeling that he deems spontaneous, on the one hand, and unselfishness, or pure altruism, on the other. This is a point that plays an important role in other Mill arguments about humans and

---

50 *Nature*, 393.  
51 *Nature*, 394.  
52 Ibid.  
53 Ibid. See also discussion of purity below in Chapter IV, “Evolution of Co-existence,” note 29, page 239.  
54 *Nature*, 395. See also discussion of voluntary self-inhibition in Chapter IV below, page 239 and note 33.
human social and political life. Mill refers to the idea of l’egoisme à deux, à trois, etc., or that feeling of a ‘self’ interest shared by a group with which one perceives an identification, or shared fate. This is not true altruism, for Mill, but rather an extension of selfishness. He concludes this part of his argument by discussing justice as a sentiment “entirely of artificial origin.”

Mill admits to the possibility that virtue is constructed on the foundation of a set of good instincts, cultivated to predominate over bad instincts. “If it be said, that there must be the germs of all these virtues in human nature, otherwise mankind would be incapable of acquiring them, I am ready, with a certain amount of explanation, to admit the fact.” These good seeds, however, contend with the “rankly luxuriant growths” that are the vices, or bad impulses, except that the good are systematically tended by society. It is in the interests of mankind “to cherish the good germs in one another” and to foster their presence in personality and habit, until “the most elevated sentiments of which humanity is capable become a second nature, stronger than the first, and not so much subduing the original nature as merging it into itself.” It is possible that some virtues are more easily self-developed than others (a point that is important to Mill’s view of agency in other respects). He nonetheless points to the

---

55 The argument has several layers. It forms the basis for what became the chapter on “The Connection Between Justice and Utility” in Utilitarianism (originally prepared as a separate essay), CW X, 240-259. It involves a conception of identification as a natural instinct, plus the extension of a sense of self-requirement to those others with whom one identifies. See below, Chapter III, section on “Interests and Identity: The Basis of Harmonization,” pp 189 ff.
56 Nature, 396
57 Ibid.
operation of social considerations in this process as well. “[W]hat self-culture would be possible without aid from the general sentiment of mankind delivered through books, and from the contemplation of exalted characters real or ideal?” The idea of a voluntary, intentional, self-conscious, definitive transformation of the individual self – accomplished through purposive inter-subjective action – is for Mill an essential process underlying the acquisition of advanced agency. “This artificially created or at least artificially perfected nature of the best and noblest human beings, is the only nature which it is ever commendable to follow.\(^{59}\)

In *Nature*, Mill collapses a conception of good into a conception of control. He represents control, or regulation, or management of natural impulses, as constituting the definition of a human good, or at least as a necessary instrument of the good. This move is intrinsic to his more general argument about the nature of the good, *per se*, as the realization of the form of expanded utility he has defined as the ultimate standard against which to judge all human action. To avoid pain and attain pleasure, especially the ‘elevated’ pleasures which only mankind can enjoy, the natural order must be subdued, its spontaneous path perturbed by intentional human regulatory action. He further attempts to frame an absolute causal association between the artificial, or second-nature aspects of human behavior, and collectively developed

\(^{58}\) *Nature*, 396.  
\(^{59}\) *Nature*, 396-397. He goes on, “It is almost superfluous to say that even this cannot be erected into a standard of conduct, since it is itself the fruit of a training and culture the choice of which, if rational and not accidental, must have been determined by a standard already chosen.” For Mill, of course, that standard is human utility, or the improvement of the quality of life of mankind as a species.
understandings of the good and how to achieve it. This, too, constitutes a central feature of Mill’s view of agency. The power of the inner life is a power enhanced significantly by, if it is not entirely dependent on, human sociality and its constraints.

Mill concedes there may be something to the adaptationist argument that what is spontaneously natural must in some degree or other “exist for good ends,” that is, it must have an evolved utilitarian function, or must have once had it, “for the species could not have continued to exist unless most of its inclinations had been directed to things needful or useful for its preservation,” but he insists that “it must be allowed that we have also bad instincts which it should be the aim of education not simply to regulate, but to extirpate, or rather (what can be done even to an instinct) to starve by disuse.”\footnote{\textit{Nature}, 398.} Ultimately, he admits, there is the possibility that “every one of the elementary impulses of human nature has its good side, and may by a sufficient amount of artificial training be made more useful than hurtful.”\footnote{Ibid.}

The consciously intentional, voluntary, and purposeful control or redirection of human nature by humanity from a position within nature is a central feature of Mill’s philosophical framework. A systematic understanding of the regularities of nature, including the regularities of human nature and human society, is therefore necessary to effective control, or management. How control should be organized is for Mill a question subject to investigation, rather than something that should or even can be

\footnotesize{\textit{Nature}, 398.}
\footnotesize{Ibid.}
determined a priori. In addition, it is important to underscore the extent to which Mill’s view of the sources of control is a social view. It is humanity as a whole that is instantiating agency in the world, through its accumulation of shared understandings about nature in general, and through its organization into societies that, informed by these understandings, support the cultivation of behavior, the modification of instincts.

Mill’s view of the effective agent equated the idea of agency, or what might be termed “empowerment,” with a specific idea of human happiness and how it is attained. To build, to cultivate, and to have the capacity to restrain one’s spontaneously natural egoistic impulses constituted, for Mill, a source of power, or causingness, within nature and hence, ipso facto, entailed utilitarian instrumental benefit. The most important cause contributing to this outcome was, in Mill’s view, the capacity of humans to think with each other.

Powers of the Inner World II: The Cultivation of Thought

Humans are in and of nature. In order to increase their wellbeing – their experience of happiness, or utility – they employ some of their natural capacities to transform others. They have to learn to control or manage their innate instincts, decreasing some (the selfish, the impulsive, etc., etc.), while increasing or re-directing

---

62 See note 3, pp 37-38 above regarding Mill’s use of the term ‘causingness.’ Isaiah Berlin took the view that Mill disavowed a specific substantive conception of the good. Addressing this question fairly goes well beyond the scope of the discussion here, where the assertion is simply that Mill’s distinction between human good and the good as experienced by animals more generally is related to what he saw as a peculiarly human capacity to deploy the forces of nature volitionally and self-consciously against the impulsive self as well as more generally. See Berlin, “Ends of Life”, and the explanation Mill offers of the nature of human utility in Chapter II of Utilitarianism, CW X, 209 ff.
others (self-control; sympathy, or identification with the feelings of others; aesthetic appreciation; etc., etc.), just as humans learn to control or manage the forces of non-human Nature. For Mill, the most important capacity of human nature necessary to enhance for these purposes is the intellect, and the enhancement of intellectual capacity is a function of sociality. This premise of Mill’s ontology has epistemological implications: humans learn about nature directly from experience but they learn more indirectly, from each other. Both sources of comprehension, and their functional integration, are necessary to the development of an advanced agency, or rational freedom. As history progresses, human agency evolves.

The outlines of this conception were in evidence as early as the 1830s. During this period, by the testimony of the Autobiography Mill engaged in a series of actual and virtual intellectual discourses that would further develop his recently re-grounded political philosophy. Much as his job at the East India Company was putting him in the way of encountering – indirectly, to be sure – the “outer world” of a distinctly non-British culture, so too did his reading and discussions of this period put him into the middle of the non-British outer world of the 19th century European continent. “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 on me.”63 He describes the ideas he acquired at the time as including the notion that

63 Autobiography, CW I, 169.
the human mind has a certain order of possible progress, in which some things must precede others, an order which governments and public instructors can modify to some, but not to an unlimited extent: That all questions of political institutions are relative, not absolute, and that different stages of human progress not only will have, but ought to have, different institutions. 64

Mill went on to assert some distance between himself and the “exaggerated and violent manner” in which such views were held by these thinkers with whom he was at the time “most accustomed to compare notes.” 65 But, he admitted to being “greatly struck with the connected view which they for the first time presented to me, of the natural order of human progress; and especially with their division of all history into organic periods and critical periods” 66 related to the grounding of social and political arrangements in commonly-held bodies of understanding, or creeds. The key phenomenon was one in which “mankind” accepted “with firm conviction some positive creed, claiming jurisdiction over all their actions and containing more or less of truth and adaptation to the needs of humanity.” 67 Mill’s view of human history as alternating between periods of equilibrium and disequilibrium in Weltanschauung would shortly give way to a similar but importantly different Comte-influenced view of human evolution as associated with a series of three “stages” in conceptions of the universe, paralleled by a “natural succession of three stages in every department of human knowledge – first the theological, next the metaphysical, and lastly, the

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Autobiography, 171.
67 Ibid.
positive" or scientific. The point here is not to attempt a genealogical excavation of the roots of Mill’s thinking about human history, but rather to flag those elements he identified as critical in retrospect: thought-sharing and changes in thinking; thought-sharing and changes in behavior, values, and institutions; the idea of sequence in ways of thinking.

In 1831, Mill authored a series of five short essays aggregated under the title, *The Spirit of the Age*. The central theme has to do with the interaction between superior and merely average minds, on the one hand, and the social and political effects of this interaction when a new paradigm is becoming dominant. In *Spirit*, compared with *Civilization* in which the same concept of superior minds also features importantly, it is a little easier to see that Mill means by “superior” minds, minds that have had the benefit of significant cultivation, or exposure to the most well-regarded thought of the time, especially where it represents an advance beyond the modal thinking of times past.

The grand achievement of the present age is the diffusion of superficial knowledge; and that surely is no trifle, to have been accomplished by a single generation. The persons who are in possession of knowledge adequate to the formation of sound opinions by their own lights, form also a constantly increasing number, but hitherto at all times a small one. It would be carrying the notion of the march of intellect too far, to suppose that an average man of the present day is superior to the greatest men of the beginning of the eighteenth century; yet they held many opinions which we are fast renouncing.

68 Ibid. See also much longer discussion and critique in Mill’s two articles on Comte, published as *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (hereafter *Comte*), CW X, 261-368.
69 CW XXII: *Newspaper Writings*. December 1822 – July 1831, Nos. 73, 77, 82 [Part 1], 92 [Part 2], 97, 103 [Part1] and 107 [Part 2].
The intellect of the age, therefore, is not the cause which we are in search of. Not increase of wisdom, but a cause of the reality of which we are better assured, may serve to account for the decay of prejudices; and this is increase of discussion.... The wisest men in every age generally surpass in wisdom the wisest of any preceding age, because the wisest men possess and profit by the constantly increasing accumulation of the ideas of all ages.\textsuperscript{70}

Many or perhaps most of “the wisest men” of any age are wise not because of individual intellectual superiority, but because they have had the advantage of education, of engagement with some portion of the common pool of human comprehension supplied by rivers of productive (and counter-productive) thought flowing down through the ages. For the average person, on the other hand, preoccupied with the mental demands of average life, the logic and evidence that underlie accepted opinion on most subjects of necessity will be out of reach.

Some few remarkable individuals will attain great eminence under every conceivable disadvantage; but for men in general, the principal field for the exercise and display of their intellectual faculties is, and ever will be, no other than their own particular calling or occupation....what sets no limit to the powers of the mass of mankind, nevertheless limits greatly the possible acquirements. Those persons whom the circumstances of society, and their own position in it, permit to dedicate themselves to the investigation and study of physical, moral, and social truths, as their peculiar calling, can alone be expected to make the evidences of such truths a subject of profound meditation, and to make themselves thorough masters of the philosophical grounds of those opinions of which it is desirable that all should be firmly persuaded, but which they alone can entirely and philosophically know.\textsuperscript{71}

Mill goes on to offer a theory about why there are times in history when “average men” are found nonetheless in a state of over-reliance on their own opinions even in

\textsuperscript{70} Spirit I, No. 73, 232. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{71} Spirit II, No. 77, 241-242. Emphasis in original.
areas where they would more naturally concede to opinion leaders, or experts, whether material, moral or political. It is because the “instructed” are at odds with each other; there is no dominant paradigm on which to base individual opinions. He avers that this occurs in times of ideational transition, which Mill in this essay deemed the appropriate way to view the period of intellectually grounded political change underway in Europe and America in his time. Mill speculates here about what might cause the mass of citizens to abandon a settled appropriate deference to expertise for their own ill-formed judgments or those of their equally uninformed fellow citizens. His answer, in effect, was that the average person finds dissent among the instructed as to the validity of a dominant epistemological paradigm. “In an age of transition, the divisions among the instructed nullify their authority, and the uninstructed lose their faith in them.” Not just sources of authority but the very nature of what can and therefore what should constitute the basis of authority is under dispute.

Typical of Mill, this idea is surrounded by a penumbra of generalized assertions about the way things are in history and the world, assertions designed to construct an apparently rational foundation, a ‘chain of causality,’” for what may seem like non-rational regularities in human societies and human history: Under the right, or perhaps typical circumstances, moral authority is rationally ascribed to the powerful,

---

72 His review of Tocqueville’s first volume of Democracy in America, (CW XVIII: Essays on Politics and Society, 47-90), published about five years after Spirit, also focuses on this issue, as does the much later Considerations on Representative Government, CW XIX: Essays on Politics and Society, 371-577. 73 Spirit II, 238.
on the grounds that they who hold power – power of whatever sort, including the power associated with wealth in the form of land or other assets – are the fittest to hold it. These are times in which there might be social dissatisfaction, but not revolution. “In these circumstances the people, although they may at times be unhappy and consequently discontented, habitually acquiesce in the laws and institutions which they lie under, and seek for relief through those institutions and not in defiance of them.”

Mill offers a sort of quasi-Marxian analysis of situations in which the “fittest” do not constitute the ruling authority, calling forth a “transition.”

Society may be said to be in its transitional state, when it contains other persons fitter for worldly power and moral influence than those who have hitherto enjoyed them: when worldly power, and the greatest existing capacity for worldly affairs, are no longer united but severed....When this is the posture of affairs, society has either entered or is on the point of entering into a state in which there are no established doctrines....; whosoever is dissatisfied with any thing or for any reason, flies at once to an alteration in the conditions of worldly power, as a means for obtaining something which would remove what he deems the cause of his dissatisfaction. And this continues until a moral and social revolution (or it may be, a series of such) has replaced worldly power and moral influence in the hands of the most competent....

Mill’s explanation for the cause of power shifts focuses on abstract ideas and their diffusion across different strata of society. Abstract knowledge, or understanding, for Mill is power, the power that counts. Society will only be organized effectively and appropriately when the proponents and practitioners of the most advanced

---

74 Spirit III, [Part 1], 252. Emphasis in original.
75 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
epistemological paradigm available to mankind in general are in positions of authority in society. To be effective as political power, the power of knowledge must be organized. In the subsequent segment of this essay, Mill returns to the association between knowledge and power, observing that there is a tendency to impute “wisdom and virtue” to those in authority – i.e., that the mere holding of power tends to perpetuate a certain respect for the holders, deserved or not. From this consideration of the social correlates of occasional maldistributions of political power related to epistemic change, Mill segues to the demographic:

There are things which books cannot teach. A young man cannot, unless his history has been a most extraordinary one, possess either that knowledge of life, which is necessary in the most difficult and important practical business, or that knowledge of the more recondite parts of human nature, which is equally necessary for the foundation of sound ethical and even political principles.  

Thus, Mill suggests, a transitional age is one in which the habits of mind of the old prevent them from seeing newly established truths, while the inexperience of the young prevent them from understanding what is needed to institutionalize the new knowledge appropriately. “The indispensable requisites for wise thinking and wise conduct in great affairs, are severed from each other.”

Mill concludes this essay on political theory as social epistemology by turning the discussion to the question of the advances of civilization. It is these advances, or

---

76 This theme, too, as others from these essays, will recur in Considerations: “One person with a belief is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only interests.” CW XIX, 381.
77 Spirit IV, 294.
78 Spirit IV, 295
progress, that transitional eras endanger. Falling back into barbarism, he says, “is the inevitable end when, unhappily, changes to which the spirit of the age is favourable can be successfully resisted”\(^{79}\) as was the case in parts of Europe during the Reformation. “The more advanced communities of Europe succeeded, after a terrific struggle, in effecting their total or partial emancipation: in some, the Reformation achieved a victory – in others, a toleration; while, by a fate unhappily too common, the flame which had been kindled where the pile awaited the spark, spread into countries where the materials were not yet sufficiently prepared; and instead of burning down the hateful edifice, it consumed all that existed capable of nourishing itself, and was extinguished.”\(^{80}\) In the essay entitled *Civilization*, written five years later, Mill recurs to the central themes of *Spirit*, but with significant differences in terms of emphasis.\(^{81}\) Importantly, Mill reprises his conception of human knowledge as social, dialogic, and linked to political forms. Here, however, Mill moves from a punctuated equilibrium metaphor, to a stadial claim, with which he will more or less remain throughout the rest of his writings. Progress – the march of civilization – is now a unidirectional phenomenon, the climbing of an historic ladder toward greater human utility.

Most centrally, in this essay civilization is defined as the capacity for complex social organization, and the increase in material prosperity and population it enables. Savage communities are ones in which every person “shifts for himself” and

---

\(^{79}\) *Spirit V*, 307.
\(^{80}\) *Spirit V*, 306-307.
\(^{81}\) *Civilization* was first published in 1836. See Editor’s Note, CW XVIII, 118.
“Wherever, therefore, we find human beings acting together for common purposes in large bodies, and enjoying the pleasures of social intercourse, we term them civilized.”\textsuperscript{82} The necessary predicate for civilized life is the acquisition by individuals of habits of discipline and control – the containment of natural instincts and impulses turned into an intrinsic aspect of human nature.

Habits of discipline, once acquired, qualify human beings to accomplish all other things for which discipline is needed. No longer either spurning control, or incapable of seeing its advantages; whenever any object presents itself which can be attained by co-operation, and which they see or believe to be beneficial, they are ripe for attaining it.\textsuperscript{83}

Mill cites “law,” the “administration of justice,” and the “systematic employment of the collective strength of society, to protect individuals against injury from one another” as among the various “ingredients of civilization” that “begin together [and] always co-exist [with] and accompany” a “progressive increase of wealth and population.”\textsuperscript{84} But Mill intends to emphasize a particular feature of the ‘progressive’ or ‘civilized’ society beyond justice as central to its attainments, and that is the idea of combination, or cooperation, itself.

There is not a more accurate test of the progress of civilization than the progress of the power of co-operation. Consider the savage: he has bodily strength, he has courage, enterprise, and is often not without intelligence; what makes all savage communities poor and feeble? The same cause which prevented the lions and tigers from long ago extirpating the race of men – incapacity of co-operation. It is only civilized beings who can combine.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{82} Civilization, CW XVIII, 120.
\textsuperscript{83} Civilization, 124.
\textsuperscript{84} Civilization, 120.
\textsuperscript{85} Civilization, 122.
The essence of combination, Mill says, is compromise, “the sacrifice of some portion of individual will, for a common purpose.” The savage is incapable of sacrificing his individual will because “His social cannot even temporarily prevail over his selfish feelings, nor his impulses bend to his calculations.” Cooperation, or combination, is achieved by disciplining the individual will against narrow and immediate self-interest, with the result that benefits can be obtained that are not available without organization. This discipline, Mill suggests, is learned as a general principle from its practice in the particular. “Co-operation, like other difficult things, can be learnt only by practice: and to be capable of it in great things, a people must be gradually trained to it in small.” This occurs historically through a gradually increasing division of labor in production, or through military operations, or other form of practical effort, wherein humans “see how much and with what ease” combination accomplishes results that cannot be accomplished, or not so easily, without it, and “they learn a practical lesson of submitting themselves to guidance, and subduing themselves to act as interdependent parts of a complex whole.” Habits of discipline, “once acquired, qualify human beings to accomplish all other things for which discipline is needed,” because “it holds universally that the one only mode of learning to do anything, is actually doing something of the same kind under easier

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Civilization, 123.
89 Civilization, 124.
circumstances.”\textsuperscript{90} The concept of interdependence is key here. Once agency, or ‘rational freedom,’ has been attained as a function of cooperative social life, the strict autonomy or ‘savage independence’ that in Mill’s view characterizes the earlier stages in the development of human societies, no longer constitutes a relevant condition. The rationally free agent is something other than – and, in Mill’s view, something better than – a strictly autonomous individual. A person is knowledgeable and competent because he/she is socially situated. Most importantly, the key to the attainment of interdependence is the sharing of knowledge, knowledge of practical things, but also knowledge about the importance of self-discipline and about the social arrangements that inculcate it – cultivate it – in the service of facilitating the cooperative interdependence called ‘civilization.’ “The [chief] characters, then, of a state of high civilization [are] the diffusion of property and intelligence, and the power of co-operation.”\textsuperscript{91}

In this essay, Mill articulates a rough general version of some of the key ideas that will be offered in both Considerations on Representative Government and On Liberty to support the argument that specific forms of government must be suited to the level of development of certain characteristics or capacities in a given population, or ‘a people,’ and that forms of government differentially support the further development of desirable characteristics and capacities. He draws a distinction at the

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
beginning between use of the term civilization to cover a broad sense of “improved”
human nature, and its use to refer to material wealth and power. He suggests that in
the latter meaning, modern Europe – especially, Great Britain – is advanced “in a
more eminent degree,” and is a state of more rapid progression, “than at any other
place or time.”92 But, this advance in the conditions of material power has come at a
price, in that it has retarded or significantly reduced the prevalence of certain desirable
qualities of individual character that had been present at other times in other places. It
also has altered the distribution of power, from “individuals” to “masses.”93 There are
two “elements of importance and influence among mankind: the one is, property; the
other, powers and acquirements of mind.”94 Both of these, Mill says

in an early stage of civilization, are confined to a few persons. In the
beginnings of society, the power of the masses does not exist; because property
and intelligence have no existence beyond a very small portion of the
community, and even if they had, those who possessed the smaller portions
would be, from the incapacity of co-operation, unable to cope with those who
possessed the larger.95

Mill laments the passing of the influence of individuals as a result of the
progress of civilization in material terms and in the advance of social harmony, as he
sees these trends. His concern here is with an apparent decline in “vigor and energy”
among the “superior” classes as an overall result of material and social progress. The
greater portion of the essay is devoted to recommendations for an association of the

92 Civilization, 120-121.
93 Civilization, 121.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
more highly instructed so as to increase their influence in society – more ‘combination’ among them – and for revision of Britain’s university curricula so as to encourage more of a sense of “heroism” and also critical thinking. Mill is preoccupied with an apparent trade-off, a negative side effect of cultivation. As the “great vices” have been weakened or even “extirpated” by morality and law, serving the requirements of a civilizing interdependence, a source of “great virtues” has dried up.\(^96\) The wellspring of both vices and virtues is the pre-civilized inheritance of natural instincts that lies within each distinct individual as he/she is born into society. The qualities that are observed as part of a human’s second nature at specific times and places, on the other hand, are the result of human social interaction and its cultivating influence.

The driving aspect of human nature Mill is most concerned with in this essay is the faculty of cognition – information processing, interpretation, evaluation, and choice – especially as it embodied in the process of opinion formation. As human societies have grown and access to property has become more widespread, “The individual becomes so lost in the crowd, that though he depends more and more upon opinion, he is apt to depend less and less upon well-grounded opinion.”\(^97\) This phenomenon serves the charlatan well, as solid evidence of proper dealing and good

\(^{96}\) *Civilization*, 132.

\(^{97}\) Ibid.
character is increasingly hard to come by in mass society. But, Mill’s concern is broader.

It is not solely on the private virtues, that this growing insignificance of the individual in the mass, is productive of mischief. It corrupts the very fountain of the improvement of public opinion itself; it corrupts public teaching; it weakens the influence of the more cultivated few over the many.\(^98\)

Opinions – that is, the opinions necessary to functioning in a civilized society – are socially grounded. They must be individually adopted if not individually constituted on the basis of the individual’s judgment of available arguments, but in advanced human societies, the source of the necessary empirical grounding for accurate opinion lies largely beyond any one individual. Mill thus from an early age exhibited a focus on thought, opinion, and belief as central to the development of an advanced human agency. The following section begins to explore the extent to which he also was deeply committed to the view that thought, opinion and belief ultimately emerge within the consciousness of individuals as a function of their being shared among individuals. And, importantly for Mill, where thought and emotion come together, there is motivation. It is the task of society – really, for Mill, the function, or responsibility, of the polity – to guide the process of motivational development for individuals toward the exercise of rational freedom, which is human agency cultivated to foster intelligent, voluntary cooperation. Such guidance can be provided effectively only when the instructed are essentially of one mind about the fundamental

\(^{98}\) Civilization, 133-134.
nature of nature and humanity’s relationship to it. This concept informs the arguments in both *Spirit* and *Civilization* and is also central to the logic of the *Logic of the Moral Sciences*. It comes to the surface explicitly first in the three essays he wrote on the contributions of Jeremy Bentham to philosophy and morals.

**Bentham and Beyond: The Social Foundation of Motives**

Two years after the publication of *Civilization*, a major Mill essay on the work of Jeremy Bentham appeared, followed two years later by a companion essay on the social theories of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.\(^9\) Mill’s critical appraisals of the two were conceived together and, while they may be read separately, to benefit from their impact as they were intended by Mill they should be seen as complementary and interdependent parts of a philosophic whole.\(^10\) Mill was using these evaluative essays as a vehicle through which to surface the key elements of his own emerging philosophical outlook, and the methodological commitments he derived from it. Together these elements provide the foundations of his view of humans, human society, morality, social science, and – most centrally – the role of the phenomenon of the polity in the evolution of an advanced form of human agency. The 1838 Bentham essay was Mill’s third effort at articulating his own philosophical perspective by comparing and contrasting it with Bentham’s. The first occasion was at the time of

---

99 *Bentham* CW X, 75-115 and *Coleridge*, CW X, 117-163.
100 As numerous Mill scholars have pointed out; the difference lies in the importance attributed here to Mill’s unique turns on a naturalist ontology and epistemology.
Bentham’s death in 1832, when a short obituary appeared in the *Examiner*.\(^{101}\) All of the central themes of Mill’s later development of his views on Bentham are in evidence. Two points are relevant here.

He has often, we think, been surpassed in powers of metaphysical analysis, as well as in comprehensiveness and many-sidedness of mind. He frequently contemplates a subject only from one or a few of its aspects; though he very often sees further into it...than was seen before even by those who had gone all round it....To this occasional one-sidedness, he failed to apply the natural cure: for, from the time when he embarked in original speculation, he occupied himself very little in studying the ideas of others.\(^{102}\)

Bentham lacked perspective and an awareness of the ideas of others; in addition, however, his personality was “childlike.”

Along with his passion for abstruser studies, and the lively interest which he felt in public events, he retained to the last a childlike freshness and excitability, which enabled him to derive pleasure from the minutest trifles, and gave to his old age the playfulness, lightheartedness, and keen relish of life, so seldom found except in early youth.... he was remarkable for gaiety and easy pleasantry....\(^{103}\)

In the third and final essay, this “childlike” quality is described in a more negative way and is identified as critically responsible for one of two shortcomings profoundly limiting Bentham’s value as a philosopher and moralist.

Mill asserts at the beginning of *Bentham* that he and Coleridge represent the opposite ends of a spectrum of revolutionary change in “modes of thought and investigation” prevalent within Britain, a revolution in the pursuit of “speculative


\(^{102}\) *Obituary*, CW XXIII, 471-472.

\(^{103}\) *Obituary*, 472-473.
philosophy” that Mill perceived as having a profound formative impact on the development of English politics. His introduction to Bentham provides the occasion for a statement of the central role that philosophy plays in human affairs. The two thinkers, he says, “so dissimilar in almost all else....were destined to renew a lesson given to mankind by every age, and always disregarded – to show that speculative philosophy, which to the superficial appears a thing so remote from the business of life and the outward interests of men, is in reality the thing on earth which most influences them, and in the long run overbears every other influence save those which it must itself obey.” Mill understood this influence to run through a chain of causation, or intermediate channels, ultimately affecting the design of political institutions. *En route*, the logic, articulation and claims of philosophy serve through inter-subjective argument and public discourse (not Mill’s words here, clearly) to gain purchase within separate, competing political camps. With respect expressly to these two particular thinkers bringing new, important, philosophically radical ideas into the political arena, the “influence of the former [Bentham] has made itself felt chiefly on minds of the Progressive class, of the latter [Coleridge], on those of the Conservative,” and “the two systems of concentric circles which the shock given by them is spreading over the ocean of mind have only just begun to meet and intersect” These upwellings of new

104 Note that this is about modes of thought, or epistemological strategies, rather than specific substantive ideas.
105 *Bentham*, CW X, 77
106 *Bentham*, 78.
thought originally flowed into the stream of British consciousness through primary intermediaries, as these two influential “teachers of teachers” persuaded various leading members of the fraternity of the instructed as to the truth value of their paradigmatic constructions. From there, the “influences have but begun to diffuse themselves through these intermediate channels over society at large,” to the point where “there is already scarcely a publication of any consequence addressed to the educated classes, which, if these persons had not existed, would not have been different from what it is.”

From the educated classes on to the uneducated, this process would continue, since “it is not in the nature of uninstructed minds to resist the united authority of the instructed.” But note, again, it is the consensus of the instructed, their united authority, that in the end prevails.

This all-important functional consensus does not, by itself, a reformation make. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for change. Institutional change does not happen as a result of epistemic revolutions, per se, but rather it occurs through political action as driven by social forces. “[T]he changes which have been made, and the greater changes which will be made, in our institutions, are not the work of philosophers, but of the interests and instincts of large portions of society recently grown into strength.”

---

107 Bentham, 77.
108 Bentham, 79.
109 Bentham, 78.
theoretically coherent conceptions “gave voice to those interests and instincts.”\textsuperscript{110} That is, he—or more precisely, his influence on the “instructed” in the camp representing one bundle of particular interests and instincts—ultimately provided the conceptual organizing principles for political action around which different social forces could rally.

The assessment is one Mill applies to both Bentham and Coleridge. For all that Mill basically shares Bentham’s utilitarian premises, his commendation turns out to be relatively narrow and it is accompanied by a critique that is equally central to Mill’s own philosophy. Accolades in \textit{Bentham} revolve around appreciation for methodology and its application to questions of human institutional development. Mill credited Bentham especially with the invention not of skepticism (or critical thinking), nor certainly of the doctrine of utility as the ground of morality, but rather with developing the idea of the systematic application of both \textit{as a science} to human nature and human social forms. The revival of skepticism and the development of utilitarian thinking – with both of which Mill quite agreed – he ascribed primarily to Hume. If “Bentham had merely continued the work of Hume, he would scarcely have been heard of in philosophy.”\textsuperscript{111} Rather, it was Bentham’s virtue that he “was called on by the whole bent of his disposition” to “carry the warfare against absurdity into

\textsuperscript{110}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111}Bentham, 80.
[the arena of] things practical,” and to do so both fulsomely and constructively.\textsuperscript{112} The absurdity in view here is the edifice of British common law erected over the centuries by custom and improvisation, according to the inclinations and, more problematically, the particular interests of parties holding power in society. It was an absurdity with reference to the aggregate welfare standard of utilitarianism and its rational application.

Bentham’s singular contribution, according to Mill, was to point out the utilitarian illogic of maintaining the unassailability of this edifice in a form apparently neither intelligently nor coherently appropriate for its purposes. English law was predominately reflective of the intentions of some to abuse the interests of all together, and hence a form rationally, logically, in want of reconstruction. Bentham’s additional and even more important contribution was to promote a methodologically rigorous analysis of the utility, or function, of the law within a framework intended to reduce its complexity to manageable proportions. Most significantly, for Mill, Bentham proposed the construction of a more functional structure. “[H]e began \textit{de novo}, laid his own foundations deeply and firmly, built up his own structure, and bade mankind compare the two; it was when he had solved the problem himself, or thought he had done so, that he declared all other solutions to be erroneous.”\textsuperscript{113} Mill credited Bentham with bringing methodology not simply to the study of the law but also to

\textsuperscript{112} Bentham, 81.
\textsuperscript{113} Bentham, 82.
philosophy itself, an accomplishment of the sort fundamental to Mill’s own sense of
what constitutes an appropriately noble ambition for an individual.

He was not a great philosopher, but he was a great reformer in philosophy. He
brought into philosophy something which it greatly needed, and for want of
which it was at a stand. It was not his doctrines which did this, it was his mode
of arriving at them. He introduced into morals and politics those habits of
thought and modes of investigation, which are essential to the idea of science;
and the absence of which made those departments of inquiry, as physics had
been before Bacon, a field of interminable discussion, leading to no result.”

Noteworthy here is Mill’s elision of philosophy, morals, and politics. In his view,
they are distinct but entirely related functions.

This commendation of Bentham for demonstrating the value of scientific
method as applied to the design of human institutions – of systematic thinking about
causes, meanings, and reasons, related to tests or standards of utility in a world in
which the proof is not so much in the pudding as in the experience of eating the
pudding, enjoying it, and staying alive – such a commendation is central to Mill’s own
philosophical stance. The content of his critique of Bentham, however, is equally
central. There are truths to be discovered, about nature, humanity, and the organizing
forces at work in relation to both, empirical truths – observations of consistencies, and
the consistent association of observed phenomena – with which “existing doctrines
and institutions” might well be “at variance.” Thus, by implication, the forms of
collective action should be re-formed. In addition and perhaps more profoundly, what

114 Bentham, 83.
115 Bentham, 78.
emerges more clearly in the critique is the argument that the springs of individual action, individual personal motivations, also should and would be subject to the stronger currents of philosophical argumentation flowing within the “ocean” of the collective human mind.

Picking up on the second personal observation of the Bentham obituary of 1832, Mill here broadens and reinforces its significance. Bentham’s childlike quality is now interpreted as a deep inability to understand and deal with the full range of human emotions; moreover, it is accompanied by an his insensibility to the important role in human behavior played by the state of the human mind and what affects that state as it relates to the derivation of motivation. Bentham’s ontology, his “idea of the world” is deficient first 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.” The elements of state of mind that are Mill’s concern as overlooked by Bentham include the idea of an internal “standard of excellence” or principle of action against which to measure one’s own behavior; conscience, as it relates to moral duties to others; “devotional feeling”; aesthetic valuations, such as a “love of order, of congruity, of consistency in all things”; the love of loving, the need of a sympathising support, or of objects of admiration and reverence”; and, the very idea of agency itself, as “the love of power,

[116] Bentham, 98.
not in the limited form of power over other human beings, but abstract power, the
power of making our volitions effectual,” and so on.\textsuperscript{117}

According to Mill, this personal shortcoming of Bentham’s helped to account
for a central limitation in his ontology of the human person, and thus constrained the
value of his contribution to moral and political philosophy. He had a limited
experience of the range of normal human emotions due to the peculiar circumstances
of his own life:

He had neither internal experience nor external; the quiet, even tenor of his
life, and his healthiness of mind, conspired to exclude him from both. He never
knew prosperity and adversity, passion nor satiety: he never had even the
experiences which sickness gives; he lived from childhood to the age of
eighty-five in boyish health. He knew no dejection, no heaviness of heart. He
never felt life a sore and a weary burthen. He was a boy to the last. Self-
consciousness... never was awakened in him.... He had never been made alive
to the unseen influences which were acting on himself, nor consequently on his
fellow-creatures.\textsuperscript{118}

As Mill had once feared of his own mind, Bentham’s was incomplete “as a
representative of universal human nature” because it lacked the feeling and empathetic
aspects – essential social qualities – so important to that nature. “In many of the most
natural and strongest feelings of human nature he had no sympathy; from many of its
graver experiences he was altogether cut off; and the faculty by which one mind
understands a mind different from itself, and throws itself into the feelings of that

\textsuperscript{117} Bentham, 95-96. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{118} Bentham, 92.
other mind, was denied him by his deficiency of Imagination.\textsuperscript{119} Equally problematic, yet very much unlike Mill at any age, “Bentham failed in deriving light from other minds.”\textsuperscript{120}

Again recurring to an obituary observation but expanding on its significance, Mill now found Bentham the person to have had a vital epistemic flaw. Bentham could not learn from others. As a result, he ignored or actively dismissed the importance of philosophical schools other than his own, whether ancient or contemporary, condemning all their postulates as ‘vague generalities.’ “He did not heed,” Mill says, or rather the nature of his mind prevented it from occurring to him, that these generalities contained the whole unanalysed experience of the human race.”\textsuperscript{121}

Philosophy for Mill is of necessity a social, even a species exercise.

Unless it can be asserted that mankind did not know anything until logicians taught it to them – that until the last hand has been put to a moral truth by giving it a metaphysically precise expression, all the previous rough-hewing which it has undergone by the common intellect at the suggestion of common wants and common experience is to go for nothing; it must be allowed, that even the originality which can, and the courage which dares, think for itself, is not a more necessary part of the philosophical character than a thoughtful regard for previous thinkers, and for the collective mind of the human race.\textsuperscript{122}

What the individual uniquely brings to the necessarily collective enterprise of attempting to comprehend the nature of human beings and of human society as well as the nature of nature itself, is the particular point of view available to him or her alone

\textsuperscript{119} Bentham, 91.
\textsuperscript{120} Bentham, 90.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
as a function of individuation. “Every circumstance which gives a character to the life of a human being, carries with it its peculiar biases; its peculiar facilities for perceiving some things, and for missing or forgetting others.”\textsuperscript{123} The peculiarity of the individual perspective is at once its major strength and yet also its central weakness. “But, from points of view different from his, different things are perceptible; and none are more likely to have seen what he does not see, than those who do not see what he sees.”\textsuperscript{124} The full human benefit of knowledge is obtained through the folding together and reconciling of apparently contradictory streams of thought, a process through which the interpretation of complex phenomena becomes possible. At the same time, the fine details or particular aspects of specific complex phenomena are accessed effectively only through those single individual minds.

The general opinion of mankind is the average of the conclusions of all minds, stripped indeed of their choicest and most recondite thoughts, but freed from their twists and partialities: a net result, in which everybody’s particular point of view is represented, nobody’s predominant. The collective mind does not penetrate below the surface, but it sees all the surface; which profound thinkers, even by reason of their profundity, often fail to do: their intenser view of a thing in some of its aspects diverting their attention from others.\textsuperscript{125}

The development of collective comprehension is dependent on the ability lacking in Bentham to imagine, or “the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another.”\textsuperscript{126} This imagination is not merely the capacity to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{123} Bentham, 91.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Bentham, 92. See also theory of mind discussion in Chapter IV, below, page 236.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
combine the nowhere yet combined, to conceive of a nectarine or a centaur. Much more, it is to have a theory of mind that encompasses the joint operation of feeling and calculation in others and the conception that others equally hold such theories about oneself. Acting in nature for such as humans, human agency, is grounded in thought, thought ever cognizant of and inter-active with the thoughts in other minds. A human self is only a self with regard to other selves; self-conscious awareness of the self as a Self is, for Mill, a joint cultivar of self and society.

As a consequence of his incapacities, according to Mill, Bentham failed to understand even abstractly the impact of an array of external influences on human motivations. “Bentham’s contempt, then, of all other schools of thinkers; his determination to create a philosophy wholly out of the materials furnished by his own mind, and by minds like his own; was his first disqualification as a philosopher.”

The second serious disqualification arose from the first, inevitably, given the limitations of his experience as described by Mill. Bentham was fated to miss important truths about the sources of individual motivation – the “springs of action.” He failed to see, much less comprehend, the importance of the process whereby motivations are constituted.

He saw accordingly in man little but what the vulgarest eye can see; recognised no diversities of character but such as he who runs may read. Knowing so little of human feelings, he knew still less of the influences by which those feelings are formed: all the more subtle workings both of the mind upon itself, and of external things upon the mind, escaped him; and no one, probably, who, in a

---

127 Bentham, 91.
highly instructed age, ever attempted to give a rule to all human conduct, set out with a more limited conception either of the agencies by which human conduct is, or of those by which it should be, influenced.\textsuperscript{128}

**Character: The Missing Link**

We arrive here at Mill’s consequential concept of “character.” This term is central to a number of Mill’s subsequent works, including the *Logic of the Moral Sciences, Utilitarianism,* and *Considerations on Representative Government.* A full discussion of Mill’s concept of character and its relationship to volition is laid out in Chapter III, “The Nature of Co-existence,” below. It is a psychosocial construct that provides a primary link in Mill’s understanding of the relationship between the individual and society, agency and culture and, importantly, culture and politics. Character is that phenomenon of personality, or self, manifest in the typifying behavior emerging from the integration of varying sources of motivation. Character is the vessel that contains the observed regularities of a complex human self, a self that for Mill is neither a mere seeker after material satisfactions, nor simply a dutiful participant in obligations to a community of interest. The human self is, or can be, *self-developed* – not *autonomously* developed – through emotional and cognitive social interaction, to enjoy a broad range of satisfactions. These satisfactions are to be attained by means of a suite of habitual behaviors appropriately tailored to time, place and circumstance.

\textsuperscript{128} Bentham, 93. Emphasis in original.
Mill was interested not primarily in the morality of acts but rather in the morality of persons as it affects the general tenor of how an individual is inclined to act in the world, and how that inclination in turn relates to the individual’s relationship to his/her experience of self.

In so far as Bentham’s adoption of the principle of utility induced him to fix his attention upon the consequences of actions as the consideration determining their morality, so far he was indisputably on the right path: though to go far in it without wandering, there was needed a greater knowledge of the formation of character, and of the consequences of actions upon the agent’s own frame of mind, than Bentham possessed. His want of power to estimate this class of consequences...greatly limits the value of his speculations on questions of practical ethics.\(^{129}\)

Bentham focused too much on the immediate consequences of actions, hence failed as a moral thinker. “[H]ow can we judge in what manner many an action will affect even the worldly interests of ourselves or others, unless we take in, as part of the question, its influence on the regulation of our, or their, affections and desires.”\(^{130}\) Bentham’s “theory of the world,” fails not only as a moral theory, but more significantly it fails as social and political theory.

He has, I think been, to a certain extent, misled in the theory of politics.... he supposes mankind to be swayed by only a part of the inducements which really actuate them; but of that part he imagines them to be much cooler and more thoughtful calculators than they really are [and by] supposing that the submission of the mass of mankind to an established government is mainly owing to a reasoning perception of the necessity of legal protection, and of the common interest of all in a prompt and zealous obedience to the law.\(^{131}\)

\(^{129}\) *Bentham*, 112.

\(^{130}\) *Bentham*, 98.

\(^{131}\) *Remarks*, CW X, 17. This is a more succinct statement of the critique than is found in *Bentham*. The passage goes on to set up the context of the Coleridge essay regarding the effect of institutions.
The “subtle workings of the mind upon itself, and of external things upon the mind” are the proximate instruments of cultivation. Character is not equivalent to agency; character is the phenomenon through the expression of which agency is or is not able to be realized at specific times and in specific places. If agency is thought of as the result of a given character acting in a particular place, time and situation, character is a major causal factor in the actual manifestation of agency. Comprehending how character can and should be cultivated in a given society is not a matter of assessing costs and benefits so much as understanding complex motivations and complex psychological processes.

The true teacher of the fitting social arrangements for England, France, or America, is the one who can point out how the English, French, or American character can be improved, and how it has been made what it is. A philosophy of laws and institutions, not founded on a philosophy of national character, is an absurdity.\textsuperscript{132}

Ultimately, however, the success in this of any given society, of any polity, depends on the cumulative wisdom of the entirety of mankind. The “collective mind of the human race” that Bentham failed to call on as a philosopher is a critical resource for philosophy because philosophy is a critical resource for individual human agency, as that agency is developed within and through interaction with particular societies in the cultivation of character. In Mill’s words, “It is what men think, that determines how they act.”\textsuperscript{133} The choice of ends as well as means is affected by this

\textsuperscript{132} Bentham, 99.
\textsuperscript{133} From Considerations. See Introduction, above, page 6 and note 8.
phenomenon, according to Mill and, indeed, should be. As noted, Mill is not at all insensible of the contribution of “states of mind,” feelings, or emotions, as springs of action. In the end, however, for Mill it is systems of thought that supply effective utilitarian power, or agency, in the world.

[T]o say that men’s intellectual beliefs do not determine their conduct, is like saying that the ship is moved by the steam and not by the steersman. The steam is indeed the motive power; the steersman, left to himself, could not advance the vessel a single inch; yet it is the steersman’s will and the steersman’s knowledge which decide in what direction it shall move and whither it shall go.\textsuperscript{134}

Hunger may drive us to eat; it does not determine for ‘advanced’ humans what, how, or when to eat. Or, whether we are inclined to steal or kill to satisfy hunger, and under what conditions. Yet, if intellectual beliefs are so important, why then is one of Bentham’s major shortcomings the inability to comprehend the full range of human motivations, and particularly those that have to do with feelings, or “states of mind”?

It is because Bentham’s utility is a partial utility, hence wholly inadequate as a basis for moral or political understanding, much less as a foundation for normative doctrines. Bentham missed the significance of the relationship of the management of motivation to the phenomenon of character – a phenomenon subject to feelings as well as to calculation – and thus was unable to take account of the role of the former in determining behavior. For an initial antidote to what he regards as Bentham’s fatal shortcomings as a moralist and political philosopher, Mill turns to Coleridge, through

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Comte}, Part I, CW X, 317.
whom the insights of continental, and especially German thought, with its emphasis on history, culture and institutions, have been made available to the English-speaking ‘instructed mind.’

The following chapter will deal with Mill’s development of the idea of character as it relates to the role of the polity in the cultivation and evolution of individual agency. It will begin with a look at Coleridge, followed by an examination of Mill’s argument for a science of the polity and character development, as it was influenced by the work of August Comte, and emerged in the System of Logic, especially in Book VI, The Logic of the Moral Sciences. The context for this discussion is the foregoing interpretation of Mill’s ontology as one grounded in a commitment to naturalism.
It was not religion which formed the strength of the Spartan institutions: the root of the system was devotion to Sparta, to the ideal of the country or State: which transformed into ideal devotion to a greater country, the world, would be equal to that and far nobler achievements.¹

Those portions alone of the social phenomena can with advantage be made the subjects, even provisionally, of distinct branches of science, into which the diversities of character between different nations or different times enter as influencing causes only in a secondary degree....For this reason (as well as for others which will hereafter appear) there can be no separate Science of Government; that being the fact which, of all others, is most mixed up, both as cause and effect, with the qualities of the particular people or of the particular age.²

CHAPTER II
POLITY CONSTITUTION AND THE FORMATION OF CHARACTER

In Bentham, Mill insisted, “The first question to ask in regard to any man of speculation is, what is his theory of human life?” The purpose of this chapter is to call attention to Mill’s own theory of human life, beginning with his view of how the process of cultivation contributes to the derivation of agency as he idealized it – as ‘rational freedom.’ It further explores the extent to which he understood the process of cultivation to be dependent on the functioning of polities as organized entities, or units – that it is in the nature of such units to have characteristic ways of structuring the behavior, understanding, feelings and motivations of particular peoples. Mill deduced from this understanding the hypothesis that the particulars of political form and processes play a consequential role in the development of agency, and proposed a way to test and validate this hypothesis. He was motivated to understand the posited

² Logic of the Moral Sciences,(LMS), CW VIII, 906.
relationship between political constitution and the constitution of character because he took it as key to increasing the species’ capacity for self-improvement. It is essential to note at the outset the argument does not suggest Mill felt humans to be fundamentally or unalterably constrained by nature to living a certain way – in this case, within the confines of any single polity or particular form of polity – and certainly not within the nation-state, *per se*. The claim is rather that, as with other features of his naturalism, Mill assumed the processes constituting political union in general to be an irreducibly essential feature of both the realization of agency, and improvement in the human condition, given his interpretation of the term “improvement.”

Mill laid out his views about the nature and significance of polities and their forms most extensively in two works, *The System of Logic*, and *Considerations on Representative Government*. Published some 20 years apart,³ the two differ radically in their immediate purposes. The *System* is a philosophical treatise concentrating on epistemological issues. *Considerations* is a political tract aimed at affecting debate about whether and what changes should be made to British constitutional order. At bottom, however, both have the same central utilitarian motivation: to facilitate attainment of a higher human happiness by reducing the use of ‘intuitionism,’ or untested intuition, in the design of political institutions. In both of these works, Mill provides what he perceives as evidence that distinctive features of particular political forms are associated with the instantiation of specific kinds and degrees of agency,

³ In 1843 and 1861, respectively.
through a process he calls ‘political ethology,’ or national character formation. The significance for Mill of this process cannot be understood except in the context of his overall ontology. A central structural element of the ontology of the person that emerges from the arguments laid out in Bentham is the conception of individual human motivation as not consisting in a miscellaneous bundle of volitions, but rather volitions conceived of as organized in relation to each other, forming a character, or a relatively fixed pattern of action derived from a more or less intentionally-formed alloy of cultivated thoughts and feelings. In Coleridge, Mill sketched the outline of a second major element of his ontological structure, or “theory of human life.” This is the conception of a superstructure of coordination, an integrated corpus of the social forms that serve as templates for the organization of common thought and action. Such a superstructure of coordination, or organized corpus of common thought and action, is the polity. Mill treats the political unit as having a distinct phenomenological status, a status reflected among other ways in the “national character,” or particular distinctive pattern of thought and action whereby the individual characters of one set of individuals is seen to be distinguished from those of other such sets.

The conceptual bridge between these two elements, the character of an individual, on the one hand, and patterns of individual character displayed within

---

4 The intentionality involved is not exclusively self-intentionality. Mill is concerned with self-cultivation, but the thrust of the argument here is aimed at demonstrating the extent to which he also was concerned with the process of cultivation as socially framed.
particular polities, on the other, is represented by the process of character formation, but a serious exposition of what this process might be and what it implies is not directly addressed by Mill in the Coleridge essay but rather in *The Logic of the Moral Sciences*, the sixth and final book of the *System of Logic*, which he was writing at the same time as the Coleridge essay, but which was published three years later.\(^5\) Following Mill’s expository path, the discussion here begins with *Coleridge*, moves on to the *System* in general, and then to its treatment in the *LMS* of the argument for a ‘social’ science, or science of the human being. In *Coleridge*, as in *LMS*, Mill is concerned with the fact and nature of the polity *per se*, and its imputed role in the evolution of human nature toward greater agency, more than with the possible import of any specific form, which is the issue he addresses explicitly in *Considerations on Representative Government*. In *Coleridge* vaguely, but more clearly in *LMS*, we can see that Mill’s polity is a living corpus of co-existence, within which an authoritative framework of cultural forms constitutes the set of related social (i.e. institutional) structures required for functionally necessary coordination of thought and action. These structures need not be state structures, but they depend on the existence of state structure or its equivalent. The intelligent acceptance of authority – to know how to know, rather than to dare to know simply – is in effect Mill’s riposte to Kant as to the

\(^5\) For Mill’s comments on *Coleridge* and the *System* and the significance of each, see letter to John Sterling, Nov. 4, 1839, in *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812-1848, Part II*, CW XIII, 411.
It is the corporate function of the institutions of the “nation” to constitute the repositories of authoritative collective understanding, as it is the particular function of laws to enforce the boundaries of action compatible with that authoritative collective understanding. Whether institutions do that badly or well, the necessary first question Mill credits Coleridge with bringing into focus is: what is the nature of the corporate function that any specific institution is supposed to fulfill? What emerges in Coleridge is the view that such functions are inherently corporate – that is, they exist to serve the utility of a political corpus *qua* corpus, as distinct from existing to serve the discrete utility of individuals, either as individuals or in the aggregate. While essentially adopting that view, however, Mill nonetheless maintains a distinctly processual, or socio-psychological conception of the nature of the polity as incorporated. This will lead him on to want to know how it is that polity-circumscribed processes of incorporation generate the development of character, upon

---

6 “[E]ven the originality which can, and the courage which dares, think for itself, is not a more necessary part of the philosophical character than a thoughtful regard for previous thinkers, and for the collective mind of the human race.” *Bentham*, CW X, 90. Compare “sapere aude,” or “dare to know,” from Kant’s essay, “What Is Enlightenment?” In *Kant: Political Writings*, Raymond Guess, et al., eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54.

7 As noted earlier, Mill himself is concerned with the incorporating function of education “in its largest acceptation,” in the phrase from his “Inaugural Address to the University of St. Andrews.” Peter J. Steinberger argues the relevant institution is the “structure of intelligibility” that is the polity itself. See Steinberger, *The Idea of the State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), in particular the author’s description, at pages 3-13, of the work as representing an effort to “provide an account of the underlying nature of political society itself, formulated as “an ontology theory of the state.” As will become clear, the intent here is to suggest that this is more or less what Mill was up to, that he went down a very similar path, to end at a similar conceptual destination. Steinberger largely ignores Mill but is making much the same case as Mill as to the epistemological significance of political order.
a certain consistency of which across individuals he perceives essential features of corporateness to depend.  

**Coleridge: The Culture of the Inward Man**

In contrast to Bentham, which is primarily focused on the question of individual motivation, or human psychology more broadly, *Coleridge* deals primarily with arguments about the nature of institutions, not as they represent individual purposes but rather as they reflect the interests of groups as groups. *Coleridge* is fundamentally addressed to what societies require to function as societies, not what moves individual humans. Yet an ontological bridge is provided in the idea that “the culture of the inward man” is the “problem of problems” connecting the “requisites of the permanent existence of the body politic,” and “the conditions which had rendered the preservation of these permanent requisites compatible with perpetual and progressive improvement,” or the “gradual evolution of humanity.” The problem that Bentham fatally missed is the one most attended to by the historico-cultural school Coleridge represented.

Mill ascribes to the “Germano-Coleridgians” the development of a necessary philosophical corrective to extremist doctrines derived from rationalism and empiricism, constituting a “revolt of the human mind against the philosophy of the

---

8 Analogous to being in a state or condition of corporateness – a question of more or less, not either/or.
9 All of the phrases quoted here are from *Coleridge*, CW X, 117-163
eighteenth century,” particularly as reflected in the political excesses of the French Revolution. Bentham thought that managing external rewards and punishments so as to spur individuals to self-regarding behavior consistent with achieving the “greatest good for the greatest number” was the only problem to be addressed. The philosophes did not make the mistake of missing the importance of an internal sense of moral obligation, or “feelings of morality,” but they failed to grasp the complex psychological and social sources, or causes, of such feelings.

The error of the philosophers was rather that they trusted too much to those feelings; believed them to be more deeply rooted in human nature than they are; to be not so dependent, as in fact they are, upon collateral influences. They thought them the natural and spontaneous growth of the human heart; so firmly fixed in it, that they would subsist unimpaired, nay invigorated, when the whole system of opinions and observances with which they were habitually intertwined was violently torn away.

Though rejecting the “apriorist” epistemology that Coleridge adopted in his later thought, Mill credits him with fulfilling a necessary methodological requirement for the derivation of valid human knowledge. Coleridge’s theory of life was based on attention to things in the world as they appear in concrete form, not simply as abstract intuitions, and the analyses of Coleridge, like those of Bentham, were grounded in “real observations, the genuine product of experience.”

---

10 Coleridge, 125.
11 Mill’s conception of utilitarianism, and how that conception relates to his view of the polity, are addressed in detail below, in Chapter III, “The Nature of Co-existence.”
12 Coleridge, 131.
13 See discussion of David Harley’s contribution to the argument for experience as the source of all knowledge, and Coleridge as at one time “an enthusiastic Hartleian,” Coleridge, 130.
14 Coleridge, 121.
observation led to the conclusion that the cultivation of the “virtues and graces of humanity” is an artificial process dependent upon the unique collective human capacity, developed gradually over history, to form desirable “second-nature” characteristics through coordination of “opinions and observances.” Motivation advances collectively, as does knowledge.

Institutions represent the expression of those collectively held beliefs about the good and how to attain it that connect action with objects of desire, and embody the coordinative structures necessary to permit attainment of such objects both individually and collectively. These structures are necessary, Mill argued in *Civilization*, because advanced agency, or rational freedom, depends upon the acquired ability to sacrifice “some portion of individual will” for the sake of attaining a higher form of happiness.¹⁵ The “savage” is so by virtue of the fact that “His social cannot even temporarily prevail over his selfish feelings, nor his impulses bend to his calculations.”¹⁶ Bethamite utilitarianism ultimately fails as political theory because “any considerable increase of human happiness, through mere changes in outward circumstances, unaccompanied by changes in the state of the desires” is hopeless, “not to mention that while the desires are circumscribed in self, there can be no adequate

---

¹⁵ *Civilization*, CW XVIII, 122.
¹⁶ Ibid.
motive for exertions tending to modify to good ends even those external circumstances.”

No man’s individual share of any public good which he can hope to realize by his efforts, is an equivalent for the sacrifice of his ease, and of the personal objects which he might attain by another course of conduct. The balance can be turned in favour of virtuous exertion, only by the interest of feeling or by that of conscience—those “social interests,” the necessary subordination of which to “self-regarding” is so lightly assumed.

Importantly, the key to coordination is the habit of submission to authority, a habit originating within that primary nexus of human connectedness that is the political union. The philosophes made the error of assuming that political cohesion and the social order it enables are reflective of the “universal and natural condition of mankind,” and were thus “ignorant, by what a host of civilizing and restraining influences a state of things so repugnant to man’s self-will and love of independence has been brought about, and how imperatively it demands the continuance of those influences as the condition of its own existence.” Those who could contemplate the radical and comprehensive destruction of human institutions on grounds of moral justification must be fundamentally and fatally ignorant of the nature, or function, of such institutions in the cultivation of necessary feelings of other-regard and the

---

17 Remarks, CW X, 15.
18 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
19 Coleridge, 132. The parallel in this critique somewhat echoes that made by Rousseau (See Mark Hulliung, The Autocritique of the Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), of whom however, Mill seems to have had only a grudging appreciation. Typical are Mill’s comments in Chapter II of On Liberty, as well as in Coleridge, where he cites Rousseau as inspiring Robespierre.
20 Coleridge, 132.
development of conscience as the foundation of moral and political obligation. Both of these are necessary concomitants of society; social order, in turn, is a necessary condition of advanced human happiness; and, political cohesion is a necessary condition of social order. What the 18th century rationalists overlooked because it surrounded them as a phenomenon to be assumed, was the general condition of the human race as one of being “agglomerated in large nations, all (except here and there a madman or a malefactor,) yielding obedience more or less strict to a set of laws prescribed by a few of their own number and to a set of moral rules prescribed by each other’s opinion; renouncing the exercise of individual will and judgment except within the limits imposed by these laws and rules; and acquiescing in the sacrifice of their individual wishes when the point was decided against them by lawful authority; or persevering only in hopes of altering the opinion of the ruling powers.”

Culture and the Polity

Mill considers the “agglomeration” of humanity in large political groups to be a phenomenon of significance in the development of agency. He sees the polity as a distinct society existing in a given place and time, the encapsulator of a specific ‘national’ or typical or characteristic culture that plays a definite and perhaps an essential role in the formation of individual character. The “historical philosophers” persuasively linked agglomeration to characteristic ways of being, showing that: “Every form of polity, every condition of society, whatever else it had done, had

21 Ibid.
formed its type of national character.”  

Coleridge spoke for “that series of great writers and thinkers, from Herder to Michelet,” by whom history had been made “a science of causes and effects,” and who made a contribution, “the largest yet made by any class of thinkers, towards the philosophy of human culture.”  

It was from this stream of thought that Mill drew his argument as to the observed “cultivating” effects of political cohesion operating through history. He distilled from the general argument a set of factors he felt had been shown by the Germano-Coleridgians to be associated with the fact of long-term political union, the causes of continuing agglomeration, or the “requisites of the permanent existence of the body politic.”  

These conditioning factors Mill describes as a system of education, “beginning with infancy and continued through life, of which whatever else it might include” a “main ingredient” is “restraining discipline”; a “feeling of allegiance or loyalty” derived from some universally accepted foundation of legitimate authority (which “may attach itself to the principles of individual freedom and political and social equality” as well as to, say, individuals, or a system of laws or ancient traditions); and a strong and active principle of cohesion among the members of the same community or state.”  

For Mill, of these three factors the most critical is a system of education. It is the principal cause of that obedience to governance which is the “very first element of  

22 Coleridge, 141.  
23 Coleridge, 139.  
24 Ibid.  
25 Ibid.  
26 Coleridge, 134-135.
the social union,” the cause of a society’s “permanence as a society, and the chief source of its progressiveness; the former by the extent to which that education operate[s] as a system of restraining discipline, the latter by the degree to which education call[s] forth and invigorate[s] the active faculties.” On this account, national character is a result of the processes that bring about a condition of political union. Thus national character is both a cause and an effect, a contributor to agency, and a consequence of processes inherent in maintaining institutional coherence. The purpose of political union is to constitute “a concentration of the force of all the individuals of the nation in the hands of certain of its members in order to the accomplishment of whatever could be best accomplished by systematic cooperation,” including doing for us “the things we cannot do” for ourselves as individuals. Mill would include as central among those things we cannot do as autonomous individuals the instantiation of a condition of rational freedom.

Coleridge’s personal contribution, very similar in Mill’s construction of it to Bentham’s, is one of undertaking the very essential scientific first step of classifying the necessarily collective functions. Since the end of government, the “general good,” is

\[27\] Coleridge, 132.
\[28\] Coleridge, 140.
\[29\] Coleridge, 143.
\[30\] Ibid. Implicit in Mill’s discussion here is the idea that an important subset of things to be accomplished by systematic cooperation has to do with functions associated with the wellbeing, or utility, of the group as a group: its maintenance, continuity, and capacity for improvement, or “progress,” as a cohesive unit.
a very complex state of things, comprising as its component elements many requisites which are neither of one and the same nature, nor attainable by one and the same means—political philosophy must begin by a classification of these elements, in order to distinguish those of them which go naturally together (so that the provision made for one will suffice for the rest), from those which are ordinarily in a state of antagonism, or at least of separation, and require to be provided for apart. This preliminary classification being supposed, things would, in a perfect government, be so ordered, that corresponding to each of the great interests of society, there would be some branch or some integral part of the governing body, so constituted that it should not be merely deemed by philosophers, but should actually and constantly deem itself, to have its strongest interests involved in the maintenance of that one of the ends of society which it is intended to be the guardian of.\(^{31}\)

The purpose of government is to fulfill a society’s corporate purposes, not an aggregate of the individual purposes political union is supposed to foster. The essential function of government is to serve the interests of the polity as a polity, most generally construed as its survival, but also its development, or evolution in terms of its functioning with respect to the way or ways of life it embodies.\(^{32}\) The good of the whole is not independent of the good of any present or future members, yet it is distinct. There is a utility of the whole, and as is the case with respect to individual utility, the utility of the whole consists of a set of ends that will be attained to a greater or lesser degree through an exercise of agency appropriate to specific circumstances.

Beyond suppressing force and fraud, governments can seldom, without doing more harm than good, attempt to chain up the free agency of individuals. But does it follow from this that government cannot exercise a free agency of its

\(^{31}\) Coleridge, 154.

own?—that it cannot beneficially employ its powers, its means of information, and its pecuniary resources (so far surpassing those of any other association, or of any individual), in promoting the public welfare by a thousand means which individuals would never think of, would have no sufficient motives to attempt, or no sufficient power to accomplish?\textsuperscript{33}

Here again, as in Bentham, the idea of the “collective mind” appears, involving features that distinguish it from the individual mind. Individuals, thinking alone, would not even think of, much less attempt or attain, certain kinds of ends. From the context of a social unit, these ends are envisioned and can become part of human life. The constitution of a political unit should be structured in such a way as to embody the “great interests of society”\textsuperscript{34} qua society, that is.

As Mill moved from a discussion of the “Germano-Coleridgian” school to focus more on Coleridge and English thought specifically, he tied his underlying philosophical argument to contemporaneous institutional reform debates in which Coleridge represented the Conservative side. This section of the essay reads today as presenting essentially distinct commentaries on the separate functions of Church and State, in service of an exegesis and defense of Coleridge’s positions on each. But Mill is in fact pointing the reader to a Coleridgean presumption about that feature of both types of institutions that represent polity-serving purposes. With respect to the Church, Mill is interested in discussing Coleridge’s views on its establishment as a

\textsuperscript{33} Coleridge, 156.
\textsuperscript{34} Coleridge, 154.
privileged institution within English political life, and in particular Coleridge’s theoretical justification for the idea of establishment.

Take, for instance, Coleridge’s view of the grounds of a Church Establishment. His mode of treating any institution is to investigate what he terms the Idea of it, or what in common parlance would be called the principle involved in it. The idea or principle of a national church, and of the Church of England in that character, is, according to him, the reservation of a portion of the land, or of a right to a portion of its produce, as a fund—for what purpose? For the worship of God? For the performance of religious ceremonies? No; for the advancement of knowledge, and the civilization and cultivation of the community. This fund he does not term Church-property, but “the nationality,” or national property.\(^{35}\)

Coleridge, Mill suggests, is appropriately relying on an historical justification for this assumption as to responsibilities. As he quotes Coleridge, this justification goes to the role initially played by the Catholic clergy and subsequently by that of other denominations as well in caring for and transmitting Europe’s epistemic endowments.

“The clerisy of the nation, or national church in its primary acceptation and original intention, comprehended the learned of all denominations, the sages and professors of the law and jurisprudence, of medicine and physiology, of music, of military and civil architecture, with the mathematical as the common organ of the preceding; in short, all the so-called liberal arts and sciences, the possession and application of which constitute the civilization of a country, as well as the theological. The last was, indeed, placed at the head of all; and of good right did it claim the precedence. But why? Because under the name of theology or divinity were contained the interpretation of languages, the conservation and tradition of past events, the momentous epochs and revolutions of the race and nation, the continuation of the records, logic, ethics, and the determination of ethical science, in application to the rights and duties of men in all their various relations, social and civil; and lastly, the ground-knowledge, the prima scientia, as it was named,—philosophy, or the doctrine and discipline of ideas.”\(^{36}\)

\(^{35}\) *Coleridge*, 146-147.
\(^{36}\) *Coleridge*, 147-148.
This passage is from Coleridge’s *On the Constitution of the Church and State According to the Idea of Each*. Mill is not concerned here with entering into either the near term political question of disestablishment, or the moral and philosophical questions inherent in the idea of the validity of theology. He cites this passage by way of illustrating Coleridge’s view about the public institutional function at issue and, in crediting its persuasiveness, providing this as a view of his own. Coleridge’s discussion of the public benefits of endowing an aristocracy with rights in real property, and individuals with rights in ‘moveable’ property – come in for parallel treatment. According to Mill, Coleridge’s review of institutions and their functions as purportedly related to the existence of a given political society constitutes an initial step in the development of a “political philosophy,” which is to say, a “philosophy of government.”

Even though Coleridge’s theory “is but a mere commencement, not amounting to the first lines of a political philosophy, has the age produced any other theory of government which can stand a comparison with it as to its first principles?”

Mill explains Coleridge’s position with respect to the classification of polity ends that should be represented in constitutional forms in two ways. The first separates them into the categories negative and positive.

---

37 He does not comment here on the issue of disestablishment, except as it relates to how the established Church is actually performing its putative national function. For Mill’s views about religion *per se*, see the second and third essays in *Three Essays*.

38 *Coleridge*, 153.

39 Ibid.
Let us suppose, [says Coleridge,] the negative ends of a State already attained, namely, its own safety by means of its own strength, and the protection of person and property for all its members; there will then remain its positive ends:—1. To make the means of subsistence more easy to each individual: 2. To secure to each of its members the hope of bettering his own condition or that of his children: 3. The development of those faculties which are essential to his humanity, that is to his rational and moral being.\textsuperscript{40}

The alternative formulation of this framework, however, offers a distinction with substantially different connotations. In the listing of State ends described as “positive and negative,” only the first, State safety, might be thought to apply distinctively to the polity as a whole, and even at that use of the term ‘safety’ rather than, say ‘preservation,’ leaves room for the imputation that it is the safety of the citizens of the State (as in the context of the ‘ends’ of State action) that is at issue, simply. And, moreover, there is no obvious reason, simply, as these negative and positive ends are described, to assume that they are not all compatible with each other.\textsuperscript{41} Mill just previously in the essay, however, has quoted Coleridge on the subject of the importance to constitutions at least of civilized polities of reflecting an appropriate mechanism of balance between “the two antagonist powers or opposite interests of the State, under which all other State interests are comprised,” those of “permanence and of progression.”\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40} Coleridge, 156. Mill is here quoting Coleridge \textit{verbatim}. Compare the Preamble to the U. S. Constitution: “to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”

\textsuperscript{41} Again, compare implications of the Preamble.

\textsuperscript{42} Coleridge, 152. Emphasis in original.
We have slipped without explicit acknowledgement into a different frame of analysis here. The focus is on the polity, *per se*, and *its* requirements, as distinct from ends that may be imputed directly to citizens as individuals, and on polity interests. The existence of a body politic as an integrated social form, and the ways of acting that characterize its members, are the proper objects of inquiry in political philosophy and political science. The policies, laws, and actions of government along with its constitutive forms and procedures should all be subject to critique and reform, but there should be no misunderstanding as to the importance of the facticity of polity life. If a State appears to be in violation of its *raison d'être* the natural course should be to modify State structures as needed – not, as Mill saw the mode prevailing prior to the time of Bentham and Coleridge, to regard government as a “necessary evil” required to “hide itself, to make itself as little felt as possible.”

We are left here with two major propositions that do not yet have a clear connection. First, the systematic investigation of history documents the evolution of human culture in a way that gives rise to an understanding of the phenomenon of the polity as playing an important role in that evolution. This proposition contains the implied premise that cultural evolution is predicate to the achievement of advanced agency. Second, states – polities – have discrete interests, related to those human goods that individuals not only cannot attain individually but which they may not even conceive of individually. The interests of the polity in the abstract may be reduced to

---

43 *Coleridge*, 143.
two, that of maintaining itself, and that of evolving. The argument for why a polity qua polity should be seen to have an interest in change, or progress, is not addressed by Mill here except indirectly: if humans have an interest in advanced agency, and if the phenomenon of political union through its relationship to culture and thence to character has been determined to be implicated in the advance of individual agency, then there seems to be an association between what happens to the polity and what happens to the nature of individuals as they act in the world. That association has to do with the formation of character. To reprise: from Coleridge we have “Every form of polity, every condition of society, whatever else it had done, had formed its type of national character,” and from Bentham, that “which alone causes any material interests to exist, which alone enables any body of human beings to exist as a society, is national character: that it is, which causes one nation to succeed in what it attempts, another to fail....”

That the success and failure of nations qua nations, or more generally the wellbeing or utility of the polity qua polity is of central importance to Mill’s political

---

44 Not Coleridge’s terms, or Mill’s in this context, although Mill did use the word evolution in place of progress. For example, he characterized the Germano-Coleridgians as having given “facts and events of the past” an “intelligible place in the evolution of humanity.” Coleridge, 139. Or, from LMS: “But since both the natural varieties of mankind, and the original diversities of local circumstances, are much less considerable than the points of agreement, there will naturally be a certain degree of uniformity in the progressive development of the species and of its works. And this uniformity tends to become greater, not less, as society advances [with] the evolution of each people....” CW VIII, 916.

45 Coleridge, CW X, 141.

46 Bentham, CW X, 99.
theory can be seen in *Considerations on Representative Government.*\(^{47}\) Between the conclusions in this later work, however, and the ontological views he developed in examining and critiquing Benthamite utilitarianism and Coleridgian institutionalism, Mill required a conceptual bridge that would functionally connect the two, and set out to construct one. His primary resources included the associationist psychology developed by his father, James Mill, and others, and the sociological and epistemological work of August Comte. His own contribution included an assessment of weaknesses in the arguments of each\(^{48}\) and an effort to fill gaps between the two, to provide a comprehensive approach to political science. Bentham and Coleridge “agreed in recognizing that sound theory is the only foundation for sound practice,”\(^{49}\) and that sound theory consists in “taking no proposition for granted without examining into the grounds of it, and ascertaining that it possessed the kind and degree of evidence suitable to its nature.”\(^{50}\) In the *System of Logic*, Mill offers his analysis of the nature of evidence, concluding with an argument as to why and how the principles of evidence should apply to understanding human phenomena, including the polity, providing what he believed was a necessary scientific grounding for prescriptions about government.

\(^{47}\) In *Considerations*, Mill adopts Coleridge’s idea about two major polity interests but in a significantly altered form that implies they are consistent, not antagonistic. This point and its implications are discussed below in Chapter III, “The Nature of Co-existence.”

\(^{48}\) See, for example, J.S. Mill’s editorial notes to James Mill’s *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, in CW XXXI, *Miscellaneous Writings*, and *August Comte and Positivism*, in CW X.

\(^{49}\) *Coleridge*, 141.

\(^{50}\) *Coleridge*, 121.
The Logic of Character: Thinking as Predicate to Acting

In the context of a comparison of two radically different approaches to political theory, Mill provided the outlines of his own philosophy of politics. It revolves around an apprehension that political forms play a strong role in the determination of human wellbeing, primarily by virtue of their effect on the cultivation of character. This is not a simple proposition, in that Mill also further ascribes to the nature of the character so constituted a significant role in the development and – in effect – the agency of the polity itself. He implies as a central hypothesis about human nature that individual character and group, or ‘national,’ character are co-constituted in a complex way. In Bentham, Mill saw a failure to comprehend the power of feelings and, hence, the significance of the “filiation and connexion of feelings with one another,”\textsuperscript{51} within the framework of which lies the central process of the development of individual motivation. Bentham’s philosophy therefore was destined to fail “in the consideration of the greater social questions – the theory of organic institutions and general forms of polity; for those (unlike the details of legislation) to be duly estimated, must be viewed as the great instruments of forming the national character; of carrying forward the members of the community towards perfection, or preserving them from degeneracy.”\textsuperscript{52} Institutional forms are linked to individual motivation through the

\textsuperscript{51} Bentham, CW X, 100.
\textsuperscript{52} Remarks, CW X, 9.
concept of character; institutional forms are organic in character, entailing national, or holistic, qualities.

In the Germano-Coleridgians, Mill found not a full political theory exactly, but the first conceptual step toward the formation of such a theory – the idea of culture, associated with the idea of nation, and with the idea that changes in culture are relevant to the “gradual evolution of humanity,” a process involving both the preservation of some features and the abandonment and acquisition of others. In the concept of culture Mill acquired a framework within which to locate both individual character and national character. Even though Mill’s primary interest is with humanity as a whole, the thrust of Coleridge is to shift the focus to the ‘social union,’ or polity, and its imputed relationship to character formation. Bentham didn’t comprehend the implication of internalized moral and social constraints at all. The philosophes recognized the importance of moral and social feelings, but took the existence of these self-interest restraining qualities as they found them, as innate. What was thus altogether missed prior to the development of the philosophy of history was the relationship between political obedience and morality, on the one hand, and between morality and agency, on the other, with the question of political obedience inextricably linked to that “theory of organic institutions and general forms of polity” absent in Bentham. Mill is on the trail of a social science that will establish a chain of

53 Coleridge, CW X, 139.
causality linking human psychology and behavior to the fact of political union, as the foundation of an art, or technology, of promoting human progress.

A full argument as to the scope and methods of this social science is laid out in the sixth and final volume of Mill’s *System of Logic*, published in 1843. The foundation of the argument is formed by Mill’s belief that it is knowing, achieved by learning how to know, that forms the essence of human nature and human utility. As Mill put in *Considerations on Representative Government*, “It is what men think that determines how they act.”\(^5^4\) So Mill begins his approach to the development of social science by addressing a central aspect of human thought, of knowing how to know, the question of inference, or logic. In 1831, the year in which “Spirit of the Age” was published and prior to the obituary note on Bentham, Mill wrote to his friend John Sterling. The letter begins with a report on the rejection of the Reform Bill by the House of Lords, in the process referencing his reading of Coleridge on Church and State, and points that are subsequently referred to in the Coleridge essay. But, Mill writes, action in politics is not where he hopes to make a personal contribution.

\[T\]he 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.\(^5^5\)

---

\(^5^4\) *Considerations*, CW XIX, 382. The full sentence continues: “and though the persuasions and convictions of average men are in a much greater degree determined by their personal position than by reason, no little power is exercised over them by the persuasions and convictions of those whose personal position is different, and by the united authority of the instructed.” Compare *Spirit and Civilization*, above.

The phrase, “the science of science itself,” occurs again in the introduction to the *System of Logic*.\(^{56}\) In *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, Alan Ryan characterizes the *System* as “key to ambitions which give a unity” to all of Mill’s thought,\(^{57}\) ambitions consistent with Mill’s own autobiographical claims of a lifelong “search for a systematic philosophy of knowledge and action.”\(^{58}\) This formulation is entirely consistent with the analysis being presented here, so far as it goes, but it is important to point out a central difference that is not obvious except by connotation. Ryan concludes the *Philosophy* with a chapter titled, “On Liberty: Beyond Duty to Personal Aesthetics.” He introduces the chapter as follows: “The intention of the preceding chapters has been to show how Mill’s conception of what it is to be rational holds together his account of the philosophy of science, the philosophy of the social sciences, and his justification of utilitarian ethics.”\(^{59}\) Ryan goes on to state that in the chapter at hand, he will discuss “what lies beyond rationality,” which he, Ryan, and by implication also Mill, equates to the achievement of “the security and welfare of self-interested men.”\(^{60}\) What lies beyond is “the sphere of imagination, self-culture, personal aesthetics, and with which rationality is only concerned to the extent that a


\(^{57}\) Preface to *Philosophy*, ix.

\(^{58}\) *Philosophy*, 25.

\(^{59}\) *Philosophy*, 233.

\(^{60}\) Ibid.
rational ethics will be concerned to secure to the individual an arena within which his individuality may be exercised to the full.”

I contend that this misconstrues Mill’s understanding both of the nature of rationality and the object of ethics, and indeed, Mill’s philosophy altogether, in at least one important respect. As should be evident at this point, the argument here is intended to show that, in contrast to conceptions of the nature of agency that associate it almost exclusively with individual autonomy, Mill’s was a far more socially and politically-implicated view – meaning not only that society and even polities are involved in the instantiation of individual agency but further that there is a meaningful sense in which particular societies, or polities, exhibit qualities of agency related causally to the process through which individual agency is instantiated. Rationality, knowledge, and Other-regard, and the comprehension and fulfillment of duties toward others, are inextricably bound up for Mill in the achievement of advanced forms of human happiness. But, beyond this, implicitly and explicitly it is the welfare of mankind as a species, not the wellbeing of any single individual, or even the idea of the wellbeing of single individuals *per se*, that compels Mill’s personally to understand how agency is constituted.

Humanity – human nature – advances through processes of cooperation, the most fundamental of which is directed at the acquisition and sharing of knowledge about nature, including the nature of human selves and human society. For Mill,

---

61 Ibid.
rationality is concerned first with the social development of knowledge, and only secondarily – at best – with the calculation of how most efficiently to achieve objects of immediate individual desire. Mill is deeply concerned with self-culture, but not in isolation. He sees it as a feature of the rational freedom whereby individuals act in a coordinated autonomy, so as to advance the happiness of humanity as a whole.

In the concluding chapter of the *Logic of the Moral Sciences*, the final book in the *System*, the phrase “science of science itself” appears yet one more time. Science is the subject of the penultimate section titled “Every art consists of truths of science, arranged in the order suitable for some practical use.” 62 Art, Mill says, “consists of the rules, together with as much of the speculative propositions as comprises the justification of those rules.” 63 Science is not concerned with the determination of ends, but rather with how to achieve ends, which is essentially a process of deriving and determining adhesion to effective rules of knowing. Ends, Mill goes on to argue, should be subject to evaluation against the possibilities of overall human happiness. The standard of utility is the “justification, and ought to be the controller, of all ends,” although “not itself the sole end.” 64 As Mill said in the *Autobiography* that he discovered of himself, happiness cannot be attained by aiming at it directly as a thing in itself. It is achieved as a by-product of particular things and conditions not accessible simply, but rather only through coordination. Virtue may at times consist in

---

62 *LMS*, CW VIII, 947.
63 *LMS*, ibid.
64 *LMS*, 962.
the sacrifice of immediate or individual happiness, justified “because it can be shown that on the whole more happiness will exist in the world if feelings are cultivated which will make people, in certain cases, regardless of happiness.”65 The coordination that derives and enforces rules for knowing and for acting should include provisions allowing significant space for individuals to pursue their discretely constituted life plans, but not as a prescription for individual happiness, *per se* – not, that is, in Ryan’s phrase, with a view toward achieving “the security and well-being of self-interested men.” It is intended to advance the happiness of humanity as a whole by helping the individual overcome the limitations of self-interest in ways that are directly functional to a general security and wellbeing and thus, indirectly will be conducive to the possibilities for happiness of individuals in principle.66 Mill understands this process to begin conceptually with the coordination of knowing, via the application of rules for establishing a valid shared understanding of nature.

**Mill’s System of Logic: How We Should Think**

The *System of Logic* is a work of epistemology, focused on the process whereby humans compile, compare, and draw inferences from different elements of sense-based information about the world, for the purpose of acting effectively in it. This epistemology is rendered in the form of what Ryan has called a “philosophy of

---

65 Ibid.
66 As will be seen in the discussion of *On Liberty* below, in Chapter III, Mill does not argue that the ability to develop one’s own life plan necessarily or inevitably leads to happiness for any one individual so empowered. Possibilities are not certainties.
inductivism." The System is aimed primarily at explicating what we might call the rules of evidence: what are the conditions of observation and demonstration that must apply if we are to rely confidently on the inferences we draw from them. And, what is essentially a different version of the same question, with respect to any resulting generalizations, what are the conditions that must be proven to apply in order to accept those generalizations as in fact constituting part of the “laws of nature.” This process is at the core of Mill’s philosophy because it constitutes for him a critical early step in the chain of action that can lead to human progress via the exercise of agency. Nature is as it is. To observe nature and nature’s intrinsic and consistent ways so as to be able to judge, more or less effectively, the course they are likely to take under various defined circumstances (science) is a key early and necessary step in the process of determining what actions to take (art) in obtaining a given result. Deciding what result to favor engages experiential, observational and judgmental processes involving a set of important considerations that are neither art nor science. They have to do not with practice or knowledge of nature, but rather are concerned with the recognition of utility, or the evaluation of ends. Mill will address this question in his essay on

67 Philosophy, xxiii. Ryan characterizes the Autobiography as telling the story of Mill’s “search for a systematic philosophy of thought and action.” Except in its treatment of classification, along with observation, description, abstraction, and naming, as one of several ‘Operations Subsidiary to Induction,” (Book IV) and in the discussion of how sciences relate to one another in LMS, the System is not particularly concerned with interrogating the process of organizing information. That omission is interesting in view of Mill’s frequent allusion to “organization” as an important feature of life and reality in general, and relates to what he understood in the concept of “complexity.” See comments on this point below, in Chapter V, “Conclusion.”

68 Consistent, not immutable, and that in the relevant part of the known universe. See discussion at pp 227ff, below.
Utilitarianism. Here, in the System of Logic, Mill focuses solely on providing his view of what it is that constitutes appropriate rules for the collective uncovering of the “laws of nature,” making the case as to why and how these rules apply to the study of human nature and human society, which is the particular science to which he wants to contribute.

A full outline of the System as a whole goes beyond the scope of the argument here.\textsuperscript{69} Most of the core points that relate to Mill’s ontology of the polity in any event are concentrated in the final section, Book VI, The Logic of the Moral Sciences, which is discussed in detail below. There are, however, a couple of issues of which he treats earlier that are especially pertinent to an understanding of his overall political conception. They are his reasons for undertaking this effort as he described them; and, the ways in which the System reflects his commitment to naturalism and his understanding of human understanding, especially its social features.

If Mill is deeply partisan about anything, it is anti-intuitionism. With respect to the contested question of how truth, whether practical, moral, or scientific, is to be established, he was insistent throughout his life on the need to consult experience as a

\textsuperscript{69} Not to mention, beyond the capacity of this author. Many of Mill’s assertions in the System have been the subject of significant criticism. Alan Ryan’s explication and evaluation of Mill’s arguments in the Philosophy is comprehensive and thorough. It includes critiques raised by others as well as Ryan’s own objections to Mill’s logic where he has them. There are points where intellectual conventions changed in Mill’s favor after the original publication and others have occurred subsequently. Ryan’s claims about the centrality of the System to Mill’s philosophy are not at issue here, but some of his criticisms now seem off the mark, as he himself acknowledged in the 1987 Preface to the 2nd edition. Given interim developments in science and philosophy, a further revision might restore even more of Mill’s arguments to a position of plausibility and coherence. See also Skorupski, Mill, passim.
means of validating claims. His extensive treatment of the concept of causality and his focus on its importance tends somewhat to obscure the point that Mill’s primary interest is not explanation but truth itself, the facts of the nature of things. For him, the world is a certain way, immutable and given in at least some important respects, and an essential purpose or function of the mind is to engender a conscious apprehension of how it is the way it is, or at least the best approximation possible to the way it is. The mind’s instruments for accomplishing this task are its (that is, the entire body’s) perceptual or recording apparatus, and its capacity to reason, to connect or associate perceptions so as to build ever more complex compound perceptions that reflect relationships among things as they are – relationships that exist in nature by virtue of whatever it is that makes nature. This leads to the corollary that connections matter, and to Mill’s view that causality just is connection, either in time or space. Of the two powers of mind, perception and reason, Mill in one sense seems to take for granted the former, as experienced, as the given source, and the only possible original source, of all human thought. On the other hand, one way to interpret the purpose of all that he argues in the System is to see it as a brief for the testing, or ‘proving’ of the likely truth value of perceptions, and the provision of an explanation for the

---

70 In 1865, some years after the publication of On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Considerations on Representative Government, in the year in which he won a seat in Parliament and was elected Rector of St. Andrews University, Mill engaged the debate about epistemology yet again, with publication of An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy (CW IX) and his analysis and critique of August Comte and positivism, (Comte, CW X).

71 There is much about this analysis that will seem to locate Mill entirely on the side of a correspondence theory of truth, but the intention is to surface those aspects of his thought that position him as maintaining a coherence conception, as well.
applicability of specific methods of proof to particular conditions of nature as perceived, or as apparently perceived.

The province of logic must be restricted to that portion of our knowledge consisting of inferences from truths previously known; whether those antecedent data be general propositions, or particular observations and perceptions. Logic is not the science of Belief, but the science of Proof, or Evidence. In so far as belief professes to be founded on proof, the office of logic is to supply a test for ascertaining whether or not the belief is well grounded. With the claims which any proposition has to belief on the evidence of consciousness, that is, without evidence in the proper sense of the word, logic has nothing to do.\textsuperscript{72}

Mill makes quite clear his belief that impressions – even call them intuitions perhaps – are the progenitors in many cases – perhaps all cases – of what we call knowledge.

Logic neither observes, nor invents, nor discovers; but judges. It is no part of the business of logic to inform the surgeon what appearances are found to accompany a violent death. This he must learn from his own experience and observation, or from that of others, his predecessors in his peculiar pursuit. But logic sits in judgment on the sufficiency of that observation and experience to justify his rules, and on the sufficiency of his rules to justify his conduct. It does not give him proofs, but teaches him what makes them proofs, and how he is to judge of them.\textsuperscript{73}

Mill’s essential quarrel is with those who would base actions on untested, unvalidated impressions, claiming them as arising either from somewhere within the unexplained distinctive character of the human mind or from a supernatural source of revelation, and in either case carrying the implication of irrefutability due to the “inconceivability” of their contradiction. “I must protest against adducing as evidence

\textsuperscript{72} System, CW VII, 9.
\textsuperscript{73} System, 10.
of the truth of a fact in external nature, the disposition, however strong or however
general, of the human mind to believe it.” 74 It is the sense that it is necessary to have a
basis for action that is grounded in a well-tested (that is, a validated) experience of
nature and the relations among its elements – the realities of things – that drives Mill.
The self-conscious awareness of motivation that is perceived to be uniquely
characteristic of the human animal is Mill’s conceptual target here. That emotions, or
feelings, enter into the production of perceptions, or states of mind, is something of
which, as noted earlier, he is most keenly aware. That feelings can affect perceptions
and thus influence our understanding of what is true is obvious to him; the extent to
which feelings might influence the application of even the most rigorous method for
validating impressions about nature is something he contemplated. 75 His purpose
seems simply to have been to do what he could to help clarify what is at issue in the
process of validation, in life at least as much as in the practice of science in the formal
sense.

All science consists of data and conclusions from those data, of proofs and what
they prove: now logic points out what relations must subsist between data and
whatever can be concluded from them, between proof and everything which it can
prove. If there be any such indispensable relations, and if these can be precisely
determined, every particular branch of science, as well as every individual in the
guidance of his conduct, is bound to conform to those relations, under the penalty

version added, “It is the business of human intellect to adapt itself to the realities of things, and not to
measure those realities by its own capacities of comprehension.” CW VII, 263. See text and notes.
75 In talking of tendencies as distinct from inevitabilities in human dispositions Mill notes that “an
interest on one side of a question tends to bias the judgment.” LMS, CW X, 870.
of making false inferences—of drawing conclusions which are not grounded in the
realities of things. 76

There is no imputation here that the rules of logic are anything but a conscious
extension of non-conscious processes of inference imbedded in the cognitive faculties
of man as an animal. Using the example of the idea that distance to an object is
judged partly on the basis of an effectively instantaneous comparison of size
perceptions from experience with immediate focal adjustments, Mill says

The perception of distance by the eye, which seems so like intuition, is thus, in
reality, an inference grounded on experience; an inference, too, which we learn to
make; and which we make with more and more correctness as our experience
increases; though in familiar cases it takes place so rapidly as to appear exactly on
a par with those perceptions of sight which are really intuitive, our perceptions of
colour.77

In sum, logic is an essential part of

the science which treats of the operations of the human understanding in the
pursuit of truth. For to this ultimate end, naming, classification, definition, and
all other operations over which logic has ever claimed jurisdiction, are
essentially subsidiary. They may all be regarded as contrivances for enabling a
person to know the truths which are needful to him, and to know them at the
precise moment at which they are needful.78

And, in its fulfillment of this function,

the sole object of logic is the guidance of one’s own thoughts. Logic takes
cognizance of our intellectual operations, only as they conduce to our own
knowledge, and to our command over that knowledge for our own uses. If
there were but one rational being in the universe, that being might be a perfect

76 System, CW VII, 10-11.
77 System, 8.
78 System, 6.
logician; and the science and art of logic would be the same for that one person as for the whole human race.\textsuperscript{79}

Is this not, then, a refutation of the idea of epistemology as an inherently social enterprise? To the contrary, this explanation of logic and its purposes, together with what Mill has to say about how logic is applied in practice to the development of human understanding, provides a clear explication of what in human epistemology Mill believes to be psychological and what social. The inherent limitations of individual experience, and the fact (assumption, really) that the nature of human experience in general, as distinct from the fact of particular experiences, does not vary significantly from individual to individual, combined with the ability to communicate the content of experience more or less accurately among individuals, constitutes the essential condition of human learning and the possibilities implied.

Mill distinguishes the process of inference from processes of observation. To draw conclusions from sensory phenomena is not the same as to register those phenomena whether externally or internally generated (e.g., as a memory). And, therefore, inquiry into the nature of the latter, or the determination of those “facts which are the objects of intuition or consciousness” as distinct from “those which we merely infer” Mill ascribes to “a perfectly distinct department of science, to which the name metaphysics more particularly belongs: that portion of mental philosophy which attempts to determine what part of the furniture of the mind belongs to it originally,

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
and what part is constructed out of materials furnished to it from without.”80 He includes within the purview of this essentially more fundamental science things such as the conception of space and time “as things without the mind and distinguishable from the objects which are said to exist in them,” but also such mental phenomena as “Conception, Perception, Memory, and Belief: all of which are operations of the understanding in the pursuit of truth; but with which, as phenomena of the mind, or with the possibility which may or may not exist of analysing any of them into simpler phenomena, the logician as such has no concern.”81

Given any specific conceptions or perceptions, which can be determined or registered initially by others and, indeed, for the most part are so determined and registered, Mill is arguing, logic considers the nature of the process whereby one can reliably build on any combination of conceptions or perceptions to reflect something else of reality. That is, is the derivative idea true, or not, and by what rules, or procedures, should one be guided in deciding? All logical – that is, inferential – reasoning, he says, is useful insofar as there are “rules to which every mind consciously or unconsciously conforms in every instance in which it infers rightly,”82 whether attempting to judge distance in order navigate the physical world around us, or attempting to judge whether a given form of government is suitable to a particular people at a particular time. The latter problem of inference, of course, he sees as

80 System, 8.
81 System, 9.
82 System, 11.
considerably more complex, more necessarily self-conscious, and more dependent on
the derivation of light from many different minds than the former. The sharing of
information and knowledge in processes he considers subsidiary to inference, such as
naming and classification, are improved as they reflect the product of shared
comprehensions. Arguing for starting with ordinary language, Mill says, “If we begin
with names, and use them as our clue to the things [objects of belief], we bring at once
before us all the distinctions which have been recognised, not by a single inquirer, but
by all inquirers taken together.”

This follows in part because “What does any one’s personal knowledge of Things amount to, after subtracting all which he has acquired by means of the words of other people?”

Clarification of the perceived nature of an object of belief and of any assertion
about it – a proposition – is the first step Mill establishes as part of the process of
entering on a valid chain of inference. The next is classification and definition, and
then beyond that lies the important arena of causality. Mill’s commitment to the fact
of causality in nature, including human nature in particular. This will be of concern
when the discussion returns to the concept of character and how Mill attempts to
define its formation in relation to the idea of free will in Chapter IV; even so, it is a
topic that deserves a good deal more detailed consideration than is possible within the

---

83 *System, Book I, Of Names and Propositions*, CW VII, 23. See especially discussion of general vs. collective names (e.g., ‘polity’ as a collective name), and abstract vs. concrete (i.e., abstract does not mean ‘general,’ it means having to do with ‘attributes’ such as color, shape, size, etc.)

84 *System*, 22-23.
context of the general argument being presented regarding Mill’s view of the polity. Here, it will be asserted simply that Mill’s conception of causality is in a sense both more and less ‘thick’ than common conventions of the term’s employment.

Mill sees causality as representing, strictly, a relationship in time and/or space, a fixed relationship given by the nature of nature. “The general regularity in nature is a tissue of partial regularities, called laws.” Causality represents nature’s laws in the sense that it reflects what is required, what is so regular as to be not susceptible to deviation. Nature’s regularities are absolute, and hence when successfully uncovered, susceptible of prediction. Gravity is. Whatever it is or however we may come to interpret what it is that it is, is for Mill of lesser consequence than the fact, as he sees it, that gravity just is. The law of gravity, per Newton, is observed to operate in the perceivable universe in a characteristic, unvarying pattern. Of quantum theories and uncertainty principles, or parallel universes and wormholes and relativity Mill of course knew nothing, but it’s not unreasonable to suggest that had he been aware of this form of thought about physics as having its realms of the contingent, variable, and absolutely unpredictable, it would not have altered his basic position. He was interested in the practical application of ideas of causality to human action in the universe as we experience it. He was at pains to insist, however, that he understood causality to mean nothing more and nothing less than a characteristic linking of phenomena in space or time.

---

85 System, 315.
A certain fact invariably occurs whenever certain circumstances are present, and does not occur when they are absent; the like is true of another fact; and so on. From these separate threads of connexion between parts of the great whole which we term nature, a general tissue of connexion unavoidably weaves itself, by which the whole is held together. If A is always accompanied by D, B by E, and C by F, it follows that A B is accompanied by D E, A C by D F, B C by E F, and finally A B C by D E F; and thus the general character of regularity is produced, which, along with and in the midst of infinite diversity, pervades all nature.  

Mill’s view of causality does not imply a Causer. The idea of cause in the sense of intended result or volition does not enter into his understanding of the forces of nature, except as distinctly and solely applied to the nature of what is true or may at times be true of conscious and self-conscious beings; he is certainly at least a skeptic and perhaps a full-blown atheist with respect to the existence of an Ultimate Being. The central point is that he asserts the fact of a complex regularity in the universe, and further claims that human nature, rightly understood, is as subject to this regularity as is any other object or creature, even though it is also the case that, rightly understood, humans may be seen as having the natural capacity to assert a degree of management over or direction of nature’s expression of its laws that is unique. An essential human capacity, therefore, consists in the ability to investigate nature’s regularities effectively, for the purpose of generalizing from specific experiences.

Induction properly so called, as distinguished from those mental operations, sometimes though improperly designated by the name, which I have attempted in the preceding chapter to characterize, may, then, be summarily defined as Generalization from Experience. It consists in inferring from some individual instances in which a phenomenon is observed to occur, that it occurs in all instances of a certain class; namely, in all which resemble the former, in what are regarded as the material circumstances.  

---

86 Ibid.  
87 See Three Essays, and especially “Theism.” CW X, 429-489.  
Mill’s universe may be regular, but it is also notably complex. Regularities, while all related to whatever fundamental fact of existence constitutes regularity in the first place, are manifold.

It is, however, something to have advanced so far, as to see that the study of nature is the study of laws, not a law; of uniformities, in the plural number: that the different natural phenomena have their separate rules or modes of taking place, which, though much intermixed and entangled with one another, may, to a certain extent, be studied apart: that (to resume our former metaphor) the regularity which exists in nature is a web composed of distinct threads, and only to be understood by tracing each of the threads separately; for which purpose it is often necessary to unravel some portion of the web, and exhibit the fibres apart. The rules of experimental inquiry are the contrivances for unravelling the web.  

It might be said that Mill’s restricted conception of causation could have been expressed simply by the term “uniformity,’ or “regularity,” but that would miss the imputation of necessary nexus on which he relied. Cause was indeed a term of art for Mill, deliberately chosen to imply “if x then necessarily, therefore, X (or Y).” It is that “necessarily” to which he attended, as well as the “therefore.” Mill is committed to the idea that humans act intentionally, that the idea of human intention is meaningful (i.e., that our paths are not unalterably undetermined by forces beyond the self, the self being a real conception for Mill), but he also is committed to the idea that this exercise of self, or agency, is ineluctably constrained by the nature of nature and nature’s inescapable laws, the “Law of Universal Causation.” The barebones statement of causality Mill gives is as follows:

The phenomena of nature exist in two distinct relations to one another; that of simultaneity, and that of succession. Every phenomenon is related in an uniform manner, to some phenomena that coexist with it, and to some extent that have preceded it and will follow it.”

---

89 *System*, 318.
90 *System*, 323.
This statement on its face would make Mill appear to be something of a raw empiricist, or simple correlationist, which is far from the case. He is, rather, devoted to the importance of theory, of a statement of both the why and how features of explanation, and the imputed dynamic significance of causal relationships, as will be seen below in the discussion of the sixth book in the *System*, dealing with the application of inference to social life. Mill suggests that the process of induction begins with analytic observation, the identification of wholes as such, and their component parts. This step must be linked to another, the affirmation of the posited relationship among parts through a testing of what is actually in nature:

[W]e must endeavour to effect a separation of the facts from one another, not in our minds only, but in nature. The mental analysis, however, must take place first.91

Assessing what is invariant in any posited causal relationship represents the fundamental challenge in a complex universe. Single causes can have multiple effects, depending on circumstances; specific effects can have different causes. Mill says that the most robust test of a relationship is what he calls the Method of Difference. This is the process of establishing, for a given set of circumstances, that a particular effect does not appear in the absence of a specific cause, but does appear in its presence.92 The function of the science of logic more generally is to establish the

91 *System*, 379.
92 See Mill’s discussion of hypotheses and testing in *System*, Book III, Chapter XIV: “Of the Limits to the Explanation of Laws of Nature; and of Hypotheses,” CW VII, 484-508. Of interest here is the note added in a later edition referring to Darwin’s hypothesis about the role of natural selection in evolution: “Mr. Darwin’s remarkable speculation on the Origin of Species is another unimpeachable example of a legitimate hypothesis. What he terms “natural selection” is not only a *vera causa*, but one proved to be capable of producing effects of the same kind with those which the hypothesis ascribes to it: the question of possibility is entirely one of degree. It is unreasonable to accuse Mr. Darwin (as has been done) of violating the rules of Induction. The rules of Induction are concerned with the conditions of
rules of reasoning which, when properly followed, allow humans to conclude that the beliefs they hold about likely consequences are meaningful, true beliefs corresponding with the facts of nature, and therefore can be relied on for action. According to Mill, what leads to belief is experience; what renders belief reliable is its validation in circumstances different in particular ways from the circumstances of the experience that gave rise to the belief initially. It is not enough to posit the existence of a cause from the mere observation of an effect in association with an antecedent. It must further be demonstrated that in the absence of the hypothesized antecedent the effect of interest does not appear. The agency effect of interest to Mill is twofold. It includes both the instantiation of the individual psychological capacity necessary to the realization of rational freedom, and the organization of such social conditions as will foster the necessary psychological capacity, and enable its realization. Much as Aristotle did, Mill locates the proximate cause, or primary antecedent of the effect with which he is most concerned, in the constitution of a political union.93 His objective in the sixth book of the System, The Logic of the Moral Sciences, is to lay out the case for a specific approach to the scientific understanding of character development, based on his causal belief – his hypothesis, in essence – that the nature of the wholeness, the unitariness of a polity has something important to do with the

Proof. Mr. Darwin has never pretended that his doctrine was proved....He has opened a path of inquiry full of promise, the results of which none can foresee.” Note v-v, within † at 498-499.

93 Aristotle’s and Mill’s views about the polity differ in important respects; the point here is merely to note that both hypothesize a relationship between the fact of political union as they define it, on the one hand, and human nature as it exhibits certain characteristic features, on the other.
nature of the prevailing type of individual character to be found within its boundaries, this prevailing character that he argues is the most important antecedent of agency.

**Toward a Theory of the Polity: The Logic of Character Formation**

The title of the sixth and final book in Mill’s *System of Logic, The Logic of the Moral Sciences*, would lead a modern reader to anticipate a discussion primarily of ethics. That, however, is not Mill’s primary focus in this work. He is providing a broad and comprehensive positive theory of the relationship of political union to society, and of society to the development of the person. This theory, or set of related hypotheses, he intends to serve as the foundation of the study of political entities and their role in the development and extension of human agency. Although he occasionally seems to lose sight of the non-normative purposes he claims for the effort, for the most part he distinguishes what he is up to here from the process of choosing ends. As noted, at the end of Book VI he is explicit on the point, devoting the concluding chapter of the book to explaining the difference between “practice,’ or “Art,” including “Morality and Policy,” and science and the rules of inference with which he is concerned in the *System*.

Now, the imperative mood is the characteristic of art, as distinguished from science. Whatever speaks in rules or precepts, not in assertions respecting matters of fact, is art; and ethics or morality is properly a portion of the art corresponding to the sciences of human nature and society.\(^{94}\)

---

\(^{94}\) *LMS*, *(System, Book VI)* Chapter XII, “Of the Logic of Practice, or Art; including Morality and Polity.” CW VIII, 943. Mill emphasized this point in the 1839 letter to John Sterling in which he was discussing the significance of the essay on Coleridge to his own philosophical outlook. Referring to his work on the *System*, underway at the same time, Mill says “Above all mine is a logic of the indicative
Whether this distinction can be as clearly maintained as Mill intends may be disputed, but that he held the intention is unarguable and of significance since it is relevant to what he was attempting to do in later works aimed at a broader audience than the System, works such as Considerations on Representative Government, Utilitarianism and On Liberty. Mill considered himself to have a scientific or at least a proto-scientific basis for his political and ethical analysis and prescriptions, given his particular understanding of what is good, and it is in the System and especially in Book VI that this basis is laid out and justified. He means to argue that such justification of if-then validity should be required of anyone proposing prescriptions for human society. Harking back to the position he took in Bentham, in which he saw the making of law requiring a different set of judgments from its application, he says “the legislator, or other practitioner, who goes by the rules rather than by their reasons, like the old-fashioned German tacticians who were vanquished by Napoleon, or the physician who preferred that his patients should die by the rule rather than recover contrary to it, is rightly judged to be a mere pedant, and the slave of his formulas.”

As he put it in Bentham,

The true teacher of the fitting social arrangements for England, France, or America, is the one who can point out how the English, French, or American character can be improved, and how it has been made what it is. A philosophy

---

95 LMS, CW VIII, 944. Possibly an implicit stab at Kant; this parallels a comment made explicitly in Utilitarianism, Chapter I, “General Remarks,” rejecting the validity of the categorical imperative as a basis for morality. CW X, 207.
of laws and institutions, not founded on a philosophy of national character, is an absurdity.\textsuperscript{96}

This attempt at a science of society, which essentially resolves into a blueprint for a science of politics, begins with the assertion that the laws of human nature, of “Mind” and of “Society,” are in fact “capable of becoming subjects of science in the strict sense of the term.”\textsuperscript{97} The painstaking, lengthy discussion of the rules of inference and how they are to be applied appropriately in search of the validation of perception and generalization comes to its intended culmination in this application to human affairs. “Here, therefore, if anywhere, the principles laid down in the preceding Books may be expected to be useful.”\textsuperscript{98} The key points elaborated in the arguments that follow amount to Mill’s defense for the assertion that there can be a science of society – not a sociology, simply, but a full science of the person in society and, in a way, of society in the person, a science of culture and history as well as of psychology and economics. These points include the idea of the mature individual self as a locus of characteristic intentionality developed through a process of interaction among the person, society and circumstances; the claim that all social phenomena are ultimately rooted in and related to psychological processes, or “laws of mind,” which determine the nature of the process but not the content of character development; the claim that social phenomena must be understood holistically, as

\textsuperscript{96} Bentham, CW X, 99.  
\textsuperscript{97} LMS, 834.  
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
necessarily systemic; and, finally, that the political cannot be studied independently of the social – that it is politics, in effect, that determines the nature of the social systems (cultures) prevailing in given times and places, and is in turn determined by them.

This integrative conception is based on the presumption Mill adopted from the work of August Comte, that there is a fixed “scale of the subordination of the sciences, being the order of the logical dependence of those which follow on those which precede.” This theorem, along with Comte’s hypothesis that all systematic human knowledge has followed a trajectory over time from theism through metaphysics to scientific naturalism, or “positivism,” deeply informed Mill’s view of how a scientific project must proceed, and how its investigations should be ordered. Employing general Comtian methodology, then, in Book VI, Mill sketches out the components of a general “science of Human Nature” as he sees it – whereby “the approximate truths which compose a practical knowledge of mankind,” are exhibited as “corollaries from the universal laws of human nature on which they rest.” This is a “genus” science, a major category that subsumes a science of the individual and a science of society, with the sub-sciences of the latter – e.g., of morals and politics – of necessity resting on the sub-science of individual psychology as astronomy rests on physics. The

99 Comte, CW X, 279.
100 LMS, CW VIII, 848.
101 Comte’s classification of the hierarchy of sciences omitted psychology. Mill felt Comte erred badly in denying the importance and validity of the study of mental states. See Comte, CW X, 296 ff. Although Mill’s formal analysis of Comte did not appear until 1865, his intellectual engagement with Comte’s ideas came much earlier. See Autobiography, referencing the Système de Philosophie Positive.
science of human nature should allow for predictions about likely thoughts, feelings
and actions, “of the great majority of the human race, or of some nation or class of
persons,” to the extent that it has successfully developed an understanding of
general causes and their general effects regarding the formation of opinions, feelings
and habits. Mill also provides an argument as to how such a science is to ground its
procedures of inference, or verification, so that generalizations may be relied on, along
with a justification for the establishment of a particular set of procedures as
constituting necessary and sufficient grounds. Together, the various components of
Mill’s science of human nature and the grounds of verification he recommends
constitute Mill’s paradigm of the instantiation of agency.

The concept of character, and its near relative, national character, are central to
this paradigm, both as to objects and processes. The concept of nation is predicate to
the concept of national character and is thus equally central, but its phenomenological
status is only partially articulated by Mill.

“I already regarded the methods of physical sciences as the proper models for political.” This is within
a discussion of the years 1829-1830. CW I, 173.

The specifics of the method of verification Mill recommended are considered further below; here the
purpose is to clarify the overall conception that method was meant to test.

This point will be addressed again in Chapter III in reference to Considerations on Representative
Government. It relates to claims about Mill’s commitment to an exclusive methodological
individualism but also to holism. Ryan’s Philosophy addresses these claims (158-162 and 180), as
does Baum’s Rereading (50). The latter describes Mill as having a “social version” of methodological
individualism. Emphasis in original.
Ethology: The Science of Character Development

At the heart of Mill’s paradigm of the science of human nature lies a set of ideas relating to the meaning and determination of right action, which for Mill is action that is rationally directed at the attainment of the higher forms of utility. He has said in his discussion of the importance of definition to the process of induction that it is critical to begin with a clear understanding of the nature of key phenomena and in the process to take account of the usage of words in ordinary language and their etymology.105 The discussion at the beginning of the Logic of the Moral Sciences addresses the use of the term “necessity” in relation to causation as the term might be applied to human action. Contending with arguments about the nature of free will, Mill wants to reject a position of absolute determinism in favor of a view of the human as, in a meaningful sense, capable of self-conscious self-direction and yet also an appropriate subject for systematic study as to modes of behavior. His challenge, in view of this, is to establish grounds for asserting a general claim of the possibility of deriving causal predicates of behavior on the basis of a scientifically developed understanding of the factors that contribute to the likelihood of occurrence of certain motivations. He stakes out a middle ground position.

The human self, Mill says, is both self-aware (that is, is aware of or perceives or experiences the self as a functionally autonomous Self) in regard to its desires, and also is capable via cognitive capability – reason – of understanding the likely

consequences of acting in specific ways to realize those desires. To the extent that the intellect has been cultivated effectively, the self in principle can come to appreciate distinctions between beneficial and pernicious desires, beneficial and pernicious results of particular actions. To the extent that the feelings are cultivated appropriately, desires will attach to right action, right in the sense that it is reasonably aimed at achieving individually and socially beneficial results. Consistent, or characteristically, right action (i.e., it’s expected, or roughly predictable) depends on one’s having the ability to affect that psychological fusion of habitual thought and habitual action that goes by the name of character.

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.¹⁰⁶

Virtue consists in that psychological condition in which the self correctly perceives that it is able to bring its first-nature impulses under the control of second-nature motivations to right action – at least, in principle. “None but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free” because “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

¹⁰⁶ LMS, CW VIII, 841.
brought into conflict in any particular case of conduct.” As these passages imply, Mill does not entirely sort out the idea of character, *per se*, from the idea of a good character (or, a bad one). He is addressing the phenomenological validity of the idea of self-control in a context in which he means to defend the value of purposive, deliberate habituation as counterweight to impulses deriving from an overly narrow and therefore ultimately dysfunctional sense of self-interest. “[I]n this manner also it is that the habit of willing to persevere in the course which he has chosen does not desert the moral hero, even when the reward, however real, which he doubtless receives from the consciousness of well-doing is anything but an equivalent for the sufferings he undergoes or the wishes which he may have to renounce.”

It helps clarify Mill’s position to recall his discussion of instincts in *Nature*. We are endowed with instincts that are functional and those that are dysfunctional, or at least with instincts that have to be appropriately cultivated – trained, disciplined, directed – toward functionality and away from dysfunctionality in their application to actions. The process of training, disciplining and directing the instincts, that is, the process of acquiring non-instinctive behavior patterns, to the extent that it represents the results of human intention, always involves the possibility at least in principle of an individual ‘override’ of habit, whether the habit has been primarily individually or primarily socially cultivated. But it is not the override feature with which Mill is here

---

107 Ibid.
108 *LMS*, 842.
most concerned; rather, it is the process of habituation and the regularity it generally entails. Understanding that process is a central task of the science of human nature. Mill insists that the ultimate laws, or theories, on which any such understanding can be based must be derived from the foundational human science of psychology, the science of the “Laws of Mind.”

As noted, Mill’s conception of the “mind” involves considerably more than cognition or calculation alone. Here he says that by the laws of mind he means to discuss the laws of mental phenomena, the “various feelings or states of consciousness of sentient beings” consisting of “Thoughts, Emotions, Volitions and Sensations.”

Mill leans heavily on James Mill’s associationist psychology to argue that a fundamental feature of mental functioning is the formation and linking of ideas. Referring to the process whereby an initial perception can subsequently be recalled by the mind as a thought element independent of any physical contact with the object or situation that generated it, Mill says

This law is expressed by saying, in the language of Hume, that every mental impression has its idea. Secondly, these ideas, or secondary mental states, are

---

109 LMS, 849. This is not the “theory of mind” as it pertains to debates within the natural sciences about inter-subjective perceptions, although it is obviously related to them; it is a theory of mind as it goes to the question of dualism, mind-body distinctions, and the structure of conscious thought. Mill was not only not a mind-body dualist; he did not imagine a wall between “thought” and “feeling.” For a view of current scientific and philosophical debate on this issue as it relates to politics and political theory, see John G. Gunnell, “Are We Losing Our Minds? Cognitive Science and the Study of Politics.” Political Theory 35, no. 6 (2007): 704-731. Gunnell is fundamentally committed to maintaining what he calls the “theoretical autonomy of social phenomena,” especially as it relates to conventionality. See p. 724. Mill’s position, in contrast, was that mind is distinct from brain, but not autonomous, and that there are social facts distinct from psychological (mental) facts, but that the latter are not autonomous either.
excited by our impressions, or by other ideas, according to certain laws which are called Laws of Association.\textsuperscript{10} Three laws of mind are identified here. The first relates perception to sensory input. The second posits the existence of mental images, or representations of perceptions.\textsuperscript{11} The third claims a key role for processes that link perceptions and representations. Mill then introduces two additional conceptions, the “Complex Idea,” which he suggests is made up of simpler ideas but also has, in effect, its own ideational autonomy (e.g., an orange which appears to us as something more than, different from, a mere assemblage of shape, color, texture, etc.), and the construct, “other constituents of the mind, its beliefs, its abstruser conceptions, its sentiments, emotions and volitions.”\textsuperscript{12} The latter he doubts will prove to be resolvable into “a mere case of association of ideas,” that it will not prove possible entirely to “resolve the laws of the more complex feelings into those of the simpler ones.”\textsuperscript{13} Here again, as earlier in the System, Mill is insisting that there is an important distinction between the processes by which we recognize a perception, or experience, as intrinsically valid and meaningful, on the one hand, and on the other, the processes that occur in the mind whereby “one belief produces another; what are the laws in virtue of which one thing is recognised by the mind, either rightly or erroneously, as evidence of another thing.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} LMS, 852. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{11} Representation as distinct from reference. For a contemporary philosophical discussion of how the two might be related, see J. T. Ismael, The Situated Self. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
\textsuperscript{12} LMS, 854.
\textsuperscript{13} LMS, 855.
\textsuperscript{14} LMS, 856.
these processes, Mill says, is the same as the “general laws of association,” whereby desires, emotions, ideas, judgments and volitions “become habitual.” In sum, it would appear that there are manifold mental phenomena and multiple mental processes to consider in tracing the development of discrete human thoughts and actions, and yet additional phenomena and processes to consider in understanding how humans learn to think, feel and act in specific, characteristic ways. To belabor the point, Mill’s primary interest as a political theorist is in the latter, but he believes that the two are connected and must be explored in relation to each other.

Mill is convinced that science can and will provide useful insights into the regularities of these mental phenomena that connect the “inner world” and the “outer world” behaviorally, but he wishes further to understand an additional set of regularities and their import: those which reflect how specific variations in the “outer world” interact with mental phenomena to produce different general patterns of characteristic behavior. “For every individual is surrounded by circumstances different from those of every other individual; every nation or generation of mankind from every other nation or generation; and none of these differences are without their influence in forming a different type of character.”

Human beings, he says, “do not all feel and act alike in the same circumstances; but it is possible to determine what

---

115 Ibid.
116 Mill also credits the plausibility of the idea that there are typical varieties of innate individual difference in responses to sensation – i.e., that there is a range. See LMS, 857.
117 LMS, 864
makes one person, in a given position, feel or act in one way, another in another; how any given mode of feeling and conduct, compatible with the general laws (physical and mental) of human nature has been, or may be, formed.”

There are two distinct assertions at work here. It is possible in principle to understand (scientifically) the complex nature of human motivations and the processes whereby they are acquired, or learned, as behavioral dispositions; and, further, to build on this understanding (scientifically) in order to make reasonable generalizations about how specific conditions external to the individual contribute to the acquisition of specific dispositions. Mill terms the study of the latter phenomena the science of ethology. “Ethology is the science which corresponds to the [art] of education, in the widest sense of the term, including the formation of national or collective character as well as individual.”

As described here briefly, Mill’s general ideas about individual human development and the possibility of studying the process systematically might be dismissed as simply interesting observations that have been overtaken by the actual science of developmental psychology, except that Mill undertakes these observations

---

118 Ibid.
119 ‘Dispositions’ (one could similarly refer to ‘traits’) is a term that implies discrete aspects of character. Mill’s interest sometimes seems to focus, more holistically, on the idea of character as a quality of the person (i.e., as distinct from “characteristics”). Whether or not particular actions or thoughts (or even traits) occur in particular bundles could be relevant to what Mill is thinking of when he speaks of national character. This poses questions which are important, but well beyond the scope of the discussion here. For some consideration of what is at issue genetically and behaviorally, see Chapter IV, below.
120 LMS, 869. The word ethology seems to be derived from ethics, but also may connect to Mill’s understanding that there is a relationship between feelings of group identification and morals (that is, between “ethnicity” or its equivalents, and systems of ethics).
as part of the groundwork for his philosophy of politics and morals. “The subject to be studied is, the origin and sources of all those qualities in human beings which are interesting to us, either as facts to be produced, to be avoided, or merely to be understood; and the object is to determine, from the general laws of mind, combined with the general position of our species in the universe, what actual or possible combinations of circumstances are capable of promoting or of preventing the production of those qualities.”

The political point is to try to affect, consciously and purposively through institutional design, the second nature of the citizenry.

“When the circumstances of an individual or of a nation are in any considerable degree under our control, we may, by our knowledge of tendencies, be enabled to shape those circumstances in a manner much more favorable to the ends we desire than the shape which they would of themselves assume. This is the limit of our power, but within this limit the power is a most important one.”

Mill’s conception of ethology, “the Exact Science of Human Nature,” is integral to his political philosophy. What is interesting from this perspective is to be found less in what he has to say about the importance of understanding in general how “circumstances” affect dispositions (tend to affect, more precisely) than in what he considers relevant circumstances, and why.

---

121 LMS, 874.
122 LMS, 869-870
123 LMS, 870.
124 Mill is explicit about his claims: there can be valid generalizations, but these will nonetheless remain approximate. Ethology is seen as a study of tendencies, not certainties. See in particular discussion in “That there is, or may be, a Science of Human Nature,” LMS, Chapter III, 844-848.
Uniformities of Co-Existence

In a chapter headed “General Considerations on the Social Science,” Mill turns to a discussion of the question of whether the “various phenomena which constitute social life” may be made the legitimate subject of scientific inquiry. It is these various phenomena of social life and their interaction with the circumstances of character formation with which Mill is concerned. It is clear from the outset that he considers the nature of these phenomena to be bound up with and integrally connected to the subject of politics. He begins by attacking the “vulgar notion” that “all pretension to lay down general truths on politics and society is quackery; that no universality and no certainty are attainable in such matters.”

He attributes such attitudes in part to a reaction to those “philosophic politicians” who have been guilty of attempting “not to ascertain universal sequences, but to frame universal precepts,” those “Students in politics” who “attempted to study the pathology and therapeutics of the social body before they had laid the necessary foundation in its physiology; to cure disease without understanding the laws of health.” The primary practical failing has been that they have “imagined some one form of government, or system of laws, to fit all cases.” Mill is as far from conceiving of the study of society, and the study of politics and governance, as separable subjects as it is possible to be. His reasons for holding this view he understands to be scientifically grounded. The greater part of the

---

125 LMS. 876.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
remainder of this book is devoted to explaining and defending the idea that humanity’s second-nature possibilities are culturally determined through the mechanism of character formation. In Mill’s view it follows as a corollary hypothesis that the form or constitution of the polity will be found to play a significant role in the way second-nature possibilities are expressed (are allowed, required, and/or enabled to be expressed) in any given time and place. This leads Mill into consideration of the corporate features of polities – features, for example, such as those reflected in the institutional forms discussed in the Coleridge essay – and this consideration further leads him to confront the problem of social and political change by recourse to a single variable, the human mind – more specifically the “speculative faculties,”128 and their interaction with the “common system of opinions”129 that forms the core of Mill’s political conception of culture and cultural change.

Two distinct features constitute this core. One is that it is developed through character-forming interaction between a self and a society, between selves and particular societies. The other is that societies exhibit characteristic natures, or consistent ways of responding to internal and external circumstances. This latter proposition includes the idea that the individuals within a given society have a tendency to respond to circumstances in relatively similar ways as compared with individuals in other societies, but it goes beyond that. Mill adopted Comte’s views not

128 LMS, 926.
129 Ibid.
only with respect to the latter’s claims about the possibility of a scientific study of social phenomena, but also with respect to the assertion that there exists always a “co-existence” between “the states of the various social phenomena.” Mill focused on the concept that there exist identifiable and meaningfully distinguishable “states of society” which may be treated as the subject of scientific study and which, when so treated, imply the existence of a “natural correlation,” or “Uniformities of Co-existence,” across their specific elements; that “not every variety of combination of these general social facts is possible, but only certain combinations....” States of society are like “different constitutions or different ages in the physical frame; they are conditions not of one or a few organs or functions, but of the whole organism,” and therefore it can be observed that “when one of the features of society is in a particular state, a state of many other features, more or less precisely determinate, always or usually co-exists with it. These features include virtually everything of importance to human life:

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

\[130\] LMS, 912.
\[131\] Ibid.
\[132\] Ibid.
themselves, constitute the state of society or the state of civilization at any given time.\textsuperscript{133}

There exists – implicitly, there \textit{must} exist – a “consensus” of the social, cultural, economic and moral systems characterizing a given polity, or “the same society.”

There is no social phenomenon which is not more or less influenced by every other part of the condition of the same society, and therefore by every cause which is influencing any other of the contemporaneous social phenomena. There is, in short, what physiologists term a \textit{consensus}, similar to that existing among the various organs and functions of the physical frame of man and the more perfect animals; and constituting one of the many analogies which have rendered universal such expressions as the “body politic” and “body natural.”\textsuperscript{134}

Mill contends that states of society – of the \textit{same} society – can be studied scientifically. The process would begin with the observation of historical trends in social behavior and organization, then proceed to the establishment of relationships among these observed trends and independently verifiable laws of psychology and, derived from them, laws relating to how character is determined so that it suits the requirements of social interaction in a given polity. These are the “psychological and ethological laws which govern the action of circumstances on men and of men on circumstances.”\textsuperscript{135}

Comte provided Mill with a conception of specific societies – polities – evolving over time while maintaining their essential coherence through a progression

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{LMS}, 911-912.
\textsuperscript{134} \textit{LMS}, 899. Emphasis in original. This organic conception remained in Mill’s text through all of his redrafts. Use of the term “consensus” as applied to society evidently originated with Mill. See Reeves, \textit{Victorian Firebrand}, 117 and 510, endnote 64. Mill’s, use, however, implied institutional synchronicity, not opinion sharing \textit{per se}.
\textsuperscript{135} \textit{LMS}, 914.
of changes, with the implication that science could and should comprehend the regularities in this progression.\textsuperscript{136} Mill agreed with Comte that individual sciences must be related to each other systematically, as a reflection of the regularity of nature as a whole. As noted earlier, and as the discussion about the Laws of Mind detailed above makes clear Mill vigorously disagreed with Comte’s dismissal of a distinct science of psychology. Mill also thought that Comte had not attended well enough to the question of those phenomena that might be thought to underlie the cohesive, or organizing features of stable social forms, or polities. He undertook to supply a framework for thinking about this under-theorized element of the science of human nature.\textsuperscript{137}

\textbf{The Polity as a Structure of Intelligibility}\textsuperscript{138}

According to the general Comtian view, across the broad sweep of human history a generalized evolution in human ways of being is to be observed, and this progression has been realized as a result of (or, at least, has been associated with) the phenomenon of political aggregation (“agglomeration”). Mill contends that in his focus on the question of what changes states of society, or the phenomena of “social dynamics,” Comte failed to consider adequately the problem of what constitutes them,

\textsuperscript{136} Mill accepted the Comtian claim that there has been a long-term universal pattern to the development of human epistemological frameworks, across and not just within specific societies, but he personally was preoccupied with within-polity phenomena as key to the process.

\textsuperscript{137} This is a framework Mill had already articulated, in Coleridge. It was repeated \textit{verbatim} in \textit{The Logic of the Moral Sciences}; and, as with the organic references to states of society noted above, the formulation survived intact through subsequent revisions of text made by Mill, up through the final edition of 1872. See Robson’s Textual Introduction to \textit{System}, CW VII, xliv-cviii.

\textsuperscript{138} See page 97, note 7, above, and Steinberger, \textit{Idea of the State}, passim.
or the phenomena of “social statics.”

Looking at history, “It is easily seen, for instance, that as society advances, mental tend more and more to prevail over bodily qualities, and masses over individuals; that the occupation of all that portion of mankind who are not under external restraint is at first chiefly military, but society becomes progressively more and more engrossed with productive pursuits, and the military spirit gradually gives way to the industrial; to which many similar truths might be added.”

But these observations of regularity do not constitute scientific laws. They are “still at too great a distance from the elementary laws of human nature on which they depend.”

To “obtain better empirical laws,” it is necessary “to combine the statical view of social phenomena with the dynamical, considering not only the progressive changes of the different elements, but the contemporaneous condition of each, and thus obtain empirically the law of correspondence not only between the simultaneous states, but between the simultaneous changes, of those elements.”

Mill is calling for a theory of social change that can satisfy a theory of social stability, a theory premised on a scientific understanding – a conception that can be validated according to necessary rules of induction and deduction – of human psychology as it manifests itself within the context of social phenomena. He proposes

---

139 “Social statics, or the science of the Co-existences [sic] of Social Phenomena.” LMS, Chapter X, 917-924.
140 LMS 924-925.
141 LMS, 925.
142 Ibid.
to find the foundations of such a theory in the regularities conducing to the maintenance of political unions, and the features of individual and collective human nature that enable it. He offers as key the idea of the human “speculative faculty,” including “the nature of the beliefs” which humans at any given time by whatever means “have arrived at concerning themselves and the world by which they are surrounded.” Shared beliefs are foundational because “as the strongest propensities of uncultivated or half-cultivated human nature (being the purely selfish ones and those of a sympathetic character which partake most of the nature of selfishness) evidently tend in themselves to disunite mankind, not to unite them, – to make them rivals, not confederates; social existence is only possible by a disciplining of those more powerful propensities, which consists in subordinating them to a common system of opinions.”

With this statement, Mill has completed a philosophical passage into what is in at least one key respect a post-Kantian worldview. One can and should dare to “think for oneself.” Indeed, per Mill, the central processes of human reason, of inference, occur within the individual mind and can occur only there. But to be truly and fully human is to be able to exercise agency not absolutely constrained by one’s own inherently limited powers of reason, but rather with the benefit of the much more significant power of “light derived from other minds.” In order to take advantage of

---

143 LMS, 926.
144 Ibid.
this social power, it is necessary to be able to share thoughts, including both information from perceptions and the vastly more complex inferential derivations of that information, with others. The essential condition of communication consists in a common conceptual language, a grammar of comprehension, which amounts to, or is conditioned on, the existence of a “common system of opinions” – opinions about the nature of nature and therefore also derivatively about the nature of right action – or the “art” of human happiness – to which the individual’s self-direction must be amenable to being subordinated as appropriate. This foundational common system of opinions is a set of shared beliefs about the world and how to be in it effectively. Moreover,

The degree of this subordination is the measure of the completeness of the social union, and the nature of the common opinions determines its kind. But in order that mankind should conform their actions to any set of opinions, these opinions must exist, must be believed by them. And thus the state of the speculative faculties, the character of the propositions assented to by the intellect, essentially determines the moral and political state of the community, as we have already seen that it determines the physical.\textsuperscript{145}

Mill considers it to be an established fact that there is a “necessary correlation between the form of government existing in any society and the contemporaneous state of civilisation: a natural law which stamps the endless discussions and innumerable theories respecting forms of government in the abstract as fruitless and worthless for any other purpose than as a preparatory treatment of materials to be afterwards used for the construction of a better philosophy.”\textsuperscript{146} This does not mean he

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} LMS, 919-920.
believes that there is an adequate understanding of the relationship of particular political forms to particular states of society. He is alluding to the establishment of a science, but recognizes it as still in its infancy. In addition to the proposition that forms of government are related to states of society systematically – that there is a necessary correlation between the two – Mill further argues that the fact of social coherence has its own correlates. “There are some circumstances which, being found in all societies without exception, and in the greatest degree where the social union is most complete, may be considered (when psychological and ethological laws confirm the indication) as conditions of the existence of the complex phenomenon called a State.”\textsuperscript{147} It appears from subsequent comments that Mill does not mean to confine the analysis of the phenomenon of the polity, or “social union,” to the modern nation-state. “By following out this course of inquiry we shall find a number of requisites which have been present in every society that has maintained a collective existence, and on the cessation of which it has either merged in some other society, or reconstructed itself on some new basis, in which the conditions were conformed to.”\textsuperscript{148}

These requisites of lasting social union he judges to be observable from the scientific study of history and verifiable through the study of political ethology, beginning most importantly with the establishment of a consistent principle of obedience to authority. Subjection to governance, in the lasting form that is necessary

\begin{footnotes}
\item[147] LMS, 920.
\item[148] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
to the maintenance of a stable political association, is a psychological phenomenon, a state of mind generated by a combination of three conditions, or factors, socially constituted (or perhaps socially instantiated is a better term?): a system of education; a feeling of loyalty or allegiance to a particular source of authority; and a “strong and active principle of cohesion among members of the same community or state.”

Mill takes the trouble here to distance himself from narrow or strictly conventional interpretations of these “conditions” as he has labeled them. Education is that system “beginning with infancy and continued through life” the main ingredient of which is the inculcation of “restraining discipline.” Importantly, its purpose is to “train the human being in the habit, and thence the power, of subordinating his personal impulses and aims” to what are considered the “ends of society.” The feeling of loyalty may “vary in its objects, and is not confined to any particular form of government.” It may attach itself to persons, laws, or principles, such as “principles of individual freedom and political and social equality,” but in every case – where it functions effectively to maintain social unity – it is constitutive of a not-to-be questioned reverence or regard. “[I]n all political societies which have had a durable existence there has been some fixed point, something which people agree in holding

---

149 *LMS*, 923. In a note, Mill tells the reader that these passages on the correlates of obedience as the necessary condition of lasting political union are from the Coleridge essay, here described as a “criticism on the negative philosophy of the eighteenth century.” *LMS*, 920.

150 *LMS*, 921.

151 Ibid.

152 *LMS*, 922.

153 Ibid.
sacred,” and which is “in the common estimation placed beyond discussion.”

Finally, the principle of cohesion necessary to the maintenance of political union is a positive sense of identity, a principle of sympathy or “union” whereby members of a community “feel that they are one people, that their lot is cast together, that evil to any of their fellow-countrymen is evil to themselves, and do not desire selfishly to free themselves from their share of any common inconvenience by severing the connection.”

Even though he included a string of caveats intended to distinguish this last point from “nationalism,” Mill here clearly intended to imply that evidence from history suggests that a feeling of commonality – identity perhaps – that goes deeper than expedience is one of the necessary conditions of achieving the psychological requirements of governance. The important role played by the feeling, or instinct, of strong sympathy with the concerns of a certain delimited set of others, is more elaborately discussed in *Utilitarianism*, where Mill talks about how it can be adapted to serve as the foundation of a system of justice. Whether Mill’s views about the psychological significance of a sense of nation in the constitution of political union have empirical support or not, it is not possible to understand his conception of the

---

154 Ibid.  
155 Ibid.  
156 *LMS*, 923.  
157 See *Utilitarianism*, Chapter V, “Of the Connection between Justice and Utility.” CW X 240 ff. The relevance of this argument to Mill’s understanding of the phenomenon of the polity is addressed below, in Chapter III.
polity and, for that matter, of society, without taking account of them.\textsuperscript{158} How does a polity maintain coherence and nonetheless permit change, making possible developments in national character and thus an advance of agency? This is the question Mill addresses as to art, or technology, in \textit{On Liberty}, \textit{Utilitarianism}, and \textit{Considerations on Representative Government}. In \textit{The Logic of the Moral Sciences}, he contends that the necessary scientific underpinnings for this art will be found in the as yet non-existent discipline of political ethology, grounded in “the theory of the causes which determine the type of character belonging to a people or to an age.”\textsuperscript{159}

Mill is arguing that to understand human nature not simply as it is but more importantly as it can be, it is necessary to comprehend the sources of the diversity that characterize it, diversities of both individual and national character that are not strictly animal, or merely biological. He assumes that the sources of national character are related to the sources of individual character. The “phenomena...with which the influences of the ethological state of the people are mixed up at every step (so that the connection of effects and causes cannot be even rudely marked out without taking those influences into consideration) could not with an advantage nor without great disadvantage be treated independently of political ethology, nor, therefore, of all the

\textsuperscript{158} See Georgios Varouxakis, “Cosmopolitan Patriotism in J.S. Mill’s Political Thought and Activism,” in Urbinati and Zakaras, \textit{Mill’s Political Thought}. 277-297. Varouxakis is concerned with Mill’s politics, not their philosophical foundations, but the thrust of his assessment of Mill’s ideas about nation is generally consistent with the interpretation developed here.

\textsuperscript{159} \textit{LMS}, 905
circumstances by which the qualities of a people are influenced.” The investigation into these phenomena Mill considers to be in a primitive state, at best. “[T]he effect of institutions or social arrangements upon the character of the people is generally that portion of their effects which is least attended to, and least comprehended.” The effect likely to be of most significance, Mill concludes, is that effect relating to “the character of the propositions assented to by the intellect.”

160 LMS, 906.  
161 LMS, 926.  
162 Ibid.
[As an official in the East India office] I became practically conversant with...the necessities of compromise....I learnt how to obtain the best I could...instead of being indignant or dispirited because I could not have entirely my own way, to be pleased and encouraged when I could have the smallest part of it; and when even that could not be, to bear with complete equanimity the being overruled altogether.¹

What marriage may be in the case of two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them – so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and can have alternatively the pleasure of leading and of being led in the path of development – I will not attempt to describe it.²

CHAPTER III
THE NATURE OF CO-EXISTENCE

Mill’s self-understood life goal was to foster individual human agency, “rational freedom,” as a means of promoting an ever-increasing happiness for the human species as a whole. The last two chapters documented how Mill’s early and continuing preoccupation with this life project was connected to his personal “system of opinions”: first, his non-theistic ontology of humans as entirely in and of nature, a species uniquely able to learn over time how to manage natural instincts and other natural things, and thereby achieve a “higher,” uniquely human, happiness; second, his a posteriorist epistemological belief that humans learn about nature’s regularities solely by experience and inference, including importantly, experienced feelings of sociality, socially shared experience, and socially shared inferences; and, third, his socially informed judgment that social co-existence – the persistent “agglomeration”

¹ Autobiography, CW I, 87.
² Subjection, CW XXI, 336
of individuals within self-maintaining, coherent, distinguishable, unitized social “bodies” – is a necessary condition of effective human learning and thus a necessary instrument of human improvement.

Mill’s self-influenced life plan was to improve the British polity’s functioning as such an instrument, by educating its influential leaders – partisans and non-partisans alike – about the nature of social co-existence, its cause and effect relationship with individual agency, and its uses and abuses in relation to “rational freedom.” This chapter re-visits some of Mill’s more well-known attempts to educate, as they reflect the elements of this partially developed and largely untested political theory – theory of the polity – and its relationship to his envisioned science of political ethology – “science of national character.” The four works considered specifically here are Considerations on Representative Government, Utilitarianism, On Liberty, and The Subjection of Women. In these works, Mill can be seen attempting to articulate several complex points about the nature of co-existence: that the idea of “agglomeration,” or social unitization and the particular forms it takes, are related but also distinct phenomena; that the fact or degree of social unitization is related to inter-generational commonalities of feeling as well as of thought and behavior; that social unitization, per se, is a necessary but not sufficient condition of human improvement; and, that the value to humanity as a whole represented by the existence of a given social unit (the utility of the whole) is related to but distinct from its value as experienced by particular human individuals (individual utility).
Mill’s emphasis in the *Logic of the Moral Sciences* on the critical role of the “speculative faculty” in determining change in patterns of human action tends to obscure the extent to which his ontology of the polity relies on the role of feelings as well as cognition in the framing of a common system of opinions. In particular, the idea of sympathetic association, or fellow-feeling, constitutes an element of the state of mind that is of significance in Mill’s theory. A coherent, more or less internally consistent set of propositions – about nature, acting in nature, and the results as experienced, or felt – come to be shared within the framework of a given polity. The function of this common system of feeling/thought/action is motivational. It works to subordinate what he calls “purely selfish propensities” and “those of a sympathetic character” to the requirements of a larger group life. To unite humans in a social unit broader than that of near-kin, the first-nature impulses of egoism and nepotism must be disciplined, brought into a second-nature subordination to acquired habits of broad other-regard, and shared learning. This is accomplished via submission to the authority of a common mental state, sympathetically shared, and framing cognitive understanding about what is of value and how it is to be obtained in given circumstances. The existence of government expresses the fact of submission, providing a necessary condition of the behavioral consistency required for co-existence within this framework. Underlying this position is a particular conception of human utility as grounded in and constrained by the environmental, psychological, and
social facts of a given time and place – facts alterable only by the united efforts of confederates, not the self-interested conflicts of rivals.³

The Criterion of a Good Form: Matching Character to Interests

About a decade and a half after the original publication of the *System of Logic*, Mill produced an attempt to apply its speculative thoughts directly to politics. *Considerations on Representative Government* is both a practical evaluation of representative democracy as a form of government, and a philosophical *discursus* on the nature and function of political union. Mill’s argument in *Considerations* represents an extension of the premise developed in *Civilization, Bentham, Coleridge*, and the *System of Logic*, that large-scale co-existence, or “combination,” and agency develop interactively. The possibility of agency, however, depends on a prior, socially established psychological condition, a disposition to obedience associated with a shared perception of a shared existence – a sense of identity of interest requiring collective action to achieve common purposes related to the persistence of a social unit. That is, an acquired disposition, or habit, of obedience, married to shared feelings of identity, or common fate, have to co-exist for “combination” in any form to persist. Furthermore, the existence and maintenance of the “combination” itself, as a holistic social fact, must become an object of intrinsic common utility.

³ See *LMS*, CW VIII, 926. Mill’s limited interest in conflict in general deserves attention as a problem for his theorizing. Some thoughts about this are presented in the Conclusion, below.
In *Considerations*, Mill’s point of departure is the proposition surfaced in *Coleridge* and more fully articulated in *LMS*, that a particular social union and the institutions that reify it play a significant and necessary role in determining how innate human dispositions come to be expressed with respect to acting effectively in the world. His primary corollary proposition from *LMS*, that the essence of the matter has to do with the formation of *particular* dispositions – patterns of motivation and action – provides the central premise of his argument in the later work. In the preface to *Considerations*, Mill describes the contents as intended to articulate a political doctrine, the principles of which “I have been working up during the greater part of my life.”

He begins by engaging the debate about whether governments are born or made, whether they emerge as an “organic growth from the nature and life” of a specific “people,” and thus are not to be thought of as fundamentally constructible, or whether they are not rather wholly artificial, made by human heads and hands like “a steam plough or a threshing machine.” He rejects the organic position more fully than the instrumental one, but asserts nonetheless that there are conditions that the nature of government requires for the viability and effectiveness of a specific governing form.

The people for whom the form of government is intended must be willing to accept it; or at least not so unwilling, as to oppose an insurmountable obstacle

---

4 *Considerations*, CW XIX, 373. In the *Autobiography*, Mill reiterates the point that the only real revolution in his basic political philosophy was completed well before his detailed practical views, as outlined in *Considerations*, were formed. *Autobiography*, CW I, 199.

5 *Considerations*, 375.

6 *Considerations*, 374.
to its establishment. They must be willing and able to do what is necessary to keep it standing. And they must be willing and able to do what it requires of them to enable it to fulfill its purposes. The word “do” is to be understood as including forbearances as well as acts. They must be capable of fulfilling the conditions of action, and the conditions of self-restraint, which are necessary either for keeping the established polity in existence, or for enabling it to achieve the ends, its conduciveness to which forms its recommendation.\(^7\)

What Mill is up to in this essay is to make the case for his hypothesis that there is, or has been, a change in human nature in the direction of agency understood as rational freedom, and that this change has been the result of a parallel change in the extent and kind of human social organization, or combination, changes causally related to political unitization. As he elaborates on it, the qualification of willingness has to do not only with acceptance of a specific form of governance, but more fundamentally with the acceptance of governance \textit{per se}, and the presence within the population broadly of a disposition to law-abidingness and mutual policing. The \textit{sine qua non} for the effectiveness of a political order is a psychological disposition shared across a group constituting “a people whose sympathies are on the side of the law, and who are willing to give active assistance in its enforcement.”\(^8\) This statement echoes his attempt in the Coleridge essay to theorize the essential condition of a permanent political society as a disposition to obedience, or submission to authority. Here, he goes a bit further, in that the essential disposition is characterized as a commitment to maintain a system of authority, not only to accept one. This goes not only to

\(^7\) \textit{Considerations}, 376.  
\(^8\) \textit{Considerations}, 378.
egalitarian forms of authority determination. “There have been states of society in which even a monarchy of any great territorial extent could not subsist...because the machinery of authority was not perfect enough to carry orders into effect at a great distance from the person of the ruler.”

He said of the “barbarians who overran the Roman Empire [i]t required centuries of time, and an entire change of circumstances, to discipline them into regular obedience even to their own leaders, when not actually serving under their banner.” Further, “A race who have been trained in energy and courage by struggles with Nature and their neighbours, but who have not yet settled down into permanent obedience to any common superior, would be little likely to acquire this habit under the collective government of their own body.”

Having established as an assumption that governments can be made, even if the feasibility of specific forms are dependent on background conditions related to the dispositions and capacities of those to be governed, Mill moves on to make the case as to why one form of government might be preferable to another. It is notable that his argument proceeds on the basis of a stipulation of the interests of the society as a whole. Reverting to his discussion of Coleridge’s themes, but with his own permutation, Mill proposes to characterize “the interests of any given society” which government is to promote as generally consisting of order, on the one hand, and “progress,” on the other. He substitutes order for Coleridge’s “permanence” to make

---

9 Ibid.
10 Considerations, 376.
11 Considerations, 415.
room for the proposition that the conditions of order and the conditions of progress are consistent, although not entirely overlapping. “Order means Obedience,” or more broadly, “the preservation of peace by the cessation of private violence,” or even more broadly, “the preservation of all kinds and amounts of good which already exist.”

Progress is defined as “consisting in the increase” of those goods – and implicitly, the invention of goods that do not yet exist.

This formula is a preliminary to the central premise around which the more specific arguments of the treatise are framed: i.e., that there is a specifiable set of good qualities “in the citizens individually” that is the key both to maintaining the good things of interest to the polity, and adding to them. This assertion underwrites the point that both the causes and the effects of government, good or bad, are related to the capacities and dispositions of the governed. “If we ask ourselves on what causes and conditions good government in all its senses, from the humblest to the most exalted, depends, we find that the principal of them, the one which transcends all others, is the qualities of the human beings composing the society over which the government is exercised. The degree to which a government form “tends to increase the sum of good qualities in the governed, collectively and individually” is thus a primary “criterion of the goodness of a government” because “besides that their well-

---

12 Considerations, 385.
13 Mill drifted around in his use of the term “progress.” Whereas in LMS, he explicitly assigned it the more general meaning of change, as distinguished from “improvement,” here it implies clearly “a tendency towards a better and happier state.” See LMS, CW VIII, 913-914.
14 Considerations, 385.
15 Considerations, 389.
being is the sole object of government, their good qualities supply the moving force which works the machinery.” And thus, Mill concludes:

We have now, therefore, obtained a foundation for a twofold division of the merit which any set of political institutions can possess. It consists partly of the degree in which they promote the general mental advancement of the community, including under that phrase advancement in intellect, in virtue, and in practical activity and efficiency; and partly of the degree of perfection with which they organize the moral, intellectual, and active worth already existing, so as to operate with the greatest effect on public affairs.

The “first element of good government, therefore, being the virtue and intelligence of the human beings composing the community, the most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves.”

Although Mill identifies virtue and intelligence as distinct categories, he nonetheless subsumes them under the concept of “the general mental advancement of the community,” which he takes to cover feelings as well as opinions and habits. The state of prevailing mental advancement determines the actionable conditions of human existence: “It is what men think, that determines how they act.” Government is “a great influence acting on the human mind” as well as “a set of organized

---

16 Considerations, 390.
17 Considerations, 392.
18 He adds, advancement also in “practical activity and efficiency.” Considerations, 390. Mill’s interest in the distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ types is important, but goes beyond the scope of the argument here.
19 Considerations, 392.
20 This phrase was cited initially above, in the Introduction. See page 37, above.
arrangements for public business.”\footnote{Considerations, 392.} In the former respect, indeed, government is “the most powerful of the influences...which make them what they are, and enable them to be what they can be.”\footnote{Considerations, 394.} We are now back to the logic of LMS regarding the nature of the polity as a structure organized to cultivate and regulate individual dispositions so as to achieve consistent, cooperative action in advancing human interests \textit{vis à vis} nature as a whole.

The two primary concerns about government are how well it accomplishes the task of advancing the general mental capacity of the community – cultivating a set of dispositions – and how it is best organized to foster the prospects of accomplishing cooperative tasks – regulating consistency – under various conditions. And, Mill argues, the two are related. “Publicity, for instance, is no impediment to evil nor stimulus to good if the public will not look at what is done; but without publicity, how could they either check or encourage what they were not permitted to see?”\footnote{Considerations, 391.} Though some institutions and policies will be preferable to others because they better enable individuals to act in collectively desirable ways, the motivation to act in those ways is the limiting condition. All of the possibilities of achieving good are dependent upon

\footnote{Considerations, 392.}
\footnote{Considerations, 394. The ellipsis is inserted to omit the phrase, “except their religious belief,” so as not to engage the argument over Mill’s full views about the import of religion here. Essentially, the claim is that he believed religion to be subordinate, conceptually, to the larger frame of a specific worldview as it operates through a politically constituted specific culture. See, for example, his arguments in “Theism” and “The Utility of Religion, in Three Essays, CW X, 403-494; his comments about religion in Considerations, Chapters III and IV, passim., and his discussion of utilitarianism as the basis of a moral theory in place of the moral aspect of religion. Utilitarianism, CW X, passim.}

168
the availability of good qualities among the governed, and thus the evaluation of form rests essentially on a determination of how well a particular form contributes to an increase in good qualities.

Both purposes, Mill argues, are carried out though a constitutional design that is appropriately educative of the citizenry. Even with a successful design, though, good qualities will not be distributed evenly across the population; attention must be given to ensuring that governance benefits from the best available capacities. Much of the rest of Considerations consists of laying out reasons why democratic institutions and their representative form in particular are most conducive to cultivating a progressive citizenry, but he also gives attention to specific devices intended to ensure that the best available qualities of intellect and virtue are made available for purposes of governance in a representative system. These latter include an electoral process designed to insure representation of the “instructed minority”; the proposition that a legislative body might have a council of elders, or Chamber of Statesmen; defense of educational qualifications for suffrage; and, an argument in favor of public balloting. With regard to the furtherance of progress, the only conditions he considers relevant, as Considerations makes clear, are those relating to the prevailing psychological states and social (or cultural) attitudes of the individuals comprising a given society.

Mill attributes to the constitution of a specific type of political order – to “the nature and degree of authority exercised over individuals, the distribution of power,
and the conditions of command and obedience\textsuperscript{24} – a strong causal influence in the development of the character of individuals and to that character, in turn, the exercise of a strong causal influence on the general advancement of the society to a higher level of happiness. He elaborates on the proposition that, when the requisite state of the intellectual and moral qualities of the citizenry has advanced far enough, a democratic, broadly participatory form of government is the ideally best form. It is best because, under the appropriate conditions, democracy does the most to foster and incentivize further individual advancement and self-development, and because it permits the broadest possible contribution of diverse capacities to the task of maintaining and developing the overall structure of authoritative comprehension and judgment that is the polity itself.

Democratic representation is important because it is the most effective means of reflecting different individual interests. These interests are to be represented, however, so that they are not unduly or unnecessarily damaged in pursuit of the general interest. They are not to be served at a cost to the public welfare.

The positive evils and dangers of the representative, as of every other form of government, may be reduced to two heads: first, general ignorance and incapacity, or, to speak more moderately, insufficient mental qualifications, in the controlling body; secondly, the danger of its being under the influence of interests not identical with the general welfare of the community.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24} Considerations, 394.
\textsuperscript{25} Considerations, 436.
The essential purpose of government for Mill is the general welfare, the welfare of the community as a community. This understanding of the general welfare, or community interest, as the object of government is reflected in his recommendations for institutional structure. An example is Mill’s justification of a public ballot.

Those who say that the suffrage is not a trust but a right, will scarcely accept the conclusions to which their doctrine leads. If it is a right, if it belongs to the voter for his own sake, on what ground can we blame him for selling it, or using it to recommend himself to any one whom it is his interest to please?...[A person’s] vote is not a thing in which he has an option; it has no more to do with his personal wishes than the verdict of a juryman. It is strictly a matter of duty; he is bound to give it according to his best and most conscientious opinion of the public good.\(^{26}\)

In the act of voting, the elector “is under an absolute moral obligation to consider the interest of the public, not his private advantage, and to give his vote to the best of his judgment, exactly as he would be bound to do if he were the sole voter and the election depended upon him alone.”\(^{27}\) Of what is the voter a trustee? Of the social union itself. Government, its form, and the actions of those empowered to determine its direction are all to be evaluated first with respect to how well they “promote the interests of any given society.”\(^{28}\) The interests of a given society consist in both shared individual interests, and the interests of the society itself as a coherent structure, or body. Mill is arguing in *Considerations* that the primary means of serving the general interest lies in the process of cultivating character. That this

\(^{26}\) *Considerations*, 488-489.

\(^{27}\) *Considerations*, 490.

\(^{28}\) *Considerations*, 383.
implies the achievement of a consistency of interest between the individual and society emerges from Mill’s formulation of the concept of character and its relationship to his understanding of the idea of an interest.

**The Nature of Interests and Their Relationship to Facts.**

Mill’s deployment of the term interest throughout his work is of central significance, particularly as it relates to his conception of the polity. The argument for this claim begins with the proposition that Mill used the term interest to express the idea of a factual relationship between an individual or an organized group and some object or condition in the world that causes, or results in, an effect with respect to that individual or group. That is, “interest” describes something non-subjective. Perceptions of interest might be accurate, or not, whether those perceptions are innate or cultivated. Second, he conceived of the polity as an essential locus for the identification and evaluation of the “truth” of interests prevailing in specific circumstances – and, to an important extent, as constituting a necessary locus for the organization of action relevant to taking appropriate and consistent account of positive and negative interests. With respect to ‘locus,’ this idea contains the sense of a delimited or bounded social space. With respect to the organization of action, the suggestion is that Mill envisioned the polity as a social system, organized around the

---

29 Interests can be place determined or place bound. Moreover, how and when physical spaces become involved in the constitution of social spaces is of obvious consequence for politics. This is a question to which Mill’s plea for an epistemologically comprehensive account of the formation of political units seems pertinent. For example, how do ideas of territory and/or the psychology of place associations figure in our memories of self and our conceptions of our relationships to particular others? What might be the implications for questions of nation, nation-building, border conflict, etc.?
generation of a broad but, as a practical matter, not infinitely variable range of goods and conditions – some distributed, some enjoyed collectively. Similarly, the social body also is systematically organized to mitigate a finite set of harms. This organization need not, and frequently should not be, centrally or rigidly organized, but it does need to be coherent.

Mill’s treatment of the idea of an interest generally implies two things. One is that to recognize an interest is to hold the belief, consciously or non-consciously, that an object or condition will produce good or harm to a particular entity, to have an expectation about the results a realized object or condition will produce in or for that entity, whether an individual or a social body. Second, while interests need not be commensurable or compatible with respect to a given individual or within a particular social corpus, they must be consistent in the following sense: all actions to realize perceived interests are based on more general assumptions, or theories, about how, when, and why causes in general lead to effects in general, as well as about which causes lead to which effects, and how effects are experienced as pleasure or pain by the given entity. This is true of a toddler consciously reaching for a piece of candy, or for a 15-year old self-consciously exercising self-discipline about whether to eat candy, or a football team executing a play.³⁰

³⁰ As, in principle, it is true of unconscious, or instinctive, action. It’s just that here the ‘beliefs’ in question are innate. See Mill’s quotation of a passage from Bain’s The Senses and the Intellect, on “Notes of observation made upon the earliest movements of two lambs seen during the first hour of their birth and at subsequent stages of development.” Bain, CW XI, 358-359. The topic, for both Bain,
For cooperative action to be effective, there has to be a fundamental agreement, in principle, about what actions are necessary to bring about the realization of particular objects and conditions under particular circumstances. For co-existence, the bar is higher. Co-existence implies the necessity of a social determination of the nature of interests to be realized socially within a delimited social space – guns and butter, marriage and divorce, language and religion. If such objects and conditions are to exist at all, and further to co-exist within a given social space, action to create and maintain them needs to be coordinated. Again, not necessarily centralized, fixed once and for all, voluntary, or even conscious social coordination is implied, but a general level of behavioral consistency is. When in Rome.... Economic, moral, legal, and other cultural forms operating within a given society must achieve enough consistency to permit individuals to live intelligibly and to cooperate effectively. These forms may be thought of as objects or conditions of meta-interest; whether formal or informal, they constitute overarching requirements of social co-existence. How consistency is achieved – really, on what grounds he believes it must be achieved – is what Mill is addressing in *Utilitarianism*.

*Utilitarianism* sets out Mill’s view of what principle it is that should be seen as justifying our actions as rational human beings. His fundamental premise about rules of conduct – prescriptions about how to achieve ends – as articulated in the *Logic of
the Moral Sciences is that such rules are based on understandings about desired or feared consequences, to be assessed according to a single overarching standard of evaluation. This standard is to specify “in what order these [specific principles of conduct] should be subordinated to each other.” 31 That is, by what standard are we to measure the relationships among our many disparate possible actions as they are thought to contribute in the (net) aggregate to our overall wellbeing? And, he says, if that standard, or overarching principle, “be rightly chosen, it will be found, I apprehend, to serve quite as well for the ultimate principle of Morality, as for that of Prudence, Policy, or Taste.” 32 The claim in Utilitarianism, of course, is that the overall end that ultimately motivates conduct is the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, very broadly construed. At the beginning of Utilitarianism, Mill introduces the idea that the doctrine involves the premise that there is, in the abstract, a way to conceive of humans as driving at the same ultimate end.

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, as above explained, the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who, in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison.” 33

31 LMS, 951. In a note added in a later edition, Mill advises the reader “For an express discussion and vindication of this principle, to see the little volume entitled Utilitarianism.” See CW VII, Textual Introduction, for discussion of Mill’s revisions to the System as a whole.
32 LMS, 951.
33 Utilitarianism, CW X, 214.
By insisting in the first instance on attaching the idea of human good to a concept of happiness as experienced, Mill as a first approximation appears committed to an entirely subjective conception of that good. In effect, if I feel happy, or if I think I am happy, then I am happy, by definition, and there is no one other than myself who has grounds for a more definitive opinion on the question, and the sources of this happiness might be seen as constituting by definition the good. It is this subjective sense to which he applies the term desire. But Mill’s view of a natural desire is that it is most frequently something to be overcome in the service of a higher order of happiness. Other, better desires can be and are learned – acquired, or constructed by association. He says in the Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy, “The attempt, again, to enumerate motives, that is, human desires and aversions, seems to me to be in its very conception an error. Motives are innumerable: there is nothing whatever which may not become an object of desire or of dislike by association.” In society, desires are cultivated, so that they are brought by association to attach to the more substantial (long-term, serious, consequential) goods, as distinguished from the less substantial. Such associations are designed to connect motives to those interests not well served by the impulses of innate desire. Rather than ascribing to the term interest the motivation

34 The point here does not relate to Mill’s claims about either inter-subjective comparison, or relative goodness: “It is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.” Utilitarianism, CW X, 212. Rather, it is the idea that pleasures and pains relate to conditions in the world, on the one hand, and that with respect to humans, the ‘higher’ pleasures are developed, beyond the merely instinctual, on the other.

35 Remarks, CW X, 13.
to any act whether deliberatively undertaken or not, “It would be more correct to say that conduct is sometimes determined by an interest, that is, by a deliberate and conscious aim; and sometimes by an impulse, by a feeling (call it an association if you see fit) which has no ulterior end, the act or forbearance becoming an end in itself.”

If impulse is the perception of an object or condition generating a ‘pull’ (one among many possible such ‘pulls’ or ‘pushes’) being experienced by the subject, the idea of an interest seems to involve a theory of value that connects to the object at one end, in effect, and to the self at the other. This would imply as well the existence of a posited causal relationship in the sense that as subject, I not only associate the object with pleasure; I have some reason to believe in the validity of the association. Thus, I have a reason, or conscious motivation to act with respect to the object or condition.

Mill’s ‘interest,’ as is appropriate to a term associated closely with an imputation of conscious choice, is integrally related to ratiocination: knowledge, judgment, calculation, theory building, causality imputing, etc. An interest is not a desire, simply, in this usage; its value is as calculated or interpreted, not as felt, or rather not simply as felt. There are questions of facticity and causality to be addressed as well as feeling, and also questions as to the possibility of experiencing higher order pleasures, or mitigating substantial pains. While the pleasure or pain they are seen to

---

36 *Remarks*, CW X, 12.
37 Animals may be said to have interests, in the sense of: it is in the wolf pack’s best interest to move to a new territory when the existing range is under environmental stress; if pack members don’t have appropriate impulses, they will suffer. Thus, even for wolves, interests and impulses are distinct.
generate is subjectively felt, the fact or probability of whether the pleasure or pain will actually result if interests are realized is not entirely subjective; neither is the question of what will cause an interest to be realized, and – importantly – the question of what interests are likely to be of the greatest moment in the long term.\textsuperscript{38} A social determination of interest thus defines morality.

This [happiness], being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole of sentient creation.\textsuperscript{39}

The standard of morality also serves as the standard of law.

[U]tility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness, or (as speaking practically it may be called) the interest, of every individual, as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and secondly, that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole; especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes: so that not only he may be unable to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being’s sentient existence.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} This discussion is framed in more or less Millean terms. He likely was unaware of placebo effects. At the limit, however, the point seems valid. Thinking something is so doesn’t always make it so.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Utilitarianism}, CW X, 214.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Utilitarianism}, 218.
Social consistency – harmonization – is required to the extent that society is involved in the realization of interests.

**Interests and Will: The Logic of Harmonization**

Morality and law together embody a set of standards for conduct that are designed to foster the achievement of happiness by motivating the self toward some actions and away from others. The functional value of the norming agencies of society depends on how well they reflect the “true” meta-interests of a given society, and how well they coordinate the behavior required to effect those interests under given circumstances of co-existence. The key to both individual and polity happiness lies in the process of ‘character formation,’ the process through which habitual patterns of individual behavior (feeling/thought/action) are developed. In the *Logic of the Moral Sciences*, Mill defined character as the habit of right action (as Mill understood right), and its use in *Utilitarianism* is similar. Character might be thought of as the realized functioning of the embodied self. It represents the actual actions or choices of an individual – or, more precisely, it represents the pattern or tendency of individual actions or choices or ways of behaving that is ‘normal,’ in this context meaning typical of an individual.

The intention to act in a certain way, to have a preference for or to choose one object or condition over another, is the purview in the first instance not of the character but rather that of the ‘Will.’ In the *Logic of the Moral Sciences*, Mill began
his argument for the possibility of a science of human nature with a preemptive defense against the idea that an understanding of human propensities and their derivations implies determinism. The will, as Mill developed the concept, represents the function of evaluation, resulting in the individual having an intention to behave in a particular way. He puts will in control of character, in principle. To an important extent, we can change our habits if we want to, which is to say, if we perceive a compelling reason to do so; that is, we can do so if we are truly agents.

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. And hence it is said with truth, that none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free.\textsuperscript{41}

Confirmed virtue is the acquired capacity to act in ways that are consistent with our own larger interests, a capacity that includes the habit of taking appropriate account of the interests of others as well as the interests of self. Character is a habit of willing in the moment that takes its motivation from an understanding of matters that are out of the moment as well as in it, derived Mill says, from experiencing our own actions and the actions of others, and the consequences of both. “Our character is formed by us as well as for us; but the wish which induces us to attempt to form it is formed for us: Not, in general by our organisation, nor wholly by our education, but by our experience – experience of the painful consequences of the character we previously

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{LMS}, CW VIII, 841.
had, or by some strong feeling of admiration or aspiration accidentally aroused."**42**

Will is the determining feature of the self with respect to action, but it is responsive to circumstances, which teach varying lessons about interests. Mill says desire is a “state of passive sensibility.”**43** Will, in contrast, is an “active phenomenon,”**44** engaged in assessing the value of x vs. y and arriving at a specific policy course based on the result. Mill’s idea of character is, more or less, that it is a habitual pattern of behavior that either does or does not contribute to realizing the best (the ultimately most self-benefiting) available interests. On Mill’s understanding, such best things cannot be strictly egoistic or selfish things; that for Mill would represent a misconstruction of human good. “Next to selfishness, the principle cause which makes life unsatisfactory is want of mental cultivation.”**45** Altruism – the essence of virtue – is the single most important of the higher capacities humans can cultivate, even higher than intellect.**46** Mill does not argue that egoistic or selfish desires do not represent attractions to ends that would induce pleasure or forms of happiness; rather he asserts that in exchange for avoiding some of these instinctually appealing sources of desire, or even some

---

**42** *LMS*, 840-841.

**43** *Utilitarianism*, CW X, 238.

**44** Ibid.

**45** *Utilitarianism*, 215.

**46** Both altruism and intellect are needed for social life. Mill argued that the ability to sacrifice willingly for others (not simply for one’s own benefit) is what distinguishes the ‘civilized’ from the ‘savage’ character, and makes possible “Enterprises requiring the voluntary co-operation of many persons independent of one another....The savage cannot bear to sacrifice, for any purpose, the satisfaction of his individual will.” See *Civilization*, CW XVIII, 123. Here in *Utilitarianism*, Mill asserts that the pleasure to be gained from altruism is of a higher order than the pleasure resulting from selfishness. These are related but distinct points. Both, of course, are open to challenge, as are his claims in general about the sociality of pre-literate human communities.
consciously derived preferences, the human animal has the advantage of being able to learn (through relating to others in society) that there are yet better pleasures to be experienced,\(^{47}\) many of which require discipline and self-denial of innate desires if they are to be experienced.

Desires, thus, are managed (in line with Mill’s naturalistic schema, offset by different, more potent desires) by the will, engaged in an active process of evaluation and ordering. Any given desire relates to a particular object or condition, one among many, some of which are alternative to or inconsistent with each other. The conception of intention (the conscious expression of a volition, or the Will) enters in when, as a result of process of comparison among desired objects and a calculation of the prospects and costs of their attainment, a sense of purpose is formed. There may be ‘no accounting for tastes,’ so that some may love to tango yet hate to foxtrot, but we believe that there is an account to be given, in the form of an explanation for the intention to realize a particular object or condition.\(^{48}\) This explanation is based on a judgment about the consequential implications for our happiness. The will for \(x\) is thus formed from our view of some condition \(x\) will correlate with which is a condition we have reason to believe will be beneficial to us, all things considered.

\(^{47}\) For all that he objects to ‘intuition’ elsewhere, and vehemently, here he really does rest his argument on the proposition that, if we just think about it, we will agree that this all coincides with what we understand about ourselves. He sees this self-understanding as ‘evidence-grounded’ in that desire is experienced as desire. See Chapter IV, “Of What Sort of Proof” in *Utilitarianism*, CW X, 234-239.

\(^{48}\) The discussion here deals only with the relationship between the idea of ‘a’ desire, and ‘will’ or the purpose or intention to realize a specific desire. Questions of value pluralism are not involved, or at least not necessarily; the issue goes to the individual’s ordering of alternatives as a step in choosing.
Because desires are many, Will represents the sovereign unitary actor, benefiting from self-knowledge, knowledge of others, and knowledge of consequences to mediate among desires. “Will,” Mill argues, “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.”\(^49\) That an intention to do the virtuous thing can itself become habitual is for Mill an important part of the process whereby other-regarding desires are fortified against the more immediate and perhaps non-conscious pull of other-disregarding desires. That is, habit is an important practical concomitant of an effective morality. “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....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.”\(^50\) “Will is the child of desire, and passes out of the dominion of its parent only to come under that of

---

\(^49\) *Utilitarianism*, CW X, 238.

\(^50\) *Utilitarianism*, 239.
Reasons are important, but they are not enough to sustain constancy of action against strong desires.

Will is derived from desire but is not subject to it; will is subject rather to reasons, or at least is under some authority of reason, and means rather to make desire subject to itself.\textsuperscript{52} Will can be informed, and therefore character can be cultivated, but not by logic alone. If will is the child of desire, experience is the child’s essential tutor. The true relative value of desires is, for Mill, arrived at by means of mental – cognitive and emotional – evaluative faculties that improve with direct and indirect (socially mediated) exposure to experience, to a view of the actual interest result of varying realizations of desire. One’s actual behavior is generally determined by character, by ingrained dispositions. “Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be less valuable; and this is no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures....They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Because I understand how happy I will be when I have lost 10 pounds, I can bring myself to forego this piece of candy – or, if the primary or ‘primitive’ desire is powerful, I will find a way to stay out of the presence of candy, or I will find a way to cultivate a habit of denial; I can outwit my own desires, in effect. I may want to lose 10 lbs. for health reasons (a strictly self-regarding interest to a degree, depending on whether or not I expect health care to be delivered if I become ill, or if I have children dependent on me, etc.) or because slimness is a social norm – or, of course, a bit of both. The understanding, in any event, is socially derived.
\textsuperscript{53} Utilitarianism, CW X, 212.
This statement points to the fact that in Mill’s view, allowing for taste and perhaps for the possibility that there are some goods that only some individuals can in fact experience as goods, there is a large and significant category comprised of human goods that are not agent-relative. “Indulging the senses” is seen as obviously of less value than overall good health, no matter who is involved in the calculus. Moreover, Mill appears to believe that there are no true human goods that are not, in principle, good to all humans, as long as the conditions for experiencing those goods appropriately can be reached. The individual self represents a unique bundle of the available menu of shared human sensibilities. Individuals might be more or less pleased by a specific amount of light or quality of sound, but the fact of pleasuring by light and sound within certain limits could be seen as a general feature of our common humanity.

In summary, there exists or could at some point exist a set of objects and conditions in the world the realization of which, depending on circumstances, will result in some form of pleasure (or pain) to a human being. To impute validity to the

54 In Mill’s milieu, would this have been the term that we now would use ‘over-indulgence’ for? There is no sense here of the idea that this is something about which ‘reasonable men may differ.’ Indeed, it is arguably only on such a theory that one can discuss ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ pleasures at all meaningfully. It isn’t necessary in this context to engage the argument about whether or not this is a legitimate position, but it is important to consider whether and to what extent it was Mill’s position. That question plays a very considerable role in evaluating Mill’s view of the function of a polity.

55 One thinks of Shylock’s exclamation in The Merchant of Venice, a play that embodies a treatment among other things of the uses and limits of cultural distinctions: “hath not a Jew eyes.....”? Act III, Scene i., 58-68. Whether, given the variety possible in individual temperament, it would be more beneficial for a specific person to spend all day in the bright sun – whether the individual would have an ‘interest’ in doing so – would depend on a range of factors in addition to the nature of the intrinsic psychological response to sunlight. These include factors that others than those the individual might know about, such as the interacting effects of sunlight, skin pigment, and skin cancer, for example.
assumption of goodness or harm in the realization of a given desire is to adopt a cause
and effect theory about that object or those conditions – a theory of “true” interest
combined with a theory about how it will be realized. Whether either theory is valid
depends on circumstances – on whether an object or condition really will have the
predicted result, in combination with other desires fulfilled or foregone, and whether
the means of realizing it are correctly identified and executed. Toward some objects
and conditions, humans will feel the pull of an innate desire; toward others, a
cultivated desire. Whether any desires, innate or cultivated, represent “true” interests
or not, it is up to circumstances to determine.

Having a will involves having a range of subjectively evaluated desires, and
the capacity to compare and make at least partly reasoned choices, based on
experience, one’s own and others, of both ends and means.

Having a character involves having not just desires, and not just having a will,
but also having a will which can be – and ideally, from the perspective of attaining a
fully rational freedom, is – both capable of learning socially as well as individually
from experience about different kinds of pleasure, and habituated socially as well as
individually to suppress lower in favor of higher kinds, including especially among the
latter those associated with acts of other-regard. Having a “good” character means
having a habit-supported process of taking account of the interests (not the desires,
simply) of others, even where innate feelings are not there to assist, as well as being
disposed to act in one’s own best interest. Both having a will and having a character result from social mediation as well as from individual experience and judgment.

*Interests and Identity: The Basis of Harmonization*

It is not character, or agency, which society reaches directly, but only the will, accessing it through both reason and feeling in a process of education writ large. Society acts to frame the will by managing the individual’s acquisition of second-nature motivations, affecting the development of the self’s conception of its own interests and how to realize them, so that a character is cultivated that is appropriate to a given society’s determination of the interests – and, especially, the meta-interests – that can be realized under the circumstances of that society. Where character development is seen as inadequate, society steps in with sanctions, both moral and legal.

Implicit in this argument is the assumption that both morality and law depend upon social agreement as to both ends and means. The function of morality and law is to engender conduct that is of a nature to contribute to the attainment of those individual and collective ends that are consistent with the common psychological heritage of humanity as well as with the prevailing circumstances of a given society – those arising from its meta-interests. Thus, as a practical matter, general rules have to be ones that a society accepts as likely to be good for all the members of that society, in principle. So, as a practical matter, there has to be agreement on the extent of the
society to which any particular moral obligation applies, as well as on what constitutes the relevant good to be served. Because ‘goods’ are in principle limitless, the need to delimit the society to which a specific moral obligation applies is given by the need to agree at a fundamental level about what constitutes a good to be secured to all – that is, an interest realized through the fact of society, or common life, and thus taken as a ground for moral and legal obligation.

Both the internal sanction enforcing moral order – conscience – and the external sanction enforcing the more stringent order of the law – justice – are centered by Mill in a concept of natural affiliation, which conditions the extent of the society over which these obligations are to reach. Mill says that there is a “natural basis of sentiment for utilitarian morality,”\(^56\) and that natural basis is found in the “social feelings of mankind; the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures.”\(^57\) “The social state is at once so natural, so necessary, and so habitual to man,” he avers, “that, except in some unusual circumstances or by an effort of voluntary abstraction, he never conceives himself otherwise than as a member of a body; and this association is riveted more and more, as mankind are further removed from the state of savage independence.” To link this to moral obligation, he says that “Any condition, therefore, which is essential to a state of society, becomes more and more an

\(^{56}\) *Utilitarianism*, CW X, 231. All citations in this paragraph are from the same page.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.
inseparable part of every person’s conception of the state of things which he is born into, and which is the destiny of a human being.”

This would seem to be something of an expanded ‘state of nature’ concept in which humans are innately motivated not solely by self-interest, but also by a natural desire for unity with other humans.\(^\text{58}\) The intuitive sense of social sympathy is reinforced, however, by reason informed by experience. “They are also familiar with the fact of co-operating with others, and proposing to themselves a collective, not an individual interest as the aim (at least for the time being) of their actions. So long as they are co-operating, their ends are identified with those of others; there is a least a temporary feeling that the interests of others are their own interests.”\(^\text{59}\) Through the political harmonization of interests, this experience conditions human psychology to apprehend the interests of others to be co-extensive with those of the self, as represented by the extensive self that is “a” society.

This mode of conceiving ourselves and human life, as civilization goes on, is felt to be more and more natural. Every step in political improvement renders it more so, by removing the sources of opposition of interest, and leveling those inequalities of legal privilege between individuals or classes, owing to which there are large portions of mankind whose happiness it is still practicable to disregard. In an improving state of the human mind, the influences are constantly on the increase, which tend to generate in each individual a feeling of unity with all the rest; which feeling, if perfect, would make him never think

\(^{58}\) Here, in contrast to his argument in *Civilization*, Mill states that at least one social feeling, the desire for unity with others, is a part of uncultivated human nature. His reference to “voluntary abstraction” may have been made with Hobbes, et al., in mind, or his own earlier position – or perhaps both. Even so, however, he assumes this social feeling is expanded by cultivation.

\(^{59}\) *Utilitarianism*, CW X, 231.
of, or desire, any beneficial condition for himself, in the benefits of which they are not included. 60

Mill’s “utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not an agent’s own happiness but that of all concerned.” 61 It is this assumption, implicitly, that requires the laws and customs of society to bring individual interests into harmony with each other, specifically within the arena of “all concerned.”

In Utilitarianism, regarding ‘thou shalt,’ or the question of fulfilling positive claims for the doing of good to another, Mill suggests the standard has something to do with propinquity. “The great majority of good actions are intended not for the benefit of the world, but for that of individuals, of which the good of the world is made up; and the thoughts of the most virtuous man need not on these occasions travel beyond the particular persons concerned, except so far as is necessary to assure himself that in benefiting them he is not violating the rights, that is the legitimate and authorised expectations, of any one else.” 62 With respect to “thou shalt not,” Mill focuses on a different standard. “In the case of abstinences...it would be unworthy of an intelligent agent not to be consciously aware that the action is of a class which, if practiced generally, would be generally injurious, and that this is the ground of the obligation to abstain from it.” 63 All systems of morals “enjoin to abstain from

60 Utilitarianism, 232.
61 Utilitarianism, 218.
62 Utilitarianism, 220.
63 Ibid.
whatever is manifestly pernicious to society.” The average person is compelled ethically to positive personal acts of other-benefit only toward those close to hand primarily as a matter of practicality. “[T]he occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, in other words to be a public benefactor, are but exceptional; and, on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to.” The goods-to-others that a system of ethics inclines or admonishes a self to act positively in achieving are undefined, while the harms to be avoided are treated as more or less self-evident.

We can imagine two intersecting axes, one of which defines potential goods and harms, the other our relationship to others. One pole of the goods axis defines the outer extent of the set of all possible goods. These are the goods that according to Mill a moral system enjoins the individual to will to all, but not necessarily to act to provide to all, as well as to the self. At the other pole of the axis is extreme harm. Morality operates differently to the right and left of the mid-point. Positive morality applies more stringently the closer the ‘other’ is to the self. The evaluation of negative morality seems to depend on the nature of the harm, more than on one’s relationship to

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid. The private vs. public distinction comes in here as a means of suggesting the limits of extensive moral obligations, related to one’s practical ability to do good.
66 On Liberty, as will be seen below, tracks these arguments from a different perspective. There, Mill tries to draw a conceptual ‘bright line’ to put strictly self-consequential actions, as distinct from acts affecting particular others or society at large, beyond the reach of social interference (i.e., via social or legal sanction). His motivation there is generated by the implications of harmonization under discussion here.
the person experiencing it. This is perhaps because Mill sees humanity as having spent its entire history trying to mitigate harms. Goods, on the other hand, are subject to invention and are potentially infinitely variable, and so the practical problem of how to provide them for ever larger sets of individuals, at the cost which providing them entails, seems to constrain any injunction to do so universally to humanity as a whole or even as a matter of right to one’s nearer associates, or members of what one experiences as one’s social unit. Judgments about moral claims are primarily judgments about the nature and degree of harms, on one side, and primarily judgments about the nature of goods and to whom the goods are due, on the other, although questions of degree certainly enter into goods judgments to an extent, as do questions of ‘otherness’ enter into judgments about harms.  

These questions are related to but also distinct from the question of what may be required as a matter of morality versus what is to be required as a matter of law, and further, how either connects to the concept of justice. At the end of Utilitarianism, in the chapter in which he lays out his case that justice can and should be understood

---

67 Again, compare On Liberty and discussion below. Duties to provide goods to others can be socially enforced, but which goods is subject to social judgment, while society has an absolute right, in principle, to prevent individuals from harming each other or itself. Harms are a question of degree: What is a deep harm and what a mere offense against taste or “custom”? See, On Liberty, Chapter III, “Of Individuality as One of the Elements of Well-Being,” regarding the “despotism of custom,” at 266 and 272, for example.

68 The purpose here is to focus on how Mill was laying out a spectrum of obligation, from moral stricures, to discretionary laws, and ultimately to claims that apply to goods or protections deemed necessary to life in a given community — i.e., protection of “the very groundwork of our existence.” The idea of ‘distinct and assignable’ persons that appears here and in On Liberty is relevant to all three areas of the spectrum, as is the difference between goods and harms. See discussion below of the costs of harmonization, and On Liberty read as Mill’s attempt to address and mitigate these costs, pp.203 ff, below.
in utilitarian terms, Mill’s strategy is consistent with his claims about morality in general as related to interests, on the one hand, and to feelings of identification, on the other. He argues that justice in practice means different things in different contexts, but at bottom and in principle, it has to do with two features of moral obligation. First, it deals (or should deal) only with moral obligations that are “perfect.” Second, justice has to do with the extrapolation of perfect obligation to concern for a particular set of others, those with whom one experiences a sentiment of sympathetic identification. Perfect obligations are those to be accorded a necessary status, as in ‘there ought to be a law,’ a status he identifies as associated with the sense that the offensive breach of duty deserves to be punished in principle, even if it is of a kind for reasons of expediency that is not subject to a positive law. In this, however, the obligations of justice are not distinguished from other perfect obligations.

Duty is a thing which may be *exacted* from a person, as one exacts a debt. Unless we think that it might be exacted from him, we do not call it his duty. Reasons of prudence, or the interest of other people, may militate against actually exacting it; but the person himself [from whom a duty is seen to be extractible, in principle], it is clearly understood, would not be entitled to complain.\(^{69}\)

Perfect obligations are duties regarding goods that are deemed so fundamental to wellbeing as to generate a claim of protection. That is, the deprivation of the good constitutes a harm, to definable individuals – “some assignable person who is

\(^{69}\) *Utilitarianism*, CW X, 246. Emphasis in original.
wronged.” Moreover, “We should be gratified to see the obligation enforced by anybody who had the power.” The duty is of a kind such as to establish a corresponding right, or absolute claim to performance on the part of others, and thereby a claim on society as a whole.

When we call anything a person’s right, we mean that he has a valid claim on society to protect him in the possession of it, either by the force of law, or by that of education and opinion. If he has what we consider a sufficient claim, on whatever account, to have something guaranteed to him by society, we say that he has a right to it.

Other positive moral dicta are more properly seen as optional – desirable, but not essential – claims, not engendering a morally or legally enforceable positive duty to specific others, or to society in general.

As the second distinguishing feature of justice, or the imposition of legally sanctioned obligations, it is necessary that these are claims related to obligations toward “some definite individual or individuals” with whom one has a sense of identification. This is a feeling so strong as to amount to an extrapolation of the natural instinct for self-defense, the animal inclination to “resent or to repel or retaliate, any harm done or attempted against ourselves, or against those with whom

---

70 *Utilitarianism*, 247.  
71 *Utilitarianism*, 245. Compare “I fully admit that the mischief which a person does to himself may seriously affect, both through their sympathies and their interests, those nearly connected with him, and in a minor degree, society at large. When, by conduct of this sort, a person is led to violate a distinct and assignable obligation to any other person or persons, the case is taken out of the self-regarding class, and becomes amenable to moral disapprobation in the proper sense of the term.” *On Liberty*, CW XVIII, 281.  
72 *Utilitarianism*, CW X, 250.
we sympathise.”

Human beings are different from other animals first, in having the ability to identify with or feel a deep emotional connection to a broader range of conspecifics (potentially, all of humanity), and second, in their more developed intelligence, which entails the capacity of consciously “apprehending a community of interest” between oneself and “the human society of which he forms a part, such that any conduct which threatens the security of the society generally, is threatening to his own, and calls forth his instinct (if instinct it be) of self-defence.”

Justice is presented here by Mill as a self-serving phenomenon that exhibits its distinct utilitarian motivation only in relation to a form of community benefit. A sense of justice is felt, he says, with respect to harms or duties owed to members of our own community or society (inclusively; not excepting ourselves). “If he is not feeling this – if he is regarding the act solely as it affects him individually – he is not consciously just.”

Justice is quintessentially a social virtue, developed to serve the most fundamental existential interest of selves in society, which is security. “[O]n it we depend for all our immunity from evil, and for the whole value of all and every good, beyond the passing moment; since nothing but the gratification of the instant could be of any worth to us, we could be deprived of anything the next instant by whoever was

---

73 Utilitarianism, 248.
74 Ibid.
75 Utilitarianism, 249. It would be interesting to compare this idea with a Kantian categorical imperative or a Rawlsian original position, but the purpose here is simply to call attention to the way Mill fixes the driver of motivation in a feeling of identification; neither rationality nor self-interest per se is admitted as determinative.
momentarily stronger than ourselves.”76 Because it underwrites the attainment of all other interests, justice is thought of as the *sine qua non* of society.

Now this most indispensable of all necessaries, after physical nutriment, cannot be had, unless the machinery for providing it is kept unintermittedly in active play. Our notion, therefore, of the claim we have on our fellow-creatures to join in making safe for us the very groundwork of our existence, gathers feelings round it so much more intense than those concerned in any of the more common cases of utility, that the difference in degree (as is often the case in psychology) becomes a real difference in kind.... The feelings concerned are so powerful, and we count so positively on finding a responsive feeling in others (all being alike interested), that *ought* and *should* grow into *must*, and recognised indispensability becomes a moral necessity, analogous to physical, and often not inferior to it in binding force.77

It is a Hobbes-like premise of security’s priority as an interest, and a similar but – against Hobbes, not simply or solely reason-grounded – corresponding imputation of social ‘incorporation,’ or social ‘embodiment’ as the mechanism through which security is to be attained. The difference between Mill’s view and that of the *Leviathan* lies not in the assumption that agency – “power after power” – is achieved through coordination, because this is clearly a shared assumption. Rather the distinction lies in the role Mill assigns to feelings of sympathy interacting with reason through the process of cultivation to establish the framework of identification on which the operations of law and justice ultimately must rely. The obvious question goes to defining who are the “all alike” whose interests are to be consulted. “Who exactly is obligated to address any specific set of ‘rights’?” is a question that also

---

76 *Utilitarianism*, 251.

77 *Utilitarianism*, 251.
entails the related question of who may validly make such claims. Agreement as to the terms of harm and positive duty among a specific set of people, or people within the boundaries of a felt social unit, are predicate to the determination of standards of just conduct, and ultimately to the provisions of law.

“Superiority of intelligence” and the “power of sympathizing with human beings generally” enable the individual “to attach himself to the collective idea of his tribe, his country, or mankind, in such a manner that any act hurtful to them rouses his instinct of sympathy, and urges him to resistance.” Mill thus ascribes to humans as a species two features he conceives of as underlying exceptionally strong and central feelings of social unity, or identification, qualities that serve as the foundation for morality and law. These are a powerful impulse toward and capacity for “fellow feeling” and a superiority of intelligence. This concept of natural or innate dispositions is the foundation on which, Mills avers, complex moral orders are developed by “education and opinion” into the kind of “indissoluble association” between the individual’s own happiness and both the good of others and the good of the whole that is necessary to the realization of a functional social life. It is a specific whole to which identifying attachments will be directed, or perhaps spontaneously generated – ideally for Mill resulting eventually in the expansion of such attachment to all of humanity. Instinct on its own generates an impulse of social attachment, read by Mill as “sympathy,” with those nearest at hand. Rationality provides the logic that

78 Utilitarianism, 248.
causally links the mutual accommodation of interests with the attainment of a greater general happiness, thus translating by association an emotional desire for unity into an interest in accommodation, or a moral sense. When fully internalized, this moral sense becomes what we call a conscience, affecting the will to recommend a course of other-regarding actions. But, given the variety of human selves and the associated variety of desires, accommodation is naturally difficult. It falls to “laws and social institutions” to arrange ways of common life so that different individual interests will be harmonized, and the occasion for direct conflicts among individual desires will be reduced. Laws define the individual interests that must be accommodated and also define legitimate, or unit-acceptable ways to achieve accommodation, within an overall framework – call it perhaps a constitution – that expresses, reifies, substantiates, or in some other sense embodies the existence and nature of a recognized, or self-identified social unit as a political unit. 79 Mill attempts to explain the instinct for justice as a political unit good (expressly, not as an individual good), one extrapolated from an innate generalized feeling of identification with specific others and in a sense parasitic upon it.

A direct parallel to this argument appears in the treatment of nationality in Considerations. “A portion of mankind may be said to constitute a Nationality if they

79 Does a constitution, formal or informal, instantiate the social unit? Or, is a constitution more reasonably seen as an articulation or – more simply – as the embodiment of the principles whereby membership is determined and according to which, status, allocation of benefits, and claims to authority are recognized within the unit? Mill does not address that here; he alludes to it in the Remarks, as to Bentham’s lack of attention to the “theory of organic institutions and general forms of polity.” CW X, 9.
are united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between them and any others – which make them co-operate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be government by themselves or a portion of themselves exclusively.”

Mill does not impute this sense of identification to any one feature of background condition, whether biologically associated categories such as “race and descent,” conventional associations such as commonality of language or religion, or environmental contingencies such as geographical limits, although he connects the sense of nationality to all of these in principle as potential causes. He suggests that “the strongest of all is identity of political antecedents; the possession of a national history, and consequent community of recollections; collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret, connected with the same incidents in the past.”

Is this simply tautology or circularity? No, it suggests rather that, other things equal, it is easier to build a political future on the existence of a political present or political past than otherwise – meaning to attach the learned habit or attitude or self-conscious choice of obedience to the determinations of a particular social body with which one feels an identification of existential interest. Mill assumes such attachments can be changed, that their objects are not immutable, but he describes the instincts from which they derive as innate. There is something here of both the idea of

---

80 Considerations, 546.
81 Ibid.
self – who and what I believe I am – and the connection of the idea of self to self-preservation, or preservation as a Self, or perhaps as a particular kind of Self, and to the interests that particularity generates that seems for Mill to be central to an understanding of the function and frame of the polity, and, most especially, to its foundational requirements. There is a relationship imputed here between on the one hand interest, understood as self-experienced but not entirely subjectively determined, and on the other an acquired but instinct-conditioned and (in some degree) rationally-supported feeling of identity between the self and a particular social group, concerning the essential – existential – interests of which the concept of enforceable obligation is accepted as necessary and right. The habit of obedience is associated with a process for determining collective interest that is not entirely – perhaps, in some cases not at all – coextensive with strictly individual interests. In the case of a conflict, where the habit of obedience is not sufficient to overcome self-interest, coercion is legitimate. “Consequently the smallest germs of the feeling are laid hold of and nourished by the contagion of sympathy and the influences of education; and a complete web of corroborative association is woven round it, by the powerful agency of the external sanction.”82

Mill asserts in the nationality chapter of Considerations that democratic political practices are only feasible where social cohesion already exists. “Free

82 Utilitarianism, CW X, 232.
institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities.”

He is referring here to functionally incoherent communities, made up of sets of peoples “without fellow-feeling,” where the “influences which form opinions and decide political acts are different in different sections of the country.” This is the same point he made in LMS. Fellow feeling, not simply political structure, is necessary for political cohesion, but it is also the case that “Experience proves that it is possible for one nationality to merge and be absorbed in another.” When this happens, it is generally good for humanity.

Whatever really tends to the admixture of nationalities, and the blending of their attributes and peculiarities in a common union, is a benefit to the human race. Not by extinguishing types, of which in these cases, sufficient examples are sure to remain, but by softening their extreme forms, and filling up the intervals between. The united people, like a crossed breed of animals (but in a still greater degree, because the influences in operation are moral as well as physical), inherits the special aptitudes and excellences of all its progenitors, protected by the admixture from being exaggerated into the neighboring vices.

Interests and Individuality: The Costs of Harmonization

Co-existence provides a coherently motivating context in which individuals are able and willing to learn from, with, and through others – ways to think, what it is good and possible to want, how to manage the self, and how to navigate the world. In On Liberty, Mill addresses what he perceives as a central problematic in this conception: the within-group, across-individual sameness it seems to imply, and the

---

83 Considerations, 547.
84 Ibid.
85 Considerations, 549-550.
disbenefits that can be incurred as a result, by both society and individuals. As *On Liberty* makes manifestly clear, Mill saw the functional exercise of individuality as both the primary wellspring of improvement of the human species, and an important source of individual satisfaction.

It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation; and as the works partake the character of those who do them, by the same process human life also becomes rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings, and strengthening the tie which binds every individual to the race, by making the race infinitely better worth belonging to. In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others.86

The necessary condition under which this statement holds is “by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others.” The individuality that contributes to progress is the individuality that is realized within a framework of general obedience to social regulation. This is the essence of rational freedom, or advanced agency – the outcome of cultivation. Mill recognizes that the implication of this way of seeing the relationship between individuals and society as it is thought to affect the realization of human possibilities is that it is ultimately up to a given society to determine the parameters of those possibilities that are applicable within its boundaries. Limiting action according to rights and interests requires determining the nature of rights and interests, and having the means to enforce

86 *On Liberty*, CW XVIII, 266.
limitations. This further implies ascribing to a given society as a whole the power of determining the rights and interests to be protected, including both those interests that are seen to be general to all and those that are seen to be particular to individuals, and among those that are general, those that are corporate in kind as well as those that are not.

The core argument of *On Liberty* is an appeal to society to limit its exercise of the power – Mill calls it society’s right – to determine the nature of rights and interests, along two lines. One is by holding to the dichotomy of harm to self vs. harm to others (and to society), but the other equally important rule has to do with confining the power to dominate in overriding nonconformance to those harms that are serious.

To be held to rigid rules of justice for the sake of others, develops the feelings and capacities which have the good of others for their object. But to be restrained in things not affecting their good, by their mere displeasure, develops nothing valuable, except such force of character as may unfold itself in resisting the restraint. If acquiesced in, it dulls and blunts the whole nature. To give any fair play to the nature of each, it is essential that different persons should be allowed to lead different lives.87

Mill appears to be equally passionate about the value to society and the value to individuals of the existence of differences among individuals, and thus is loath to contemplate the possibility that there might be situations in which there arises an absolute and irresolvable trade-off between these two values. This does not concern a trade-off between the value of individuals and the value of society; Mill is quite clear on the point that society is individuals, and the wellbeing of the latter entirely

87 Ibid.
constitute the wellbeing of the former. Rather, the trade-off at issue deals with the value of difference to the direct individual experience of wellbeing, as against the value of difference to individuals as they experience wellbeing indirectly through the fact of a society that is organized to take advantage of differences.

Some of his strongest statements of position on this point come from the work in which the term “rational freedom” appears: The Subjection of Women. At the very end of the essay, which contains a variety of arguments for the benefits that society in general, and men in particular, might obtain from the full civil and social emancipation of women, Mill turns finally to address the benefits to be felt by the individual women so empowered.

Thus far, the benefits which it has appeared that the world would gain by ceasing to make sex a disqualification for privileges and a badge of subjection, are social rather than individual; consisting in an increase of the general fund of thinking and acting power, and an improvement in the general conditions of the association of men with women. But it would be a grievous understatement of the case to omit the most direct benefit of all, the unspeakable gain in private happiness to the liberated half of the species; the difference to them between a life of subjection to the will of others, and a life of rational freedom.88

The exercise of will is among the most fundamental of natural impulses. “After the primary necessities of food and raiment, freedom is the first and strongest want of

88 Subjection, CW XIX, 336. This work was published originally in 1869, after Mill’s service in Parliament, which followed the publication of Considerations. An 1879 volume published posthumously combined The Subjection of Women and On Liberty.
human nature.” But, of course, advanced agency and its satisfactions—rational freedom—are not the same as savage independence.

While mankind are lawless, their desire is for lawless freedom. When they have learnt to understand the meaning of duty and the value of reason, they incline more and more to be guided and restrained by these in the exercise of their freedom; but they do not therefore desire freedom less; they do not become disposed to accept the will of other people as the representative and interpreter of those guiding principles.

A progressive society develops and inculcates guiding principles, and imposes necessary restraints; this results in the condition of rational freedom in which the individual is able to act both responsibly and freely. Such a society is both ordered and progressive, because the individual is able to exercise functional autonomy, a benefit of which is innovation. This occurs, however, only as a result of the social development of the intellect and virtue.

[T]he communities in which the reason has been most cultivated, and in which the idea of social duty has been most powerful, are those which have most strongly asserted the freedom of action of the individual—the liberty of each to govern his conduct by his own feelings of duty, and by such laws and social restraints as his own conscience can subscribe to.

This does not mean that individuals are free to violate laws or to ignore with impunity the conventions of morality simply because their own standards are different. The ability to participate in the setting of standards according to one’s own judgments and valuations constitutes the condition of rational freedom, but rational freedom is an

---

89 Ibid. This is, presumably, after security, which Mill argued in *Utilitarianism* is the primary existential need. See page 198, above.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
aspect of life related to co-existence; it is distinct from savage independence. The terms of significant co-existence dictate that judgments and values must be significantly co-determined. Necessary commonality and consensus must be regulated, either internally or externally. Some form of dominance, of all by all if not of all by the few or the one, is inevitable; the arenas in which it is not required are those in which society can be indifferent because what occurs in them does not affect its interests. These arenas can be extensive if reason and duty, intellect and virtue, are broadly and deeply inculcated in the characters of individuals as habits of subordination to a common system of opinions. A liberal polity, no less than any other, cannot function absent a strong consensus as to the nature of essential goods and harms, and the proper way to secure benefits and prevent harms to its individual members. This is the case not as a matter of design or intention, but rather due to the nature of interests and the forms of co-existence that reveal and instantiate them. Mill is claiming in relation to this observation about the nature of interests that within any given polity, a social (political and moral) posture of broad tolerance for differences of thought and action is likely to result in a more effective determination of interests. This aims at articulating the kind of consensus that Mill believes to be most effective in leading to the realization of higher interests. In the idealized conception of this claim, a varied individuality and experimentation, and competition among alternatives, permit society to benefit from an increased understanding of effects and their causes,
and such understanding provides the necessary basis for undertaking constructive social change.

Were an opinion a personal possession of no value except to the owner; if to be obstructed in the enjoyment of it were simply a private injury, it would make some difference whether the injury was inflicted only on a few persons or on many. But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.92

In On Liberty, Mill is addressing two different but related political problems. One is what he sees as a tendency for the inappropriate imposition of the particular group interests of some on the behavior of other individuals and groups, wrongly representing the sub-group interests as identity interests of the whole. The other is the problem of defining the essential or identity interests of the polity overall in a way that is unnecessarily comprehensive, so that the benefits of individual difference are lost both to that polity and human society in general, and the exercise of individual agency is unnecessarily constrained.

Mill is as concerned in this essay with the question of political or legal imposition as with moral or social pressure. To take him at his word, “The object of the Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used by physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion

92 On Liberty, CW XVIII, 229.
of public opinion.” For Mill, the overriding of one will by another is the essence of dominance, or perhaps tyranny, whether formally or informally secured. Dominance is not always undesirable because it is not always dysfunctional.

Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end. Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. Despotism is not required in a ‘civilized’ society in which individuals have learned both how to calculate their own best or true interests (in principle), and also have learned they must take account of the interests of others, for their own benefit as well as for the benefit of those others. The emergence of the capacity for self-control, where the self is understood as a socially embedded self, capable of a complex rationality that can calculate broadly about consequences over time, is predicate to the possibility of a broadly realized rational individual freedom. The full realization of such freedom, however, depends upon the extent to which wills informed by reason have acquired appropriate habits of subordination, or character. Character is the guardian of one’s “best” interests, taking account, to the extent possible, of all that that is to be gained or lost in higher happiness through behavior, personal, inter-personal and collective, which involves necessarily taking account in one’s own self-calculus of the interests of others. Where perceived interests are in conflict, however, or where

---

93 *On Liberty*, 223.
94 *On Liberty*, 224.
individual character falls short, the accommodation of interests – the ‘harmonization’ in Mill’s term – is appropriately accomplished through the imposition of society’s will on the individual. The causal origin of dominating behavior lies in ‘will,’ specifically wills in conflict with respect to a particular interest, and the exercise of power to achieve that interest. The interest in view is that of the dominator, but that does not necessarily mean that the interest of the dominated is not also thereby served.

Some of the most fatal changes in human affairs have been, as to their more manifest immediate effects, beneficial. The establishment of the despotism of the Caesars was a great benefit to the entire generation in which it took place.\textsuperscript{95}

Mill understands the polity to be a distinct locus of the interpretation of human interests, with respect to which the law, or communally enforced prescriptions and proscriptions, represents a pro tem articulation of requirements. The implication is that, as a practical matter, law and law enforcement, which amounts to holistic polity-level dominance of all over each, (or, where there is not broad participation in governance, of some over the entire) with respect to any given or posited interest or posited harm, imposes of necessity a unitary view of interest and of harm on the workings of society. “The disposition of mankind, whether as rulers or as fellow citizens, to impose their own opinions and inclinations as a rule of conduct on others, is so energetically supported by some of the best and by some of the worst feelings incident to human nature, that it is hardly ever kept under restraint by anything but want of power; and as the power is not declining, but growing, unless a strong barrier

\textsuperscript{95} Considerations, 443.
of moral conviction can be raised against the mischief, we must expect, in the present circumstances of the world, to see it increase.”

This is problematic because any polity mechanism for decision about true polity interests can, and – he believes – frequently is, wrong as to what constitutes a harm that must be proscribed or a benefit that should be prescribed for the whole.

Equally or perhaps even more problematic for Mill, as noted above, is the all too likely possibility that such determinations will be made on the basis of partial harms and partial interests, that a “special interest” with power in government will employ its coercive force to institute requirements on individuals that are not only designed to benefit that special interest but also entail a form of harm to the general interest of the polity as a whole. An equally pernicious use of polity authority is creating a benefit for one partial interest at the expense of another partial interest, one group or class advantaging itself against another – again, where there is no reason provided by a net overall polity benefit. Particularly repugnant to Mill is the use of polity authority to dominate with respect to matters that he sees as defined as strictly matters of taste – that is to say, not critical to interest in any significant way.

The exercise of democratic determination does not mitigate these problems. Mill is arguing in On Liberty that broad democratic participation can and often does have the effect of making the problems worse, for two reasons. One is that the demos will not recognize that it is fully as much the author of subordination as any other

96 On Liberty, 227.
source of political power: self-government “is not the government of each by himself, but of each by all the rest.” Following Tocqueville, he notes that “the will of the people, moreover, practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active part of the people; the majority or those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority,” in effect a claim that a democracy just as any other polity risks the possibility that the interests of the polity as a whole will be determined in a way intended primarily to serve the particular interests of only some members, those whose interests are effectively represented by the politically active class. The problem lies in putting the coercive power of government at the service of a partial interest, irrespective of and potentially in contradiction to the interest of all or to other partial interests.

But Mill’s solution to the mischief represented by the inappropriate imposition of rules of conduct is presented in the form of that same mischief: the erection of “a strong barrier of moral conviction.” This conviction must apply to determining what is strictly self-regarding conduct and what not, as well as what forms of conduct, if they are indeed other-regarding, are actually harmful. He argues, for example, that economic competition inevitably results in harms to others in that “an individual, in pursuing a legitimate object, necessarily and therefore legitimately causes pain or loss

---

98 Ibid.
to others, or intercepts a good which they had a reasonable hope of obtaining." This is acceptable harm because it is "by common admission, better for the general interest of mankind, that persons should pursue their objects undeterred by this sort of consequences." That is, it is a shared social good that ‘by common admission,’ or widely held opinion, that legitimates the practice of treating this conduct clearly affecting the interests of others as not harmful. Rational freedom as realized through practices justified by public opinion can be jeopardized by public opinion; the corrective is a change in public opinion. Mill’s harm principle requires a collective determination of harm, which he recognizes as posing a fundamental dilemma.

“To determine the point at which evils, so formidable to human freedom and advancement, begin, or rather at which they begin to predominate over the benefits attending the collective application of the force of society, under its recognized chiefs, for the removal of the obstacles which stand in the way of its well-being; to secure as much of the advantages of centralized power and intelligence as can be had without turning into governmental channels too great a proportion of the general activity – is one of the most difficult and complicated questions in the art of government.” His exposition in *On Liberty* does not in any way question the prerogative of a society to set out a specific list of harms, defined as injury to what are agreed to be legitimate interests of specific persons to be protected in the form of socially-established rights to

---

99 *On Liberty*, 292.
100 *On Liberty*, 292-293.
101 *On Liberty*, 308-309.
pursue them, or – distinctly – harms to society *qua* society. Society is seen to have an implicit right to intervene whenever it establishes an association between some act and harm, to specific persons or to itself; that is, whenever there is a grounded reason to do so. Along with the principle that makes a determination of coercion turn on the question of other-regard, the second maxim or principle forming “the entire doctrine of this essay” is: “that for such actions as are prejudicial to the interests of others, the individual is accountable, and may be subjected either to social or to legal punishment, if society is of opinion that the one or the other is requisite for its protection.”\(^\text{"102}\) This explicitly bases the right of society to act coercively, like the right of the individual to liberty, on the principle of utility, “the permanent interests of man,” and the evaluation of those interests. For reasons of prudence or expedience, or a higher utility, society may well be advised not to enjoin or punish specific transgressions.

Mill’s argument throughout *On Liberty* makes it clear that the fundamental problem he perceives is that in its determination of what constitutes personal harm to an individual, society will be wrong, both off the mark in what actually constitutes harm and overzealous in treating simple differences of particular interest as constituting a real harm.

But the strongest of all the arguments against the interference of the public with purely personal conduct is that, when it does interfere, the odds are that it interferes wrongly, and in the wrong place. On questions of social morality, of duty to others, the opinion of the public, that is, of an overruling majority,

\(^{102}\) *On Liberty*, 292.
though often wrong, is likely to be still oftener right; of the manner in which some mode of conduct, if allowed to be practised, would affect themselves. 103

It is up to each individual society, or polity, to determine what liberty comports with its own interests as an entity. The resource for making that determination, or of any other determination affecting its existence or wellbeing as a society, is the same resource the individual has in determining what will be in her interest: experience. A significant portion of On Liberty, including most of the chapters on “Thought and Discussion” and “Individuality as One of the Elements of Well-Being,” is dedicated to explaining how letting individuals within society experiment with diverse ways of life will lead to social benefits. Over time, society will learn what are the best ways of life consistent with each other, and will be able to develop individual characters that reflect the requirements of that consistency. Mill framed this vision in the Autobiography:

“I looked forward to a future, through the present age of loud disputes but generally weak convictions, to a future which shall unite the best qualities of the critical with the best qualities of the organic periods; unchecked liberty of thought, unbounded freedom of individual action in all modes not hurtful to others; but also, convictions as to what is right and wrong, useful and pernicious, deeply engraven on the feelings by early education and general unanimity of sentiment, and so firmly grounded in reason and in the true exigencies of life, that they shall not, like all former and present creeds, religious, ethical, and political, require to be periodically thrown off and replaced by others.” 104

103 On Liberty, 283.
104 Autobiography, 173.
‘A’ society – that is, society ‘incorporated’ as a unit with collective enforcement authority, can and does have unit interests, dependent for their realization on a consistency of behavior, or mode of conduct expressed as a particular national character. Individuals have their own interests. Where there is a conflict, the interests of society are going to prevail, but right design of law and social institutions can harmonize interests and reduce conflicts. The challenge from a utilitarian perspective is to do this in a way that permits as broad as possible a range of individual interests to be pursued, not only so that the benefits of rational freedom can be enjoyed, but also so that society can improve the realization of agency over time by learning from the varied experiences of individuals – including from their mistakes. Circumstances will determine whether a society has gone too far or not far enough in allowing room for diversity of conduct, but because it is more likely to err on the side of too much consistency, society should hold itself to stringent empirical standards of demonstrated utilitarian benefit – not to custom simply, or prejudice – to evaluate how or whether specific individual conduct constitutes a true and significant harm to others or to society itself, as a functioning unit, an organized whole. This is Mill’s formulation of functional liberalism, a liberalism of the whole.

Rational Subordination and the Utility of the Whole

The means by which co-existence is achieved and maintained differ from one society to another, but wherever there is co-existence, there is also a background condition of ontological and epistemological consistency co-extensive with a group
sharing a feeling of identity of interest. Identity of interest implies consistent action, which in turn requires consistent thought, or a common system of opinions about the nature of the world, about how to be successful in it, and about how to know – what is evidence, and how is it judged? Government represents the institutionalization of prevailing assumptions about the value and requirements of co-existence. Simple cooperation may require only temporary agreement as to immediate ends and a shared evaluation of proximate means. Co-existence requires and implies something deeper: a shared philosophy of life, to permit a significant degree of motivational commonality experienced as mutual sympathy and identification.

An associated requirement is the disposition to subordination, preferably reasonably grounded, but necessary in any event for the interdependence of polity coherence and individual wellbeing. This is what moral and legal orders are instantiated to sustain, a habit of obedience, or deference to rule of conscience and law. Such a habit is rarely absolute, however. No matter how functional obedient behavior might be from the perspective of self-interest broadly construed, if obedience is costly, self-interest more narrowly construed can prevail; hence, the result may be disobedience, and there is need for enforcement. If an identity interest is involved, coercion is appropriate, but not otherwise.

Dominance for Mill seems to be a condition in which the behavior, or more broadly the action of one individual – which can be construed as including speech – is constrained or determined by the will of another, where there is no identity interest
involved to justify the constraint. He does not use the term dominance; he does speak of ‘the exercise of power over,’ and he contrasts it with the concept of liberty, suggesting they represent two ‘desires’ that are in some sense substitutes for each other. In the *Subjection of Women*, where the issue of dominance is central, he says:

> “The love of power and the love of liberty are in eternal antagonism. Where there is least liberty, the passion for power is the most ardent and unscrupulous. The desire of power over others can only cease to be a depraving agency among mankind, when each of them individually is able to do without it: which can only be where respect for liberty in the personal concerns of each is an established principle.”

A somewhat different version of the concept appears in *Considerations*:

> “There are two states of the inclinations, intrinsically very different, but which have something in common, by virtue of which they often coincide in the direction they give to the effort of individuals and of nations: one is, the desire to exercise power over others; the other is disinclination to have power exercised over themselves. The difference between different portions of mankind in the relative strength of these two dispositions is one of the most important elements in their history.”

> “The desire to exercise power over” is here treated as a ‘disposition,’ which in this context seems more of an innate tendency than a learned character trait, although the distinction is not addressed directly. This disposition is related to liberty in the form of an interest in political self-determination on the part of a nation, but in this case as the subordinate desire. “There are nations in whom the passion for governing others is so much stronger than the desire of personal independence, that for the mere shadow

---

105 *Subjection*, 338.
106 *Considerations*, 420.
of one they are found ready to sacrifice the whole of the other.”

It seems that this preference for dominance is a characteristic associated with the ‘national character’ of some polities in which “the more popular the institutions...the more monstrous the over-government exercised by all over each, and by the executive over all.” The concern is with over-government. An appropriate exercise of authority, in contrast, has three key features: the locus of interest-determination is coincident with the interest referent, or the ‘body’ to which the interest is relevant; the determination is based on a true corporate interest, and only that; and, the resulting subordination is confined solely to what is called for in order to achieve the corporate interest being addressed.

To take the second feature first, dominance is legitimate, which is to say rational, when it pertains to the effective determination of a true interest – whether within the individual, where a rational, experienced-based perception of long-term interest overrides an impulse for immediate gratification, to result in a more functional disposition of will, or, in the case of true social interest, manifested as the dominance of morality over selfishness. Dominance is illegitimate, which is to say irrational, where it is not serving some higher order true interest. Mill’s primary premise is that of true functionality, so that his objection to specific examples of moral domination go to those where the object of the moral dictum is not actually functional but rather

---

107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
represents – as he sees it – an artifact of some no longer relevant tenet of social utility; or worse, consists of a never-functional superstition, or belief held without any grounds in a true necessity of common life; or, perhaps worst of all, results from the superposition of a particular over a truly common or identity interest.

The entire history of social improvement has been a series of transitions, by which one custom or institution after another, from being a supposed primary necessity of social existence, has passed into the rank of a universally stigmatised injustice and tyranny. So it has been with the distinctions of slaves and freemen, nobles and serfs, patricians and plebeians; and so it will be, and in part already is, with the aristocracies of colour, race and sex.\textsuperscript{109}

On the other hand, when external circumstances, or true interests require it, in the absence of alternatives, subordination is rational. This is more likely to be the case to the extent that a society has not yet developed to the point where deference to authority and a commitment to progress have become essential features of national character.

The early difficulties in the way of spontaneous progress are so great, that there is seldom any choice of means for overcoming them; and a ruler full of the spirit of improvement is warranted in the use of any expedient that will attain an end, perhaps otherwise unattainable. Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end.\textsuperscript{110}

Instinctual desires – especially the self-regarding – must be modified to account for external circumstances, directing the orientation of interests toward those truly

\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Utilitarianism}, CW X, 259.
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{On Liberty}, CW XVIII, 224.
This is a task of moral and cognitive education, which in turn is determined – it would seem – by the nature of social institutions as they operate within the framework of political institutions. Political institutions may be and ideally according to Mill should be participatory, yet they are nonetheless intrinsically regulative. Their determinations regarding essential group or unit interest, or forms of identity interest, may be adhered to as a result of innate feeling or conscience, but in the absence of either, they are to be enforced by compulsion and sanctions, as required.

In all, the claim here is that Mill posits in the abstract two distinct ‘foci’ of interest and, hence, distinct ‘loci’ of appropriate interest determination: the individual self, or subject; on the one hand; and, on the other, the extended or inclusive self of the polity. One interest of the polity as a whole lies in the arbitration and organization of differing and/or conflicting individual interests in a way that is compatible with the identity interests of the polity itself. Mill sees these system-regulating interests as generating the character-constitutive imperative of successful governance.

In the end, however, it is neither the systemic interests of a single, distinctly organized political community, nor any immediate individual interests, that Mill is attempting to affect as a theorist of the polity. Rather, all of this is aimed at providing

---

111 Civilization, 119. The omitted phrase is “farther advanced in the road to perfection.” Whether Mill was absolutist in his use of the word perfection has been the subject of much debate. See, for example, John Gray, “Mill’s Liberalism and Liberalism’s Posterity,” Journal of Ethics, 4, no. ½, Rights, Equality, and Liberty, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella Law and Philosophy Lectures 1995-1997 (2000), 137-165.
a foundation of understanding to be used in facilitating a systematic approach toward the goal of the increased happiness of human beings, as a species with “highly developed faculties.” Mill perceived humans to have been engaged over time in a process that expanded the boundaries of co-existence, with effects on human intellectual and moral development that could not have resulted from mere cooperation without also expanding the boundaries of fellow feeling and shared understanding. By outlining appropriate “principles of method” that in later generations would bring the “moral and social sciences” into “a more satisfactory state,” he was trying to lay the foundation for what would become a tested theory of the co-development of human thought and social organization. He expected this theory would posit that social unitization, or political particularization, has played a prominent part, via the co-constitutive processes that lead to group-characteristic patterns of thought and action.

Every element of this construct deserves critical interrogation, including Mill’s valuations and motives for developing it as well as whether it is coherent or plausible, and how it might be problematic in ways Mill did not foresee, as well as those he did. The next chapter makes a case that in the sciences, a close approximation to Mill’s construct is only now emerging, as a result of very recent developments within evolutionary theory that are altering long-standing assumptions about “things” and

---

112 From the final section of LMS, “The Logic of Practice or Art,” CW VIII, 952.
113 Ibid.
“bodies” in nature in general, and about human nature, the mind, and the role of social units in the development of both, in particular. It is premised on a view of nature and human agency very similar to Mill’s, and it is generating a view of the role and significance of culture in the development and change of characteristic behaviors that also is similar to Mill’s. The time frame is broader, but the overall construct increasingly is considering the significance of processes of entietization – the accidental, enforced, and/or voluntary bounding, binding, and bonding of individuals into phenomenologically distinct social bodies – as these processes interact with the circumstances of natural selection. The next chapter aims to show, in a very preliminary way, some key consistencies between Mill’s undeveloped theory of political ethology, and new strands taking shape in the theory of human evolution that have to do with the role of social organization in general, and groups in particular, to the emergence of the species we recognize today – in all its variety – under the name “modern human.”

In effect, Mill’s political theory of the evolution of characteristic human behavior – thought and action – is finally being realized as a theory, so as to finally permit the critical interrogation it both deserves and requires.
Oxytocin is produced naturally in the bodies of humans and animals. It plays a key role in social interaction, promoting maternal behavior and monogamy in animals. The hormone also heightens social sensitivity, social awareness, generosity and trust in people.¹

A new study has shown [that W]hen we take the perspective of a similar person, a region of the central medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) linked to self-referential thought is activated, whereas mentalizing about a dissimilar other engages a more dorsal subregion of the mPFC.²

CHAPTER IV
THE EVOLUTION OF CO-EXISTENCE

The discussion in the preceding chapter laid out the case for asserting that Mill was interested in what he understood to be the nature of social co-existence, or social unitization, because he perceived the constitution of more or less existential social units – polities – to have a primary influence over the development of specific, characteristic ways of thinking/feeling/acting in the world, including especially, thinking/feeling/acting with other human beings.

Mill saw the concept of character as central to the realization of rational freedom, that freedom being defined as a situation in which society secures to individuals “liberty in the personal concerns of each,”³ the ability of each individual self “to govern his conduct by his own feelings of duty, and by such laws and social

---

³ Subjection, CW XXI, 338.
restraints as his own conscience can subscribe to.” \(^4\) This is politically determined liberty, “rational” not “lawless” freedom.”\(^5\) From Mill’s perspective, liberty can be exercised only within the boundaries of a defined group of individuals, one in which the exercise of authority over individual conduct on behalf of the group as a whole and its members as members is characteristically accepted in principle as a necessary and desirable form of self-restraint, in service of higher forms of happiness.

Mill argued that the most important factor shaping the polity, and affecting its impact on the characteristic behavior of individuals, is the system of conceptions about the world and how to be in it that prevails across a given society, constituting its “common system of opinions.” His five-part essay, “Spirit of the Age,” can be seen as an early attempt to construct a theory associating the phenomena that constitute an existential social unit with characteristic systems of thought/feeling/action, and his further instinct to relate changes in the distribution of power to changes in these thought systems.\(^6\)

The thrust of the discussion to this point has been aimed at demonstrating how Mill’s preoccupation with this phenomenon can be seen pervading his written work,

\(^4\) *Subjection*, 336.
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) In *Spirit*, Mill compares the hereditary system of authority determination in a Highland clan, where he says power “calls forth the qualifications for its exercise,” with that of America and “the best constituted republics of antiquity,” where selection for positions of power was supposed to rest on fitness to govern. Either way, he argues, except in times of transition from one predominant social theory to another when a people constituted as “a” distinct society is uncertain about the functional requirements for “worldly and moral influence,” power is associated with competence in “administering the affairs of the state.” Mill clearly, here as elsewhere, does not use the term “state” as an equivalent for “government” as distinct from “society.” *Spirit*, CW XXII, 253-254.
once his project is re-conceptualized in this way. He was trying both to articulate, and to work out, how an apparently natural condition of “agglomeration” in discrete, relatively stable, norm-enforcing social units of varying types was associated, as he believed it to be, with increasing human knowledge and cooperation – as evidenced in the scale and complexity of social organization – and yet also with an increase in individuality. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the extent to which the naturalist spirit of the present age is adopting a revised narrative of the evolution of modern humans. that significantly problematizes radically individualistic conceptions of the prehistoric ‘state of nature.’ The effect in general of this new naturalism is to make Mill’s intuitions about the dynamic relationship between social “agglomeration” and psychological development fundamentally more intelligible.

From Eternity to Here, Now, Us

A “combination of many-sidedness and wholeness,” to adopt and adapt terms from Mill, seems to be leading to the construction of a new narrative about the evolutionary history of the human species. The universe itself is represented as evolving, from the Big Bang to everything it contains today, including the human mind. The moving principles are process, combination, and contingency. Strictly speaking, there is no ‘moving’ principle at all until late in the story, when life

---

appears. In our universe, it happens that order – that is, organization – happens, probabilistically, not deterministically. “Progress” – here read as the emergence of more complex forms of organization – also happens. How and why one form of organization appears and how and why and when one leads to another is the principle focus of much inquiry: under what conditions does one form come to contribute, through combination, to the instantiation of another, distinct, more complex form: sub-atomic particles to atoms, atoms to molecules, organic compounds to life forms, simple life forms to complex life forms, individual organisms to persistent social units in which group-maintaining behaviors are genetically supported? In this emergent discourse, the making and keeping of group distinctions, and the forces involved in bringing about an internal organization of grouped individuals into phenomenal ‘units’ together constitute a central focus of analysis, applied broadly to all form in nature. Static conceptions – such as the idea that the terms ‘atom’ or ‘gene’ or even ‘the mind’ represent unitary, single ‘things’ in some straightforward and/or eternally fixed sense – are either rejected or diminish in significance as ontological propositions, in favor of

---

8 In this new creation narrative, there is still a time of genesis. It marks the stage entered when the inorganic becomes the organic, or self-generating, organization. For a general discussion of the concept, see Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1971).

a focus on the processes and contingencies that bring about effective unitization of one degree or another under specific circumstances.

Four ideas emerging from the context of this discourse about the evolution of organization can be interpreted as representing analogs – in an evolutionary rather than a historical time frame – to key components of Mill’s premise: that a progression of the human species toward larger-scale units of characteristic organization has been causally associated with the development of human individual agency, understood as the ability to manipulate nature, including one’s own, in order to affect perceived interests.¹⁰ These ideas can be summarized as propositions.

1. **Human brain capacity and human social units have co-evolved.** The processes by which the human brain has evolved to an exceptional size, unusually elaborated structure, and unique mental capacities are now thought to have been dynamically related to increases in the species-prevalent size of units of stable social organization.¹¹ These interdependent increases, it is theorized, led to the spread and persistence across the human species of genetically grounded mental traits, including

---

¹⁰ Saying this was Mill’s premise is not meant to imply that he invented the idea of a progression in the social combinations characteristic of “civilization.” As noted, he was interested in integrating this idea, borrowed from German “systems of opinion” – probably Herder’s in particular – with a systematic understanding of individual psychology, interacting with social and cultural dynamics as they are affected by processes of polity maintenance.

¹¹ That is, conventional living groups, in which members are observed to aggregate under a modal range of environmental circumstances. For a discussion of the recent history of this theoretical perspective, see Gazzaniga, *Human*, 91ff. Designed for a general audience, this work provides convenient access to a broad range of neuroscience and related research, alternative views about specific issues, methodological foundations, and, to an extent, points to significant dispute about a given theoretical position.
those involved in cooperation, morality, language, learning, and group identification.\textsuperscript{12} Agency, the ability to manipulate nature in service of one’s perceived interests, is thus seen as a capacity associated with processes in and of nature leading to the co-development of the human mind and human sociality, much as Mill posited.

2. \textit{Culture has contributed to the evolution of mind and behavior:} The transmission, reproduction, and evolution of particular cultural forms – from organized individual bits of information to coherent complex structures of belief and practice – has become a focus of attention as a major facilitator and driver of evolutionary changes in the human brain, the functioning of the human mind, and genetically-grounded patterns of human individual and social behavior.\textsuperscript{13} In general, the theoretical frameworks being employed seem compatible with Mill’s view that thought/feeling/action dispositions are affected systematically and characteristically by the nature of particular social contexts, \textit{and} that this has played a role in the development of both minds and societies toward greater scale and complexity, and hence toward increased agency, both individual and social.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} See Gazzaniga, \textit{Human}, passim.
\textsuperscript{13} An overview of the basic argument is provided in Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, \textit{Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution} (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Like Gazzaniga’s \textit{Human}, this is another work aimed at providing an overview to a general audience. See also Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson, \textit{The Origin and Evolution of Cultures} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), a compendium of journal articles detailing the development of the central hypotheses and the associated methodology.
\textsuperscript{14} Agency is here used in the general sense of Mill’s term rational freedom. It represents a capacity to act effectively in the world, both individually and socially, with deliberate purpose. The contributors to agency are intelligence and virtue. Definitions of virtue are culturally influenced; so are purposes.
3. Group selection has interacted with individual selection in human evolution.

The premises underlying evolutionary theories – biological, psychological, and cultural – increasingly incorporate the idea that natural selection operates on persistent, transmittable, between-group behavioral variation, not strictly on inter-individual differences. Under specific circumstances, it is argued, group selection leads dynamically to increased cohesion, greater behavioral coordination, and the inter-generational transmission of generically-grounded behavioral traits conducive to group maintenance, including altruism and cooperation. Group selection is thought to have played a significant role in human evolution in particular – as noted, operating significantly through cultural transmission of behavior patterns, and change in those patterns in response to evolutionary processes. These arguments are increasingly being formalized – i.e., specified mathematically – and subjected to experimental as well as observational verification procedures. Functional separation, and internal alignment of individual interests with group interests affecting the distribution of characteristic dispositions, are two key features identified as important in determining whether selection is likely to operate at the group level rather than at the individual level.

---

15 Evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson, a proponent of admitting the phenomenon of “agglomeration” into the natural selection paradigm, has made an effort to engage the pro and con arguments systematically, and to outline the case for an integrated approach. See, for example, D. S. Wilson, and E. O. Wilson, “Rethinking the Theoretical Foundation of Sociobiology,” Quarterly Review of Biology, 82 no.4 (2007): 327-348 and D. S. Wilson, “What is wrong with absolute individual fitness?” Trends in Ecology and Evolution 19, no. 5 (2004): 245-248.

16 See Boyd and Richerson, Origin and Evolution, Chapter 3, “Why Culture is Common, but Cultural Evolution is Rare,” 52-65, for a discussion comparing mechanisms of cultural change among humans to those operating typically among groups in other species. See also Alexander Rosenberg, Philosophy of Social Science, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 193-202.
level. This parallels Mill’s suppositions about the connection between national, or polity, character and national, or polity, success, although there is an important difference in the treatment of contingency, as will be discussed below.  

One anthropologist has developed a hypothesis suggesting that an adaptively functional form of “reverse dominance” egalitarian, all-over-all form of political order evolved among humans in the Paleolithic era, spreading by group selection to transform forms of order-keeping from the hierarchies typical of large-primates generally, to a new pattern of collectively enforced egalitarianism.  

This posited “grand coalition” form of co-dominance and suppression of competition is described as behaviorally expressed in individual policing of social interactions, and collective action to support group resource acquisition and distribution. The theory and evidence supporting it have been marshaled to suggest that an evolution in political form was a pre-condition for the emergence of extensive between-group behavioral variation among human population sub-groups, which contributed further to the potential for selection on group-characteristic behavior. Circumstances would later contribute to the re-emergence of hierarchical patterns of dominance. This is comparable to Mill’s

---

17 It is worth recalling at this point that Mill’s ‘character’ is not a conception of specific behavior. It is, rather, a set of dispositions – to feel, think, and act in particular ways in response to a variety of circumstances. Character is an overlay on temperament that serves to foster consistency of behavior within specific, bounded, persistent social spaces, existing at particular times in particular places. Your spouse ran off with another person. You may be either angry or resigned, but your behavior will be conditioned significantly by your learned conception of appropriate response. For the angry, take murderous revenge, say, vs. sue for full custody of the children. Even the degree or kind of anger you feel may be affected by patterns of formal and informal norm enforcement and the social consequences attendant on that enforcement.

view that democratic political authority constitutes the control of each by all, and that
a capacity for “obedience” is the first requisite of social life.

What follows amounts to a sketch only of these complex and mostly controversial perspectives, as read by someone not competent to interrogate them on their own terms, but able to assess their apparent face-value consistency with Mill’s theoretical aims, at least in a preliminary way.19

Evolution and the Nature of Human Agency

Mill’s view of human psychology rested on the idea that we are an intrinsic part of nature as a whole, creatures with special abilities to think, and to manage our desires purposively, to be rational agents. He also understood human happiness to be determined by feelings, the innate and the cultivated, as experienced in and through society, and as evaluated in relation to society’s cultural frames. In this conception, life in society, in particular societies, is a co-determinant, along with one’s innate individual traits and other “circumstances,” of the possibilities and limits of individual agency in any given time and place, agency being the capacity to act effectively in the world in order to advance happiness – personal and social. Per Mill, we come into the world biologically primed for life in society (among other things), but also hard-wired, as it were, with a variety of egoistic impulses, some functional to the self and to

19 There is no claim here of objectivity in selecting trends. This is an interpretive enterprise, not a scientific one. An effort has been made to watch for obviously contradictory arguments and evidence, but a good deal of important controversy is mostly ignored – over the question, for example, of whether there is a distinction between mind and brain. That is because what’s at issue in the debate within the naturalist community seems not much changed from the terms in which Mill engaged it, and his position still has strong adherents.
society, some not; the non-functional needing to be disciplined, managed, or extirpated altogether. This is accomplished through interaction with other selves, through which a characteristic pattern of habits and dispositions emerges, lending reliability (and, hence, predictability) to our behavior, but always at least in principle leaving room for the individual will to override habit and choose a different course of action or even a change of character, for good and for ill.

Mill’s “rational freedom” amounts to an acquired and cultivated capacity for extensive individual functional autonomy, achieved via the socially-facilitated development of intellect – knowledge and judgment – and of virtue – concern for others, and a disposition to obey society’s norms regarding duties to others. Virtue disciplines self-interest in accommodation to the requirements of life in “a” society, for the sake of benefits otherwise unavailable to the autonomous, purely egoistic self – including the emotional benefits of being in the company of others like oneself.

Mill’s understanding of what it is that constitutes human agency has a good deal in common with emergent scientific understandings of the human species, which have moved beyond the sectarian disputes over nature vs. nurture, material vs. meaning, ego driven vs. socially conditioned, toward a more integrated and dynamic view.\(^\text{20}\) The prevailing discourse is locating man ever deeper within nature, while at

---

\(^{20}\) This view is being reinforced by more detailed ethnography as well as by new technologies of investigation such as gene mapping. For a good overview of the history of theory, counter-theory, and the early years of the re-introduction of biologically grounded understandings into the social sciences, see Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Mary Midgley, *Beast and
the same time strengthening the perception that human qualities are unique, at least with respect to degree, if not kind. This narrative ties the development of particular human characteristics, including mental capacity, degree of sociality, and capacity to form and change through cultural transmission of behavioral dispositions, to the evolution of capacities present in rudimentary form in other primates, and in particular the great apes. Although this might imply that humans are less different from other animals than was once thought, the underlying idea is that the degree of co-evolution of critical features – especially, mind, social organization, and culture – propelled mankind into what constitutes an importantly distinct phase or state of being.

The more tradition-consistent element of this claim has to do with the idea of the mind seen as an especially, if no longer exclusively, human phenomenon. Imaging and other technologies show distinct morphological and functional differences between human brains, and the brains of other animals and pre-human archeological specimens. These structures are being associated through experimentation with species-typical behaviors. Ethological research appears to support the idea that the species genetically closest to humans in evolutionary terms have “precursor” mental capacities in a number of areas of significant interest to humans, but that in humans these capacities are more or less uniquely developed. In addition, emotions are

increasingly considered integral to “mental states,” as Mill’s analysis suggested they are. Feelings and ideas are described as experienced via “neural systems that are distinct but still interact” within the brain to result in mental states underlying behavior, whether the behavior is having a thought, or acting. Disputes over the brain/mind distinction continue, but the self-awareness feature of mind, the conscious sense of being a Self still seems to be significantly more attributable to humans than to other animals. Another important feature of the human mind seems to be its capacity to recognize and to impute mental states to others, the so-called “theory of mind” (I think you also think, and I guess what you are thinking), although evidence suggests that this ability, too, is characteristic of at least some other primates.

This emergent view of the evolution of human mental capacity as innately related to an evolved “hyper” sociality is of particular interest with respect to Mill’s arguments about the foundation of moral dispositions – his claim that they are mostly learned, not innate, and that they are generally related to learned inhibition as associated with delayed or foreworn self-gratification. Mill’s arguments are for the most part consistent with current themes about “choice” in behavior, which tend to emphasize the role of emotional response, or “feeling,” acquired as well as instinctive,

---

21 “[W]e....shall understand by the laws of mind those of mental Phenomena; of the various feelings or states of consciousness of sentient beings. These, according to the classification we have uniformly followed, consist of Thoughts, emotions, Volitions, and Sensations; the last being as truly states of Mind as the former.” LMS, CW VIII, 849.
22 Cited in Gazzaniga, Human, 147, and 406, note 56. See also general discussion in Human, Chapter 4, “The Moral Compass Within,” 113-157.
23 See discussion of experimental findings regarding animal self-recognition in Human, 310.
24 See discussion of evidence pro and con non-human primate theory of mind in Human, 49-50.
as dominant over conscious reasoning. The idea is that positive or negative sensations (familiar to Utilitarians as pain and pleasure) are automatically aroused by situations we confront, and that these feelings are ultimately what provoke us to behave in a specific way.\(^{25}\) Rationality, or the ability to \textit{self-consciously} take account of causality, to compare, calculate, plan, and “choose,” is seen as operating in many cases to contribute to an assessment of likely consequences, but ultimately an emotional evaluation of what Mill might call a perceived interest determines the outcome.\(^{26}\) This claim and its underlying logic and experimental evidence are extended to moral choices as well. Some specific feelings that arise automatically in social interactions are theorized to have “evolved to deal with specific circumstances common to our hunter-gatherer ancestors,”\(^{27}\) that is, circumstances involving interactions with other members of their group and with non-group members.

Particular moral systems are cultivated from these “germs of feeling,” as Mill put it, by particular societies, in response to their particular circumstances. Evolved (innate) feelings that are evoked automatically by situations or actions of others provide the motivational raw materials around which moral conventions are built.

\(^{25}\) \textit{Human}, 120, referencing the work of Antonio R. Damasio. “Damasio proposed that emotions play a major role in decision-making and that the fully rational brain is not a complete brain.”


\(^{27}\) \textit{Human}, 128.
These are thought to include sympathy, contempt, anger, guilt, shame and gratitude.\textsuperscript{28} These emotions, and others like fear, might contribute in varying combinations to the development of patterns of complex learned but nonetheless intuitive dispositions toward reciprocity, a concern for suffering, the acceptance of hierarchy, and what is sometimes called a “coalition bias” (in-group/out-group recognition is the term for the associated cognitive capacity).\textsuperscript{29} Mill’s contention was that these second-nature dispositions are developed within specific societies, to apply to interactions with specific others, but he also argued that the social (that is, the political) boundaries of relevance could and should be expanded.\textsuperscript{30}

With respect to moral acts as well as others, conscious rationality is thought to be something applied, for the most part, after the fact. There is evidence for what one psychologist has described as the “makes sense” rule, by which causality is imputed not on the basis of consciously constructed theory or proof, but rather on a perceived coincidence between x and y.\textsuperscript{31} This is read as representing a general tendency to interpret, or to find reasons for, whatever phenomena are encountered, including our own feelings, and our own beliefs. What we experience as moral judgment is, in this

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{29} An additional “moral module” seen as characterizing human populations generally is the reaction of disgust to certain phenomena, termed an impulse to purity. Thus, the argument runs, occurrences in the environment serve as an input that triggers a particular emotion or set of emotions, and this emotional stimulus in turn prompts an automatic, or intuitive, disposition to behavior (thought or action). \textit{Human}, 130.
  \item \textsuperscript{30} It goes without saying that Mill saw inegalitarian differential application of these derivative moral impulses within a given society as a practice that ought generally to be discarded as soon as politically possible.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} \textit{Human}, 141.
\end{itemize}
view, first a result of innate but socially conditioned emotional responses, and only secondarily attributable to conscious interpretation as to why judgment is what it is. In this view – as in Mill’s, where the institutions of a politically coherent social unit, embody a consistent “system of opinions” about behavior, socially accumulated from experience over time – culture acts as an overlay, working in interaction with the self to habituate innate emotional dispositions to some behaviors and against others, so that “virtue” translates differently in different societies.³²

In the event, however, to experience a ‘gut’ feeling about what is the right thing to do is not the same as to be motivated to do the right thing. The self perceives competition among desires. Brain research suggests that an emotion-based stimulus to immediate gratification vs. the emotion connected to a distant reward, or to self-gratification in the face of an emotionally registered moral reaction, can be overridden by calculation. That calculation can be about costs and consequences out of the moment, and costs to self as well as to others.³³ This is an interpretation of some of the roots of virtue and the “causes” of “character” very similar to Mill’s. Human motivations are grounded in evolved instincts but innate instincts are only some among the many interacting forces affecting an individual’s determination to act in a

³² Human, 140. Mill’s argument with the “intuitionists” had to do with why and when a society should use experience and reason to evaluate its traditional moral practices, not to the question of innateness vs. processes of cultivation, per se.

³³ There is evidence that the capacity for self-control may be associated in some way with intelligence, or at least “cognitive competence.” Human., 146-147. See also Walter Mischel, Yuichi Shoda and Monica Rodriguez, “Delay of Gratification in Children,” Science, New Series 244, no. 4907 (1989): 933-938.
specific way at any specific time. Mill insisted that the habit of obedience to norms of a particular society has to come before a specific logic of obedience can be articulated formally for that society, and defended as a product of reason. The discussion will return to this point below.

As noted, theories positing connections between innate human emotional features and instinctual moral judgments are emerging in the context of a more general claim about the relationship between the evolution of mental processes – cognitive and emotional – and the size and complexity of human social groups. 34 Primates characteristically have brains much larger relative to body size than is found in other mammals; humans have both substantially larger and functionally more complex brains than do even closely related primate species. The emergence of this additional human mental equipment is traced to a period in which the typical human group size increased from perhaps 60 individuals to 150-200.35 This argument relates to the so-called executive function, or “higher” brain structures and capacities in particular. Associated hypotheses relating group living and growth in group size to the


35 At present, the prevailing hypothesis seems to be that the requirements of group living drove selection for mental capacity, and not the other way around. “The most succinct and parsimonious causal sequence...is that the window of opportunity provided for more intensely bonded social groups and the social skills that underpin this was the crucial selection pressure for the evolution of large brains...” Dunbar, “Social Brain,” 169. The premise is that environmental conditions favored, or demanded, larger-scale cooperation, and that this in turn generated the selection pressure for increased social capacities. In much of this research, there is a tendency to single out one factor as “causing” a result. Except when he was speculating about “systems of opinion,” with respect to humans, Mill usually wrote about interactions among many different causes, and multiplicities of circumstances.
development of cognitive skills especially tailored to social interaction have been applied to primates generally, not just to great apes or humans. Originally termed “Machiavellian intelligence,” because its features were seen as related to the ability to interpret and to affect – to “manipulate” – others’ intentions, the concept has come to be called more generally “social intelligence.” Anthropologists pursuing the idea of evolutionary connections between group size and brain development are attempting to locate evidence of these features and language emergence in common time frames. The evolution of advanced language abilities is characterized as a “software” development emerging in the vicinity of 200,000 years ago, made possible by prior acquisition by humans of an unusual accumulation of socially relevant cognitive genetic “hardware,” such as the neuronal structures that coordinate one’s feelings with the actions and emotions of particular others. This in turn has led to the idea that the development of social cognition capacities, in particular advanced intentionality and language skills, was associated with the emergence of diverse cultures.

The current results provide strong support for the cultural intelligence hypothesis that human beings have evolved some specialized social-cognitive skills (beyond those of primates in general) for living and exchanging knowledge in cultural groups: communicating with others, learning from others, and “reading the mind” of others in especially complex ways.

36 See Gazzaniga, Human, 91-111.
37 Dunbar, “Social Brain,” 176. Primates in general have secondary neurons that fire “sympathetically” when the individual’s own hand or mouth executes an action, but also when another individual’s hand or mouth executes such an action. These neurons are thought to constitute one of the precursor capacities for language. In humans, a similar secondary neuronal activity occurs when another is observed to express the experience of pain. Gazzaniga, Human, 169.
That is, learning from others was associated with an increase in the particularization – diversification – of patterns of thought/feeling/action, as Mill implied.

Evolution, Culture and Characteristic Behavior

Mill’s “theory of human life” included the idea that individuals within the units of society into which the human species divides itself (or, is self-understood to be divided), tend to exhibit characteristic patterns of thought and action, more or less similar to those found in other such units, but nonetheless distinct. He posited a relationship between the development and maintenance of common systems of opinion within politically discrete social units, on the one hand, and the development of broad trends in human social organization, and individual thought and behavior, over time. Evolution theories are now making similar connections, having to do with change operating over a broader span than “recorded time.” The idea that culture is an important feature of the story of human evolution – of what we recognize as modern human nature, in effect – is providing an explanatory supplement to the proposition that human intelligence is of a special order related in part to an unusually extensive human sociality. Culture is conceptualized as information acquired in the context of social interaction that relates to behavior: thought (including emotional and cognitive processes at work in the mind) and action. Culture intrinsically involves inter-
subjectivity, and ideas about what it is good to do and to be. Culture both changes and persists; that is, culture itself evolves. Culture is seen as a phenomenon particularly affecting human evolution in particular; human culture and the human genome are seen as having co-evolved. Finally, culture is hypothesized as implicated in and instantiated by phenomena associated with the making and maintenance of distinct, delimited groups.

"Social" Learning, or Gaining Light from Others’ Minds

A significant amount of what is taken to be particularly humans behavior is seen as grounded in what have become innate capacities for processing information gleaned from the social environment, including instincts about how to learn from others, and which others to learn from. Learning is equivalent to Mill’s “ratiocination,” or the capacity of inference, whereby the individual draws generalizations on the basis of experience (induction); makes some assumptions about what that experience means based on what is already known about the world (theory building and deduction); and then tests those assumptions through trial and error (prediction, structured observation, and experimentation), to see if they seem reliable. Decision-theory models based on concepts of estimated probabilities and sampling demonstrate how small amounts of environmental information can be effectively used

39 Boyd and Richerson, Not By Genes Alone, 13.
40 "Associated with" does not mean “limited to.” There are strong differences of view within and among the relevant scientific fields involved in this discussion. The treatment here omits some significant areas of controversy in order to present the general thrust of the argument as it appears to be trending.
and accumulated to produce better choices based on reduced risk of mistakes.\textsuperscript{41} An individual engaging effectively in this process presumably gains some survival or reproductive benefit, so good individual learners would be selected over poor individual learners, other things equal. But the net outcome depends on the nature of mistakes, and the costs of experimentation. Trial and error is resource intensive, and risky; curiosity can kill the cat.

Social learning is learning that benefits from the experience of being around others “of one’s kind.” It can mean just being frequently nearby, and therefore coincidentally adopting the same practices based on experiencing the same environmental cues, or “mirroring” randomly and accidentally discovering a desirable practice. This is Mill’s “apelike” skill of imitation, in effect. An “advanced” form of individual social learning involves emulation – reading the intent of another, recognizing the purpose of the action, sharing the purpose, and \textit{deliberately} copying. The value of social learning capacities interpreted in terms consistent with individual learning models suggests that, so long as imitative learning is itself an optional behavior, then “an organism capable of imitation can afford to be choosy, learning [individually] when learning is cheap and accurate, and \textit{learning socially} when learning is likely to be costly or inaccurate.”\textsuperscript{42} Where alternative models are available to copy, if there is a common or predominant local alternative, this is the one to

\textsuperscript{41} See \textit{Origin and Evolution}, 19-20.  
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Not By Genes Alone}, 112
follow, on the assumption that it represents the most successful option for a given environment.

One branch of this line of argument tends to locate the impetus for social learning primarily within the individual. Varying forms of behavior are seen as being evoked by the operation of environmental conditions (including the actions of other individuals) on genetically preprogrammed modular responses, or “preconceptions.” This leads to the view that social learning is not a process of “transmitting,” of consciously conveying or showing, so much as that “children make inferences by observing the behavior of others, and the kind of inferences that they make are strongly constrained by their evolved psychology.” An evolved psychology includes bigger and better inference-making equipment, as in a theory-of-mind capacity for registering others’ intentionality and its implications for oneself; and for forming a correct view of the “other” as someone whose behavior it makes sense to take as a model. This only leads to the further question, however, of how and why human psychology seems to have evolved so much farther in these aspects than, say, general primate psychology.

Mill considered the faculty of causal reasoning – applying conscious rules of inference – to be of profound significance as a marker of human nature. He also took it to be a faculty that consists solely in processes internal to the individual. At the

---

43 Not By Genes Alone, 10.
44 Not By Genes Alone, 44-45.
same time, he understood the information of relevance to human inductive and
deductive reasoning to be predominantly a collectively acquired good, including
information about what is good to know, to do, and to be, and information about how
to know, to do, and to be. In Bentham, he pointed to the identification, evaluation, and
choosing of ends – the part overlooked by Bentham – as at least as important as the
problem of choosing means. Seeing human individual good as irreducibly dependent
on society, both as an end in itself (feelings for others) and as a means (light from
other minds), he adopted from Coleridge the conception of culture as the embodiment
of heritable acquired knowledge of the good and how to achieve it. This included the
view that a society’s common cultural institutions – broadly understood as language,
methods of education, system of laws, ways of thinking, dispositions as to what is
delightful, what disgusting – in sum, and as a whole, represent that society’s particular
legacy to subsequent generations. A society assembles this heritable collection of
thought and feeling both consciously and non-consciously, for the sake of individuals
born and not yet born, and for the sake of the society as a society. 45

Inter-generational Transmission of Systems of Opinion

The important implication of the heritability of cultural forms is that behavioral
(phenomenal) characteristics and variation in behavioral characteristics acquired

45 A significant issue Mill generally undertheorized – perhaps the significant issue – is conflict. Here,
the question goes to conflict over what does or might or should constitute “a” society – by what criteria
conflict is supposed to be resolved, even what conflict means, in perceiving or generating conditions of
“wholeness.”
within the lifetime of individuals can be transmitted across generations, not thought to be the case with purely genetic dispositions.\textsuperscript{46} The concept of culture associated with co-evolution theories is seen as denoting the information stored in or accessible to the individual brain but not arising in the first instance from individual experience, much like Mill’s “light derived from other minds.” It is information related to action. “Culture is information capable of affecting individuals’ behavior that they acquire from other members of their species through teaching, imitation, and other forms of social transmission.”\textsuperscript{47} Among other forms of social transmission considered important are sanctions brought to bear on the actions of individuals by other individuals with respect to adherence to norms.\textsuperscript{48} The “learning” involved in cultural practice implies rules, rule enforcement and rule following as an intrinsic part of the concept.\textsuperscript{49} Cultural practices evolve in the sense that they are reproducible with some fidelity over generations, providing a “target” for forces of natural selection. This point leads to questions about the extent to which broad cultural forms are transmitted

---

\textsuperscript{46} Typically referred to as Lamarckian inheritance, but also see Boyd and Richerson, Not By Genes Alone, 5 and 16-17, and Richerson and Boyd, Origin and Evolution, 14, on Darwin and the transmission of acquired variation.

\textsuperscript{47} Not By Genes Alone, 5.


\textsuperscript{49} The posited evolutionary relationship between agent-centered and group-relevant features of cultural transmission – including “moralistic punishment” and coercion, is discussed below.
holistically – i.e., as in Mill’s consensus – and about the possible contribution of more or less holistic transmission to group selection, especially for human populations.

The term “culture” as a defined factor in evolutionary theory does not have the discriminative status of terms such as “gene” or “species.” It is used to refer both to behavior and its information content, and also ranges from incremental adjustments in complex behavior that accumulate to become technological innovations (the fabrication of a spear point), and to large ‘holistic’ sets of integrated practices (the “culture of the Inca”). Attempting to bridge this spectrum, Richard Dawkins’ introduced the term “meme” to describe an individual, replicated cultural “unit,” suggesting an analogy with a physiological gene. In this model, discrete “units” of thought/practice (how/why to make a new spear point), combine in larger structures of symbolically affected behavior, as genes combine in a genome, to enable complex coordinated behavior. At the other end of the spectrum, some natural scientists invoke analogies relating the idea of culture to the populations that make up a species. As genes are linked together in larger, reproductively transmitted structures, ultimately represented as the collective species’ genome carried within its various breeding sub-populations, so too small cultural elements are “linked together in larger, culturally

---

transmitted entities: systems of morphology, myth, technology and religion,” that then are further aggregated into sub-cultures and cultures that “characterize human groups at different scales.”

In the logic of this claim that culture itself evolves, it is suggested that more or less coherent, integrated, ‘holistic’ cultural forms are more or less accurately reproduced from generation to generation, more or less coextensively with human groups of varying coherence and scale, more or less depending on circumstances. Mill’s political ethologist would ask, what psychological processes or mechanisms might contribute to the emergence and endurance of coherent cultural forms, or “systems of opinion,” under what social circumstances, and how do issues of rule and authority condition relevant social circumstances? The concept of a cognitive thought/action/feeling “schema” offers a possible answer to the psychological mechanisms part of this question, an answer that expands on the concept familiar to Mill as a “habit.”

Schema is the term used to refer to a pattern of brain organization connecting components of routine (habitual) action together. A bit of information in the environment triggers the automatic assembly of a complex set of learned goal-associated behaviors, relevant to both thinking and acting, assuming nothing else

---

51 *Origin and Evolution*, 317.
going on in the mind succeeds in inhibiting the call-up.\textsuperscript{53} To the extent they are habitually used and reinforced, schemas become robust and durable. Their function is to link elements together in consistent, meaningful, action-relevant patterns without the need for conscious attention, applied to regularly used behaviors – from, say, riding a bicycle to interpreting the intentions of a stranger. Schemas are socially reproducible, in principle. “A central challenge...is to understand the interaction between the distribution of schemas across persons and the distribution of the ‘external cultural primers’ that evoke them.”\textsuperscript{54} Like Mill’s posited systems of opinion, if mental schemas for routine behavior are shared differentially, they will function to coordinate thought and action among particular individuals, and to distinguish group practices from the practices of other groups.

As evidence has accumulated that the brain has innate features related to distinguishing a group within which the individual places him/herself from other non-group members, different explanations for this phenomenon are offered. One has to do with basic cognitive dispositions to categorize and classify what is observed according to characteristics intuitively taken to be “inherent” in what is being observed. Neuroscientists suggest that humans have innate systems within the brain that distinguish at the most general level between inanimate objects, living things, and


The thought is that such innate categories may extend to what are biologically perceived as “natural kinds” and sub-categories of natural kinds, such as species, and that such a discriminative neurological schema may have been adapted to provide a mechanism for recognition of ethnic categories – groups seen as bounded by endogamy, or “marry within the group” practices, with descent relationships thus group delimited. A second explanation suggests that innate in-group/outgroup categorizers evolved in adaptation to the increasing prevalence of culture as an environmental fact for humans. It posits that symbolic group markers and a mental faculty for using them to categorize among groups might have arisen together as a aid to social learning, since one of the factors seen as leading to effective emulation is the recognition of similarity between the observer and the observed. Both arguments are posed as a counterweight to the idea that racial, ethnic, and cultural discriminations have no innate basis, but they not inconsistent with the possibility that biological methods of identification and categorization are available to support and reinforce conventionally determined discriminations.

While social learning and forms of culture seem to be a feature of many animal species, a pattern of cumulative change in socially learned behavioral adaptation
seems to be quite rare. The claim is that inter-generational cultural adaptation represents an evolutionary force that is fundamentally different from either “nature” or “nurture” as conventionally conceived. Cultural adaptation has some features analogous to the genetically grounded transmission of traits – more or less faithful replication, individual-to-individual transmission, the heritability of variety, in effect – and other features analogous to the impact of variable environments on selection. The evolutionary potential of cultural adaptation is seen as having made possible the “unprecedented adaptations” of modern complex human societies “based on cooperation with unrelated people.” Cultural adaptation, it is argued, “combines inheritance and learning in a way that cannot be parsed into genes or environment.” Instead, in understanding human adaptation in particular, it is necessary to attend to “how a population of individuals interacts with their environments and each other over time.” Still, if an evolving culture is particularly effective in permitting a species to adapt and increase its dominance, then why has this strategy not become characteristic of more species?

59 See Origin and Evolution, Chapter 3: “Why Culture is Common but Cultural Evolution is Rare,” for a formal discussion of this point, and Chapter 4: “Climate, Culture and the Evolution of Cognition,” for an empirical assessment that more or less tracks with arguments relating to the evolution of human psychological capacities cited above.
60 Not By Genes Alone, 15.
61 Not By, Genes Alone, 11.
62 Ibid.
Evolution, Cultural Adaptation, and Group Coherence

Mill, too, was deeply interested in the problem of cultural adaptation – progress, in his terms, in systems of opinion – as applied to human sub-populations constituted as discrete, self-regulating groups. He was asking, in effect, what forms of group regulation contribute to a particular society’s auto-adaptation in thought and action, under what circumstances? Developing theories relating to the evolution of human behavioral dispositions, and the idea that culture has played a significant role in human evolutionary history, exhibit notable parallels to Mill’s instincts about the centrality of this question. It appears that the adaptation of human societies toward larger social-unit scale has proceeded via a process in which the development of the mind, with its complex, integrated, society-dependent faculties, has been implicated as both cause and effect. Mill believed in a general progression of social organization, from a condition in which competitive egoism prevails toward one in which habits and rules together support cooperative individual interaction, or “rational freedom,” “Universal sequences” in human history, generated by “the action of outward circumstances upon masses of human beings” at work, contributed to this general progression.\footnote{LMS, CW VIII, 877.} Mill attributed to political forces a key role in the determination of the impact of such universal sequences via the instantiation of distinct societies within which individuals exhibit characteristic, consistent behavior. The proposition that “circumstances,” can operate on groups \textit{qua} groups to promote and ultimately to
enforce behavioral consistency within bounded, discrete, self-recognizing communities, and that such a process might be related to the evolution of both other-regard and agency across the human species, has a parallel in contemporary discourses about human evolution.64

This discourse is located within a more general effort to explore the question of how complex biological orders develop from simpler ones. This exploration has given rise to a proposition about the evolution of persistent cooperation in nature. This proposition is similar to Mill’s claim that the observed phenomena of “co-existence” by which we assert things to be “kinds” must be related to causality in the “origin of all things.”65 The idea is that, although it happens rarely, “major transitions” in biological “kinds” occur when what have been distinct entities enter into a relationship in which they lose their functional independence (or, it declines significantly). The “major transitions” idea was applied initially to the concept that a symbiotic association of different types of bacteria at some point provided a fitness advantage that eventually turned into full integration, paving the way for multi-cellular organisms. What is thought to have driven this process forward is natural selection among groups. That is, in response to particular circumstances, the symbiotic association (or ‘group’) was so successful relative to non-symbionts that it persisted

---

64 See Alexander and Borgia, “Group Selection,” passim.
65 System, CW VII, 579.
and expanded, developing ultimately into a new type of life form. This is seen as having contributed to the forces bringing into existence new categories of living things composed of formerly independent other living things now functioning as units. As noted, this logic has been applied to explain the evolution of eusocial insects and the evolution of chromosomes. Stephen Jay Gould and others have argued for the application of group selection concepts to the origination of new species. Conceptually less extreme, the logic has been applied in developing evolutionary explanations for the existence of persistent social cooperation in humans, ranging from simple forms like reciprocity, where benefits to the individual are apparent, through altruism, to individually costly group beneficial behaviors such as policing and punishment.

A version of the group selection argument was put forward by Charles Darwin as a likely explanation for the evolution of human sociality and morality. He articulated this view in the fifth chapter of The Descent of Man, which deals with the evolution of human intellectual, social and moral “faculties.”

It must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other

---

66 See discussion note 9, page 228, above.
68 See Frank, Repression of Competition, for difference between policing and punishment.
men of the same tribe, yet that an increase in the number of well-endowed men and an advancement in the standard of morality will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.  

Claims for a supplementary role for group selection in human evolution were not pursued in the formative years of evolutionary biology, and remain contested as unproven, and as unlikely on the face of it to have been significant in evolution overall as compared with selection on organisms. In recent decades, however, proponents of group selection have made progress toward developing an integration of the theory with traditional individual selection. The new term of art is multi-level selection. The formal proposition more or less follows Darwin’s conception that a group with relatively high proportions of moral, or altruistic, or inherently cooperative individuals will be advantaged, as a group, over other groups or unrelated individuals, and this process can contribute, under certain conditions, to the spread of these self-denying behavioral traits in the overall population – i.e., the species. One important condition is that groups remain groups – that is, there must be something generating a non-

---


71 As noted, David Sloan Wilson has been particularly active in the effort to engage arguments relating to group selection positively, and to integrate them analytically with individual selection. See especially Wilson and Wilson, “Rethinking” and D. S. Wilson, “What is wrong with absolute individual fitness?”
random pattern of interaction among particular individuals that is maintained even when there is a mixing of formerly separated populations, so that the selection effect of differential advantage remains greater between groups than between individuals.\textsuperscript{72} The core of the argument is that group separation can create the possibility of between-group variation in behavior greater than within-group variation.

The question driving interest in group selection, in principle, has been the need to explain how a genetic basis for altruism could persist in a population where the individual carrying that gene or genes would be disfavored in reproductive competition with individuals whose genes support strict egoism. One answer is kin selection. The costs to an individual of an other-benefiting behavior can be outweighed in reproductive consequences by the benefits to a closely related set of individuals carrying similar genetic endowments. The broader argument for group selection as a factor in evolution points to the possibility of natural selection operating on groups of associated individuals, whether close kin or not, because selection operates on behavior.\textsuperscript{73} If there is more fitness-relevant behavioral variety between

\textsuperscript{72} John Maynard Smith’s “haystack” model of group segregation and re-mixing has become a central focus in the debate over the plausibility and viability of group selection as a serious force in evolution. See, for example, Theodore C. Bergstrom, “Evolution of Social Behavior: Individual and Group Selection,” \textit{Journal of Economic Perspectives} 16, no. 2 (2002): 67-88. Also see Darwin regarding groups absorbing other groups – not random migration among groups. \textit{Descent}, 129.

groups than between individuals, selection will operate at the group level. Group coherence creates the possibility of between-group variation that can be selected for. A corollary is that this in turn can favor traits that foster group cohesion, as distinct from traits that do not, or that act against it.

*Separation and the Maintenance of Difference*

In the argument for the possibility of group selection, the maintenance of non-random assortment is implied. This has been seen as extremely untypical in nature. Assortment can occur by accident, but interbreeding within species, at least, is open by definition. Recently, however, more credence has been given to factors contributing to the natural occurrence of non-random assortment of populations into behaviorally distinct sub-populations. Under specific circumstances, spatial structure can result in an uneven distribution of within-population interactions. This provides a definition of group based on the different frequency of interaction, not differences among individuals. Such groupings constitute accidental neighborhoods in which individuals happen to interact with specific other individuals more often than with members of the overall population. As biologist D. S. Wilson put this point, “The groups need not have discrete boundaries; the important feature is that social interactions are local, compared to the size of the total population.” Assortment only becomes relevant to evolution, however, when it affects fitness through differential behavior. The

---

74 See Bergstrom, *Evolution of Social Behavior.*
75 D. S. Wilson, *Rethinking,* 334
question, in view of this, is: how is it assortment, *per se*, might contribute to the heritable variety of behavior between groups? This happens when specific behaviors by individuals evoke similar behavior from nearby individuals, behaviors that indirectly result in higher average fitness than the individuals involved could experience in absence of the interaction. That is, there is a net indirect benefit to interaction – a non-additive effect that is over and above the relative fitness effects generated independently by the differential distribution of traits across individuals. Genes that have a selection effect at the inter-individual level theoretically should respond to group selection, and experiments indicate that this can occur.76

*Group Selection: Cause and Effect in Group Cohesion*

The second set of ideas relating to the plausibility or likelihood of group selection having an impact – that is, of between-group variation becoming a relatively stronger evolutionary factor than within-group variation under specific circumstances – goes to the issue of what might contribute to the existence and maintenance of groups as groups. That is, what might occur to increase the likelihood that nature will see the emergence of relatively stable, persistently assorted groupings of individuals? Here the argument begins to turn on features of a group as a group as well as on features of its members as individuals: boundaries, structures, relationships, patterns of interaction, etc. Very generally speaking, groupings can be distinguished by the nature

and strength of their boundaries, or borders, and the extent and character of their internal organization. Implicitly, if the theoretical possibility of selection on groups is contingent on the likelihood of groupings and the occurrence of non-random adaptive variance due to interaction effects, there could be a feedback effect, whereby group selection reinforces the frequency of traits contributing to group separation. This line of thinking opens the door to a broad range of questions about what it is that makes groups, not just assortments, and also what it is that keeps them intact and functioning as social units. For human groups, Mill’s instinct was to look for answers in the psychological processes supporting social coherence, and in the associated relationship between those processes and the circumstances that produce a “body politic.”

The Evolution of Political Order and the Utility of the Whole

The thrust of the argument to this point has been intended to provide evidence of a rising scientific interest in the possibility that grouping and the effects of grouping have played a noticeable role in human evolution, and may therefore be intrinsic to human nature as we currently experience it – not as a feature in total opposition to individual agency but as a factor operating in complicated concert with its development. Mill associated the idea of politics with the idea of groups. That is, he interpreted the political as involving the making and keeping of cohesive, more or less unitary and distinguishable groupings of individuals in particular societies, or communities of co-existence. To say “a society” as distinct from “society” was for
Mill to invoke in some way or other the political, implicitly if not explicitly. He saw the concepts and practices that regulate and habituate common life as predicate to, and determinative of the possibility as well as the specific character of, that common life. Therefore, as to building comprehension of the nature of things political, “All questions respecting the tendencies of forms of government must stand part of the general science of society, not of any separate branch of it.” 77

Mill contended that the formation of a *habit of obedience* in matters affecting the well-being of oneself as well as that of a community of specific others is the necessary first step toward rational freedom, and away from mere “savage independence,” a state in which “everyone lives for himself.” 78 The inculcation of a communally-referenced habit of obedience is achieved via the training incorporated in communal institutions, those regulative structures that transmit those thought/action/feeling schemas constituting a particular society’s common culture, the structures of practice that constitute it as a particular society.

Evidence gathered in recent decades with respect to group cohesion and group governance among the large primates offers elements of a parallel theory, suggesting that the roots of human political constitution, both hierarchical and egalitarian, may lie much deeper in pre-history than Mill imagined. Innate dispositions to enforce

77 *LMS*, CW VIII, 906.  
78 *Considerations*, CW XIX, 394. Note that the parallel formulation appearing in *On Liberty* has to do strictly with benefits to the self as authority in the case of one’s own self-understood well-being, an authority Mill contended was not based on any principle of rights, but rather on the idea that mankind has progressed to the point where social discourse and persuasion can replace sanctions as tutor of one’s best personal individual interests. See CW XVIII, 223-224.
communal order, innate dispositions to deference, and innate dispositions to affiliation together are seen as functioning to make group life possible, and helping create the conditions under which between group variation can become significant. The dispositions involved, in combination, result in policing behaviors that constrain within-group conflict, behaviors that demonstrate in-group/out-group discrimination, and behaviors representing organized between-group aggression. These underlying dispositions, in combination, also are seen as providing a pre-adaptation for the possibility of cultural diversity and cultural adaptation.

**Primates, Primacy and Order**

The argument begins with assessments of the nature of a discrete chimpanzee society and the role of politics in its maintenance, politics in the sense of actions associated with the determination of group definition and group order.79 Primatologists documenting the behavior of *pan troglodytes* in habitat-like zoo conditions and in the wild have developed a view of chimpanzees as being innately communal, and the chimpanzee community as being governed, in the sense that its members engage in some third-party policing of each other’s behavior, and competition is structured, not anarchic.80 Order is exhibited in the form of a flexible, or plastic, linear dominance hierarchy. Sometimes stable, often dynamic, chimpanzee

79 In Mill’s terms, the political is as much about affecting the prevailing “system of opinions” about how to be in the world as it is about determining particular rules. This would presumably apply to an early human community, not a community of chimpanzees.

80 The arguments in this section generally follow the claims made in Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).
hierarchy affects and is affected by virtually all social behavior; individual chimpanzees demonstrate a constant awareness of complex, shifting inter-individual relationships, and of their preference implications. Rank and order keeping are associated, but ranks are neither permanent nor hereditary; contests for primacy recur, and are supported by coalition-building and coalition-changing behaviors. The life of the community consists of a set of activities in which individual members interact both competitively and cooperatively, foraging, grooming each other, playing, copulating, raising young, and occasionally conducting collective aggression against neighboring communities. Chimpanzees get into frequent disputes while engaged in these interactions, and it is these disputes that may be policed and punished. The general degree of conflict abeyance within a community appears to depend significantly on whether existing hierarchical relationships are stable, or not. This is partly related to the degree of acceptance of a given dominance order per se, but it also reflects an overt process of collective order keeping. Males serving as established dominants intervene to end disputes among subordinate males and to protect females and juveniles.

---

81 A community is a persistent unit of social organization, consisting of closely related males, primarily non-related adult females who migrate between communities, and juveniles attached to the females, ranging together within a territory. What is “natural” varies under different environmental conditions and changes on evolutionary time scales. Within-group rank ordering thus far appears to be a constant. See de Waal, Chimpanzee Politics, passim.

82 See discussion, Chimpanzee Politics, 190-191.

Among the males, threat-displaying behaviors, rather than actual attacks, serve the purpose of establishing, maintaining and contesting dominance; one-way “greeting” behavior constitutes deference. Reciprocal grooming, in contrast, is associated with affiliation, taking place primarily among males, rivals as well as non-rivals. Horizontal networks based on familial and other affiliative ties intersect and interact with power coalitions, with the former providing the extension of relationships that contribute to the effect of the latter. Status seems to represent the power to, more than the power over, associated with preferential access to resources: space, reproductive primacy, foraging opportunity, functional affiliations, etc. It appears that the structured order of preferment represented by hierarchy, combined with the affiliational instincts that have to do with genetic relatedness and maternal-child bonds together constitute a structure that permits and fosters persistent association. It is within the context of this interactive regulation of social conduct that pro-social behaviors are to be observed, including reciprocity, instrumental cooperation, and altruism, as well as cooperative aggression against potential predators and against other communities.

The composition of the chimpanzee community is not fixed as to membership, because adult females migrate, but it has a discernible internal structure comprised of

---

84 See *Chimpanzee Politics*, passim.
85 Female status is independently determined – within a given group, daughters can acquire status from their mothers; males must compete for it – and to a significant extent operates separately from the male status hierarchy, but females matter politically when they rally to or desert a given male during a contest for dominance. *Chimpanzee Politics*, 116-121.
characteristic patterns of inter-subjective behavior. Competitive, cooperative, and affiliative behaviors represent alternative phenotypic expressions of innate dispositions available, to some degree, to any single individual, depending on circumstances. A group-recognized dominance-submission hierarchy, in contrast, has significance solely in the context of a group functioning as a group. It is a feature, or property, of the group, not of the individuals comprising the group; it represents a system characteristic identifying the establishment of relationships within the group – as monarchy is a feature of the realm, not of the monarch. Among such dispositions, the instinct to defer to a superior – superiority being not immutable but contingent on circumstances – instincts to third-party policing behavior when dominant, and the existence and cultivation of affiliative bonds seem to interact to facilitate group coherence. This combination of dispositions, operating in concert, thus can be said to constitute a group utility, a utility of the whole the value of which is determined by circumstances.

Not exactly “savage independence,” the culture of these particular “higher beasts” exhibits what Mill saw as the essential element of social union, obedience to a government of some sort. Chimpanzees appear to take conscious account of the social implications of a system of rank order, more or less accepting and living within its complex framework of fluid relationships even as they contest for place in that order in characteristic, predictable, often clever ways. As one result, inter-individual conflict is constrained, and dispositions to submit and/or to cooperate are less
relatively disadvantaged than they otherwise might be. But between these politically structured self-recognizing groups, what primatologists call “hostile inter-group aggression” is also appears to be characteristic and predictable.

Can this tale of the effects of agglomeration-constituting politics and governance among our nearest primate relatives have a bearing on the nature of human societies? Chimpanzee communities, after all, exhibit little cultural variety relative to human societies; chimpanzee mental and language capacities appear considerably more limited, and their characteristic units of social organization seem to be smaller than those of early human groups. In Mill’s terms, chimpanzees as a species are relatively less accomplished at combination, and also demonstrate a narrower range of cultural difference – of collective character – between politically constituted social units than humans do.

*Homo Sapiens, Egalitarian Dominance, and Progress*

The observation of similarity between chimpanzee and human political behavior has been used to construct an argument about how an enforced egalitarianism

---

86 Note this summary represents an interpretation of interpretations of observations, not experiments, and one that over-generalizes patterns of behavior known to vary with environmental conditions and group composition.


88 Chimpanzees are evidently the species closest to humans in genetic make-up. This is a somewhat controversial point, however, especially in relation to bonobos, (*pan paniscus*), so-called pygmy chimps whose political-social repertoire is different – female-dominated, inclined to make love not war in service of conflict restriction, and evidently more language-capable than *pan troglodytes*, for example. Hierarchy, however, is an important organizing principle in bonobo communities. See “Ghost of genetics past shows up in bonobos” at [http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn13734](http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn13734) (accessed Feb. 12, 2011).
might have evolved on the foundation of a genetic endowment predisposed to support hierarchy, and how this in turn might have contributed to cultural variation and group selection in human evolution. This argument posits that the suite of group-constituting hierarchical behaviors observed among the four living species of African-based hominoids could have given rise to a type of grand coalition-based system of reverse or counter-dominance designed to further restrict and more aggressively manage within-group competition. The resultant reproductive leveling, in conjunction with the imposition and enforcement of resource-sharing norms, would permit, in principle, the emergence and spread within the population of characteristics and traits in addition to and also different from, the characteristics and traits that develop within the framework of say, the order of a chimpanzee dominance hierarchy and that are associated with relative primacy within it. The net benefit of any traits that emerged in the context of the prevention of uneven resource distribution would accrue to the group as a group. The benefit would be, in effect, a property of the group as a group, reliant on the presence within and across the group of an interacting set of behaviors constraining a single value or limited values standard of primacy determination. Mental capacity and traits for cooperation (e.g., an instinct to reciprocate) might contribute more to the group gene pool, while physical strength and traits for non-cooperation (e.g., an instinct to cheat or otherwise “free ride”) might contribute somewhat less. If the combination, including any increase it engendered in the possibilities for beneficial cooperation, were to prove more useful to a group than the
absence of the combination, these behaviors could come to characterize the species generally – but always with reference to the presence or absence of the relevant traits occurring within groups as a group.\textsuperscript{89}

The basic notion is that the egalitarianism thought to have characterized Paleolithic-era human groups amounts to coalitionally based reverse, or counter dominance, constituting a form of antihierarchy, or inversion of dominance in which the power flow is reversed, so that all dominate each to the extent of keeping relative power at parity.\textsuperscript{90}

The idea of the possibility of group selection is relevant for generating suggestions as to why and how coalitional action against “alpha-ism” might have arisen and been selected for, and even more important in the development of propositions about what reverse dominance might have meant for the future evolution of humans, once acquired as a predominant form. The restriction of primacy through the evolution of egalitarian norms and practices of enforcing such norms is associated in evolutionary time with the period giving rise to language and culture, which in turn would tend to further the potential for group relative to individual selection. A single or limited-value dominance hierarchy acts to preserve both within-group and between-group fitness variances. A mutual dominance scheme shifts the balance toward

\textsuperscript{89} The logic of this argument about the nature of reverse, or counter, dominance as the basis of egalitarianism was developed by anthropologist Christopher Boehm, whose interest is in exploring the long-term effects of political behavior on human nature, especially “the political side of morality.” Boehm, \textit{Hierarchy}, viii. Like Mill, Boehm speculates about what he sees as human ambivalence about dominance, with control of others within one’s group linked to desires for individual self-determination.\textsuperscript{90} This is consistent with Mill’s view of democratic government as government of each by all.
between-group variance; then, to the extent this permits more interaction and active cooperation to emerge, and to the extent this in turn results in net group benefits, traits favoring more interaction and cooperation can spread in the population, either competitively or by emulation.

There is nothing inherently “nice” about this view of egalitarianism; there is, however, the imputation that it could lead to additional reduction of within-group variation. The enforced sharing of resources, for example, puts a premium on the development of other adaptations that make collective resource acquisition more effective, relative to adaptations that matter more to inter-individual competitive success.91 A more even distribution of material benefits is bought at the price of a more extensive dependence on coordinated action – a greater harmonization of interests, in Mill’s terms. But, the payoff for coordinated action – combination – evidently includes for the human species at least not only the greater productivity and population that Mill identified in “Civilization.” It also may include human mental capacity, including many of its moral and emotional components. On this account, the co-existence and consensualism that operate at the surface of what we think of as non-political or pre-political forms of human social organization do not represent the absence of politics; they reflect the practice and product of a particular form of

91 As noted, chimpanzees have been observed to act aggressively in coalitions; the critical innovation needed to direct such coalitions against selfish resource ‘hoarders’ could have its genetic foundation in the traits underlying the practice of non-kin food sharing observed within a number of animal societies. Even chimpanzees engage in some meat sharing, apparently. See de Waal, Chimpanzee Politics, 197-198. For a general discussion of the evidence for political, cognitive, and cultural pre-adaptations for egalitarian systems of social organization, see Boehm, Hierarchy, 181-194.
politics. The essential effect of both forms is to restrict internal, or within-group
competition in the service of greater success vis à vis the external world – consisting
of both the environment generally, and other groups specifically.

This interesting story about the possible rise of egalitarianism in Paleolithic
human groups turns on the assertion that what we see in egalitarian society represents
the results of an innately grounded instinct to balance power in service of greater
agency, not the absence of an instinct for dominance. It implicates the underlying
instinct and its expression, in interaction with cooperative instincts and capacities
more or less co-evolved, in the overall development of complex human societies and
their specific moral, ideational, and material structures. It is one thing, however, for
an indifferent “nature” or other circumstances to determine what behavior is group-
averse, and what behavior is group-advantageous – really, in each case, what
combination of behaviors – by favoring a group’s relative success. It is a different
matter, as Mill argued in On Liberty, when the group itself takes up the conscious
intentional determination of its own best interests.

_Rational Freedom and the Utility of the Whole_

To recur to the basic argument, John Stuart Mill’s preoccupation with both
harmonization and liberty reflects not inconsistency but rather an appreciation for
complexity. Complexity is not a matter of counting, the equivalent to a Benthamic
calculus of what constitutes a good for some aggregated but not integrated “greatest
number.” Complexity, or as Mill termed it, combination, represents the instantiation
of a whole (to some degree) that is distinct from the simple sum of the parts: In persistent combination, behavioral traits may exhibit phenomenological variation not expressed in the absence of combination. What is good for a given individual, therefore, is not a function solely of what is good for it individually, but rather a function jointly of what is good for it individually and what is good for it in relation to what is good for any persistent combination in which it participates.

For any combination to persist, it must incorporate features that maintain its persistence, including mechanisms of conformance and the suppression of group-dysfunctional internal competition. Establishing and maintaining a society as a distinct, coherent society thus may be seen as the function of politics – not the purpose of politics, which is politics regarded from the perspective of the individual participant, but rather politics regarded from the perspective of the group as a group. From this latter perspective, what appears is a transfer of at least some power (perhaps better said, of some agency) from the components of the system acting separately to the system as a whole. The power transferred has to be such as to sustain the structure as a coherent structure, with the result of instantiating a group that will not easily dissociate, or disorganize. The tasks of maintaining the structure as a structure will be distributed among various elements of the “body politic,” including the ontologically prior element, the psychological, as well as the ontologically posterior: those moral, cultural, legal, economic, and other practices constitutive of any given society. For the polity to remain intact, all of these must function with a degree of consistency. For it
to remain functional as a whole, however, the consistency cannot be such that it prevents adaptation.

Whether or not Mill saw the nation-state as an ideal form and scale of polity for everywhere and for all time – and there is considerable evidence, in *Considerations* and *Utilitarianism* in particular, but elsewhere as well, to indicate he did not – it is clear that he did understand the development and realization of human agency to depend significantly on the nature of human society, and the nature of society to depend on the fact of government as constitutive of discrete units of co-existence. He assembled a complex proto-theory as to how and why that should be, grounding his premises in both naturalist and conventionalist views of the human species and its development over time. Mill also understood, on the grounds of his theorizing, that there is considerable risk of over-government and misgovernment, the latter meaning when government policy is mistaken as to polity *qua* polity requirements; when it subverts polity interests in service of particular sub-polity interests; and, when it suppresses behavior that does not in fact threaten polity interests in any significant way, and may in fact promote polity interests in unforeseeable ways. The interests of a particular polity are just that, its interests as a more or less unitary society conditioned by the framework of more or less consistent thoughts, feelings, and actions that constitute it as a polity, that keep it functioning effectively as a unit. Interests of individuals as individuals are distinct from polity interests, *per se*. They may be compatible; they may be incompatible. To put it
abstractly, the distinct elements of a multi-layer utility function might operate in the same direction some of the time, in opposite directions at others.

Read this way, Mill’s many-sided view of the polity in the development of human society and agency over time resonates with current themes in evolutionary theory, and with Darwin’s own ideas, in ways not evident at the time in which both published their thoughts on the subject, nor generally recognized since. Mill’s political theorizing opposes both biological determinism and strict anti-naturalism. It is consistent with a non-absolutist individualism in which concepts like nation, clan, and tribe can represent meaningful categories, with that meaning to be interrogated both philosophically and empirically. Mill’s theorizing, although incomplete and certainly contestable, nonetheless has enough in common with both naturalist and interpretivist discourses to form the basis of a common dialogue about the polity. There is the potential here to engage both positive and normative questions about politics and government in a way that takes account of group-making and group-keeping – the development and existence of particular holistic social bodies – as an essential contributor to human agency.
CONCLUSION

The Polity and the Paradox of Progress

This study has made a number of claims about John Stuart Mill, what he was up to as a theorist of the polity, and why. They add up to the proposition that this partially articulated, complex, yet fundamentally coherent feature of his thought deserves more attention and engagement than it typically gets. Comprehending the nature and effects of political union was a centrally important objective for Mill because he perceived the phenomena associated with unitization as strongly implicated in human psychological development and social organization. Attending to the conceptual relationships among Mill’s ontological, epistemological, moral, and political theorizing leads to an understanding of Mill and his normative liberalism that reveals it to be more consistent than otherwise. His philosophical views about the political as constitutive of human agency, while incomplete, provide the framework of a positive theory of politics that is in significant ways compatible with contemporary scientific explorations of the role of group cohesion and group variation in human evolution.

Evaluating the Argument

Mill’s political prescriptions appear more consistent, and their grounds of justification are more intelligible, whether persuasive or not, when understood as reflecting his theory of the polity. An example is his concern with representation and “competence” in CRG. If there are distinctly corporate, systemic, ‘meta’ interests to
be served by political participation, as well as discrete constituent interests, then constitutional structure and political institutions need to reflect the thought/feeling/action requirements of both – if not through distribution of votes, then some other way. Further, to the extent Mill’s political prescriptions are adopted but his complex grounds for them are not understood, important political consequences are likely to be missed. An example is the fact that the “harm principle,” as articulated, is based on an inexplicit but central assumption that it is “a” society that has to determine what is private harm and what is public harm, so long as co-existence is at issue. In *On Liberty*, Mill’s defense of the right of members of a distinct Mormon political community to practice polygamy if they so choose demonstrates the point. In his argument he explicitly sets aside his own strong positions against the legal and psychological subjugation of women, in order to stipulate that the interpretation of interest is up to a given polity. Other political units would not be required to recognize polygamous unions as valid within their jurisdictions.\(^1\) This is not an argument from external principles of sovereignty; it is an argument based on Mill’s views about the internal requirements of co-existence, and the necessity of co-existence for the realization of ‘rational freedom.’

---

\(^1\) See *On Liberty*, CW XVIII, 290-291  Mill makes a complex argument here, as is typical, taking account of women’s consent, the possibility that their views are determined by customs over-privileging marriage, the option of education and moral suasion, etc. It is possible to read this whole example as aimed at what was in his view the unnecessary narrowness of Victorian English Christian morality. But he is consistent here, as elsewhere, in insisting that social prescription be justified in relation to its application to a specific political community and that community’s self-defined assessment of its communal interests, in part because of the obligation such prescriptions implies – guarantee of rights, for example – in his view.
Adopting such a Millean perspective in policy debates would not resolve them, but it would shift the terms, bringing the question of the good of the whole as a whole to the table as a legitimate concern, in principle, even with respect to issues that seem most to deeply to turn on views about individual rights, individual freedom, or the concept of privacy. Gun ownership, the regulation of reproduction, immigration policy, food and financial regulation – all concern the need to exercise collective judgment in determining “What are the rightful limits to the sovereignty of the individual over himself?”\(^2\) That determination, per Mill’s harm principle, should be conducted on a standard of demonstration, showing the seriousness of harm to specific others, or to \textit{this} (or any) particular society organized as a lasting political body around loyalty to a specific constitution of authority and specific principles of cohesion, principles that define membership in a way that translates into shared feelings of commonality. The harms to be considered are harms of omission – failures of duty – as well as harms of commission, and they have to be determined circumstantially. Arguably, it is in fact such a political reading of the harm principle that is motivating many of the participants on various sides of contemporary policy debates who make their claims on grounds of absolute individual rights.

Mill’s political prescriptions were based on his theory that all forms of human agency – not only ‘rational freedom’ – are constituted in the context of particular systems of political order. Stipulating that he did not limit his understanding of

\(^2\) \textit{On Liberty}, 276.
political order to idea of the state, how seriously should we take his theory as explanation? Several kinds of evaluative questions might be asked. The first has to do with coherence. Are the major elements not only consistent with each other, but does it seem to make sense overall? However grounded or justified, does it amount to a story worth telling, and if so, why? A second goes to the reasonableness of his central assumptions and assertions considered independently – do they stand up logically, and/or are they empirically supported, since testing and predictability are the standards Mill himself claimed to judge on? Third, how does Mill’s conception compare with alternatives, the contradictory as well as the compatible? The following sections offer preliminary suggestions about how such questions might be addressed. After that, some summary thoughts are offered, including an estimate of what Mill’s theorizing might imply if applied to contemporary political discourses.

**Assessing Philosophical Coherence**

The interpretation here generally supports a judgment of philosophical coherence, at least as a first approximation. It suggests that what at first appear to be inconsistencies reflect rather the fact that Mill’s model involves an inherent paradox. For Mill, agency is seen as a product of social cohesion, not solely but in essential respects, and its expression is determined significantly by, even as it determines, the terms of that cohesion. This interpretation of Mill locates the source of coherence in a particular form of naturalism, a form that provides the articulated assumptions on which his epistemology and his particular versions of utilitarian ontology and morality
are grounded. It is the nature and strength of his commitment to naturalism that generates his philosophical and ethical coherence. Naturalism informs his definition of agency as well as his understanding of society, culture, history, and polities. One question that might be asked goes to how far his commitment to naturalism was simply a product of his culture and the political processes that situated him with respect to that culture? Any adequate answer to such a question, and an assessment of the implications, is well beyond the scope of the present study. It does seem clear the commitment was deep and affected a great deal of his thought from very early on. As Skorupski put it, “The root of Mill’s philosophical thought is thoroughgoing naturalism....In this fundamental premise Mill was always a child of the enlightenment.” He wrestled within the enlightenment family to find a naturalist frame that could support German idealism and historicism as well as British empiricism. He did this by sticking to the elements of both that he felt could in principle be related by reference to the concept of humans as attempting to manage nature from a position within it, by comprehending regularities accessible to human thought, collective and individual. It is fair to ask whether he succeeded in holding to that standard of naturalism, at least with respect to the major elements of his construction. As Chapters I and II have shown, he succeeded pretty well when it comes to his ideas about the mind and mental states, his definition of agency, his

---

3 Skorupski, *Mill*, 5. See 5-12, and passim for further discussion of this perspective and its centrality to Mill’s philosophy.
conception of culture and character, and his effort to redefine utility. As Chapter III demonstrates, he was trying to do that in addressing social unitization, history, and characteristic human behaviors, as well. Chapter IV has provided evidence to show how the evolution of naturalism since Mill’s day is bringing it closer to his version of the order of things philosophically than it was in his day – including on the point of the importance of social unitization to variation in characteristic human behaviors. If anything, the trend is to see the interactive association between the development of minds and the development of cohesive societies as even more important than Mill did, attributing to the association a significant contribution to a dynamic that changed the nature of human nature itself.

While Mill could and often did make extreme assumptions about the importance of rational calculation in human affairs (and he is hardly alone in that), he did nonetheless attempt to take positive as well as negative account of the role of feelings, and – as in the case of the experience of nationality, for example, or indeed, happiness itself – occasionally credited feeling with essential priority. Mill’s naturalist stance may be rejected as wrong, in principle, but as he employed it, it was broad, yet comprehensible, and coherent.

Critiquing Key Elements

Accepting the argument for coherence, Mill’s theory of the polity can still be challenged on grounds of validity, either with respect to the central elements of his construction taken separately, and/or on the way he put them together, and/or on
whether some element of his theorizing was inadequate or incomplete rather than fundamentally wrong. An assessment of the major elements taken separately – e.g., naturalism, utilitarianism, etc. – goes well beyond the assessment of any individual theorist’s views. The aim of this study has been to show how Mill’s particular positions on these major elements are related. In some cases, the effort at coherence led Mill to develop arguments that both strengthen and problematize the doctrine. For example, it has been argued here that in reconciling the idea of individual good and the good of all, Mill took an approach different from either aggregate or average utility – i.e., “harmonization.” In one sense, harmonization could be read as equivalent to optimizing – finding that combination of practices which gives the highest possible amount of wellbeing for each, given a specific set of constraints – but he suggests something different, in two respects. First, Mill’s individual utility sets are incomplete unless they incorporate the utility of others. Mill’s utilitarian principle of the Greatest Happiness only works to override self-interest when it is experienced as fellow feeling, or a feeling of unity, deeply rooted in individual character. Second, Mill envisions a utility of the whole, a system utility or set of meta-interests, which cannot be reduced to individual utilities, in part because they are co-constituted.

4 John Rawls describes Mill as holding to a principle of average rather than aggregate utility. See A Theory of Justice, Rev. Ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap 1999), 140 ff. The argument here, by contrast, is that Mill was after something different, a utility of the whole, distinct from although related to individual utility. This would be analogous to imputing a distinct utility to the existence of a specific Rawlsian “practice.”
It is appropriate to characterize Mill’s version of utility as naturalistic, but not as simplistically hedonistic, and certainly not as simplistically individualistic. He argued that pleasure and pain are experienced as a range of mental states – both feeling and cognition; altruistic and sympathetic feelings as well as egoistic ones; opinions; volitions; etc.; as well as sensations evoked by something external touching the body. Hence, one can’t simply think one’s way to norms either of duty, or justice; in the end, society must determine their content and fellow-feeling their applicability to a body of persons. The harmonization of interests through the cultivation of characteristic patterns of thought/feeling/action is consistent with his ideas of society as a corpus, made up of coherently functioning systems, but it also leads back logically to the need for social judgments as to what are goods and harms, and what it is that generates them, and to the problems of social conformance he identified, as well as those he overlooked or was less concerned about.

The idea that there can be a systemic “utility of the whole” – with a sub-system of law integrating principles, practices, norms, and theories of justification and justice, for example – makes the idea of a “common” good intelligible within a Millean utilitarian framework in a way that individually-grounded theories of social choice cannot.\footnote{For a classic statement of the economics involved, see Kenneth J. Arrow, \textit{Social Choice and Individual Values} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1963), 2, note 2: “The ability to make consistent decisions is one of the symptoms of an integrated personality....[T]he problem of arriving at consistent [social] decisions might analogously be referred to as that of the existence of an}
harmonizing requires collective evaluation as to ends and means. And, except where there is a perfect unification (something Mill seemed to idealize and yet also to fear), there will be contest and conflict over the terms and conditions of harmonizing whereby some will benefit more than others with respect to their disparate interests. Unitization corporatizes difference, “softening extreme forms and filling up the intervals between them.”\(^6\) Conflict becomes socially managed contest. The price of lasting peace then, presumably, is political unitization, to one degree or another, and an evolution towards social and cultural compatibility. Moreover, taking more account of inter-subjectivity of thought and feeling, as Mill does, makes any calculation of even strictly corporate utility much more difficult, and inherently more problematic. In effect it requires anticipating how a particular society of individuals will perceive and react not only to anticipated and unanticipated results in terms of the material and social environment, but also how they will feel and react to the feelings and reactions of their fellow citizens, their perceived absolute and relative status \textit{vis à vis} those fellow citizens after changes in the social and material environment, what further feelings and reactions those various feelings, perceptions, and reaction will invoke, the effects on social incorporation as well as on individuals, and so on.

Different individuals also may weigh the costs and benefits of any given trade-off as to means differently, even where ends are shared or systemic, because the

\(^6\) \textit{Considerations}, CW XIX, 395.
means are thought (and/or are felt) to affect others and social life in general, as well as consequences to individuals. Mill’s amendments to utilitarianism thus may make it more broadly appealing as theory, but they also make it more problematic in practice.

In addition to naturalism and utilitarianism, Mill’s political theory relied on a particular kind of historicism. Here, too, as with fitting his utilitarianism to his naturalism, he made modifications framed so as to make them consistent with his overall construct. This is not to argue that he did so entirely consciously or systematically, but that was the effect. He accepted the idea that there has been a perceptible progression in human affairs, toward social harmonization on larger scales, leading to a greater human ability to manage nature according to our view of our own interests. He also accepted the idea that this progression resulted from processes of cultivation carried out by discrete, different individual societies. He adapted the Comtian view of the systematic properties of social units to his analysis of the cultivation process. In line with his views about rational freedom, he credited to cultivation a socially based increase in knowledge – notably, not necessarily in wisdom – and a socially mediated increase in the capacity for self-control. His view was not teleological in the sense of seeing the process of harmonization as having some pre-determined natural end point.\footnote{See, for example, Mill’s note [56] on the term teleology, \textit{LMS}, CW VIII, 949.} It was deterministic in this sense: he assumed humanity to have gotten onto a specific path toward larger scales of harmonization, to be well-served on balance by staying on this path, and therefore as agents likely to
understand this and take steps to move along on it. Such movement would not be accomplished by individuals acting solely as individuals; rather the movement would be harmonized movement, accomplished by regulative, character-forming social bodies, or political units, working in concert to maximize an individuality given maximum room for expression by common consent.

Mill’s amendments to the philosophy of history went toward naturalizing it, moving it in the direction of his own view of nature. The Germano-Coleridgians he saw as having the right idea about a society’s role in motivating behavior, and the right idea about the range of motivations, but the wrong idea about how we know what to want, and how we should frame our judgments about what to do. Mill was a Lockean phenomenalist, believing that one’s own mental states – perceptions of sensation, essentially – are the only things actually known, but also that the validity of mental states and the inferences drawn from them require testing and validation. The causes of one’s mental states being varied and to a great extent indiscernible, a non-rigorously tested preference may be authentic but does is not therefore necessarily valid. The relevant rules of inference, or system of logic, Mill saw as inherent in the functions natural to the human mind, conscious and non-conscious. This means they are universal, but since circumstances are not universal, and applying the same principles of reasoning can legitimately give different practical results. In Mill’s naturalist conception of how to make a correct determination of what is good to try to do or be, and how to do or be it, there is no room for a deity as a source, but also no
room for unexamined or untested social or personal ‘intuitions.’” There is only one’s own ratiocination and experience, as informed by cumulative social judgments and experiences, and as habituated to learning and acting effectively in the world through the dynamic of character constitution.

Mill’s naturalist adaptation of what he called ‘historical philosophy’ as a tool for understanding ‘the gradual evolution of humanity’ thus had two main features. First, and most critical in Mill’s view, historical philosophy would have to take account of what we justifiably believe about human individual psychology, or the derivation of mental states. It would have to be integrated also with what we justifiably believe about the way particular human societies and human cultures interact with a universal human psychology. Second, justification for belief must rely on inferentially significant testing, by experience or, preferably and where possible, on more rigorously constructed “scientific” grounds. As with utilitarianism, historicism in Mill’s hands becomes a broader, richer theory, even as it reveals itself to be more problematic in application than the original version. Mill demands empirical verification, then argues that experiments are not possible, either on human beings or on societies. We can wish he had been more right in this claim, but its falsification by subsequent history does not invalidate Mill’s core premise that prediction either \textit{ex ante} or \textit{ex post} is the best test of validity. It is history (the collectively articulated product of our collective observations) that must tell us what reveals regularity and seems to be important in the evolution of individual agency. To see whether and how
any posited progression can be considered verified, Mill insisted it would have to be rendered consistent with what we reasonably believe to be the case about human psychology, and how that psychology interacts with social and cultural processes and practices.

How much ‘philosophic’ history and theoretically well-grounded social science would have to be shown to be in concert to justify Mill’s claim that political form and progress defined in a particular way – as an increase in rational freedom, for example – have a particular, specifiable relationship? Moreover, in addition to the inherent methodological challenges Mill articulated, there is the problem that scientific thought itself evolves by contest and disagreement as well as by cooperation and consensus. Fundamental scientific understandings change, and even when not changing, their implications are contested. Even more problematic is the specter of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Believing in the fact of progression and the nature of improvement as manipulation of nature, as Mill did, and acting on these beliefs, it is possible to see humanity as setting itself on the kind of future course that Mill saw as coming to pass because of those beliefs and actions.

The longer our species lasts, and the more civilized it becomes, the more, as Comte remarks, does the influence of past generations over the present, and of mankind en masse over every individual in it, predominate over other forces: and though the course of affairs never ceases to be susceptible of alteration both by accidents and by personal qualities, the increasing preponderance of the collective agency of the species over all minor causes, is constantly bringing the general evolution of the race into something which deviates less from a certain and preappointed track. Historical science, therefore, is always
becoming more possible: not solely because it is better studied, but because, in every generation, it becomes better adapted for study.\textsuperscript{8}

The implication is that in the long run, there will be no exit from the path of increasingly larger scale, politically harmonized social organization, because of the benefits it provides. The only questions left, then, would be what constitutes effective management – including a view of what should be centralized, what not – and what will be the effects of ‘accidents,’ like the unintended consequences of large scale common action, or ‘personal qualities,’ whatever they may be. If this formulation hints of Nietzsche or Foucault, that is appropriate. To an extent Mill represents an extreme form of modernism with overtones of the postmodern, a modernism run out in various directions that all lead, ironically, to the same vision of the future. It may be happy or dark, depending on one’s disposition.

\textbf{Undertheorized Issues, Omissions, and Contested Conceptions}

Mill was after a holistic, abstract, naturalist theory of society drawn from observation of particularities, one that would incorporate in outline at least all the main features of human life as humans appear to understand it. His approach was to collect, distill, and synthesize the entire corpus of Western thought, in principle, using methods suited to what was meant to be an integrative enterprise. Where he had parts that seemed not to fit, he either rejected them, or machined or engineered them into suitable components. Although the interpretation presented in this study is aimed at

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{LMS}, CW VIII, 942.
revealing the nature of Mill’s enterprise and its extent, there are areas in which his conception seems especially underdeveloped, where something seems to be missing, and/or where an adopted scientific or historic “fact” seems particularly problematic in relation to current perspectives on human life. These include, for example, as under-theorized, the relations among material power, social power, and “systems of opinion”; as omitted, attention to the dynamics of conflict, resistance, and disintegration; and, as contested, his use of the chemical bond as analog for the social bond in his arguments about social science methods.  

Mill attempted to theorize economic relations and the political, but he was not inclined to confront materiality and its effects philosophically, as having a distinct role in matters of human affairs, except as they represent perceived interests. This parallels Mill’s seeming indifference to the place of violence and other expressions of perceived existential conflict in human affairs – hatred, for example. His theorizing would have been fortified by more systematic attention to resistance and compulsion as representing alternative estimations, from alternative perspectives, of the benefits and costs of incorporation. Being whole, being unified, seen as a more-or-less condition of political organization rather than an either-or, provides a different perspective on political questions from Mill’s. Moreover, in general his political

---

9 It’s worth noting again, however, that Mill tends to stand up better to conventions of thought as more time passes. Caveat lector.

10 For an encapsulated discussion of Mill on matters economic, see Ryan, J.S. Mill, Chapter 6, “The Principles of Political Economy,” which includes references to Marx and to Mill’s Chapters on Socialism.
theory takes account only of a limited range of human desires and emotions. The possibility that one person’s happiness might depend on the unhappiness of others, for example, seems beyond his comprehension. For Mill’s political theory to be fully articulated as a basis for understanding the process of political unitization as in nation-making in the abstract, for example, these obviously important elements would need to be accounted for and integrated into the overall conception.

Another area that merits further examination and critique is Mill’s treatment of the laws of complexity, or what he calls co-existence – i.e., wholeness – and the related question of how complexity is perceived by the mind. He did not seem to be entirely comfortable with his working assumptions, or perhaps with what he understood as the foundations of those assumptions in his own thought. In contrast to his treatment of conflict, which was largely to avoid dealing with it directly, he constantly problematized the issue of complexity, which he saw as question of how the mind sees a thing as a thing – say, an orange as an orange, not simply as distinct sensations of smell, color, shape, etc. This question in one form or other turns up in the early books of the System of Logic, in The Logic of the Moral Sciences where he talks about the “chemical” method, and in his use of ‘holistic’ referents elsewhere, such as polity, system, culture, etc.

Mill had strongly held views about perception, its relationship to what is or may be outside the perceiving self, and its relationship to “causal” laws of the mind by which it perceives the co-occurrence of things either in sequence (laws of succession)
or in simultaneity (laws of co-existence). He recognized that sometimes simple co-
occurrence of sensations doesn’t seem to account for what we perceive, so that
“cause” seems to take on a different, possibly additional meaning. In these instances,
he suggested, simple ideas should be seen as generating rather than as composing
complex ideas.\textsuperscript{11} Connecting brain operations to nature’s structure, and reading the
former as reflecting a version of the latter, is part of what he seemed to be working
out.

Mill evidently used the term mental “chemistry” to refer to the perception of
all kinds of complexity that registers as not attributable to a simple ‘composition’ of
causes. The uniformities of co-existence that cannot be explained causally in the sense
in which Mill generally used the term “cause” have to do with the kind of causation he
accounts to the “origin of all things” in the universe.\textsuperscript{12} These models of things, orders
in the universe, and our ways of perceiving them and their interactions seem to have
been associated by Mill with specific phenomenological properties and particular
methods of investigation. Mill made interrelated assumptions about the relationship of
mental operations to kinds in nature and to orders of things, on the one hand, and how
this translates into methods of investigation and comprehension. The implication of
these assumptions, and their relationship to his proposed methodology for studying
particular societies and the relationship of their particularity to individual behavior,

\textsuperscript{11} In \textit{LMS}, he suggested that perceiving light as “white” when it is in fact the result of “mixing colors”
may be another such example of mental chemistry at work. CW VIII, 853-854.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{System}, CW VII, 579.
need more scrutiny than has been possible here. As an example, his assertion in *The Logic of the Moral Sciences* that chemical bonds change the substance of matter, and alter its properties, and that this is qualitatively different from the nature of social bonds, bears questioning. Taking a very long-term view, it would seem that social interaction might have contributed to an alteration in the actual substance of the human individual. Oxygen and hydrogen, in contrast, do not change their substance when they are connected in a water molecule. Biology generates, and changes, in timescales within which chemistry more typically composes. The difference between existential complexity and circumstantial complexity, and the implications of this difference for our efforts to comprehend the world we experience, is something that Mill addressed but did not fully work out even to his own satisfaction. These qualifications, however, do not make Mill wrong, in principle, on the logic of social unitization.

**Summary Thoughts on Implications**

Mill asserted a necessary relationship between the processes involved in political constitution and the processes constituting selves. He is not the only political theorist to assert such a relationship, but he further formulates a coherent procedure for testing the validity of the proposition.

---

13 Just the change in terminology, from “plurality” of causes to “complication” of causes (*Book III of the System vs. Book VI*) suggests lack of resolution on the issue. See also Mill’s discussion of Locke on complexity vs. Hartley, in *Bain*, CW XI, 347.

14 Terence Ball traces Mill’s interest in character to Plato, among other more proximate influences. See “The Formation of Character,” 29, note 18, in particular. A parallel could be drawn to Aristotle’s
There is a possibility that Mill was more right than wrong in believing that systematic observation of societies through time, combined with empirically supported theories about the psychological and social processes involved in forming individual patterns of thought/feeling/action, would provide evidence that this process is in the nature of things. This claim has as yet not been tested, at least not in the comprehensive way Mill thought it should be, except to an extent in the context of contemporary evolutionary science, as discussed in Chapter IV, above. In that venue, at least, Mill’s intuitions about the significance of “agglomeration” in the evolution of large-scale social cooperation and human mental capacities seem more apt than not.

Political union may well be more difficult to achieve than Mill envisioned, or less inevitably destined to increase the form of “rational freedom” he valued, but there is a plausibility to his claim that unitization intrinsically involves the constitution of characteristic patterns of thought/action/feeling, the development of common systems of opinion about the good and common feelings about the right; and the instantiation of common structures dedicated to serving meta interests. How, why, when or even whether that is the case are questions for the human sciences to try answer, or perhaps better said, for a political science that is fully integrated with the natural sciences, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history understood as a project of interpretation. Mill’s framework provides what might be best characterized as an

treatment of education and citizenship in Book VII of the Politics, as well. This is to cite just two examples.
incomplete yet coherent prototype, one that could serve as the foundation of a theory-based approach to a science of politics. Mill’s theory is testable on empirical grounds as well as contestable on the basis of its philosophic claims.\footnote{For example, an empirical test of the plausibility of Mil’s propositions about polities and character is possible, in principle. A study such as Bellah’s examination of individualism as a feature of the American character related to the historical development of the American polity could be replicated elsewhere, for comparison and contrast. See Robert N. Bellah, et al., \textit{Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).}

There are other ways in which Mill’s theory could be put to use, for example in debates about the nature of the nation-state. It offers a way to interpret the concept that takes account of inter-subjective valuations, emotionally embedded concepts of commonality, and history, in a way that strictly contractual constitutionalism does not. This could have practical as well as normative implications. In international relations and foreign policy, for example, what Mill had to say about the limits of outside intervention in imposing lasting political order, and about analogous limits to third-party intervention in civil conflict, might read more usefully than it does when he is dismissed as a Victorian imperialist.

Finally, Mill’s functional, complex attention to the utility of the whole constitutes an alternative to rights and rules-based individualism as the basis for a liberal political program. His understanding that the acceptance of governance is a necessary pre-condition of the achievement of individual agency, his premise that government acts broadly on and through society, by definition, whatever the governing form, and his prescription for society to restrain itself in imposing socially-
determined “improvements” on individuals, if articulated as a body of coherent principles grounded in a conception of human nature, might appeal to members of democratic polities as reflecting a liberal view that better matches the complexity of political union than current strictly individualistic conceptions do. For example, compare the argument of Iris Marion Young that “the unity of a single polity is a much weaker unity” than theorists of deliberative democracy claim.\textsuperscript{16} While sharing Mill’s understanding that the political essentially references not individual interests \textit{per se}, but rather contest over the determination of common ends, she rejects the claim that what is necessary for political communication is a shared “perspective’ – as Mill would term it, a “common system of opinions” – much less a shared sense of identity. The sole unity she claimed that politics entails is the force of expedience, wherein a given state of economic interdependence, or accident of geographic proximity, is such that “the activities and pursuits of some affect the ability of others to conduct their activities.”\textsuperscript{17} Her concern, as was Mill’s, was with the protection of difference, but their conceptions of the relationship among politics, particularity, justice, and human nature are not the same. His view, rooted in a chain of understanding that invokes a particular conception of philosophy, science, and history, was that it is in the nature of


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

292
human societies that politics determine commonality of thought and feelings of identity, which in turn determine justice.

*****

This study has provided evidence and argument in support of the proposition that Mill’s construct works as a construct because that is what he was aiming for: to interpret and modify the leading philosophies of the day so that they fit together, in order to articulate an explanatory theory of the political as constitutive, for his own political purposes. He was in search of a science of political ethology that could be effectively employed to increase ‘rational freedom’ within specific polities, by the people of those polities. Mill’s theory merits evaluation as a comprehensive, philosophically grounded holistic construct. Each element is open to challenge and critique, yet as it stands, nonetheless, provides the foundation for a new discourse on the nature of polities. It deserves attention for that reason, if for no other.


*****

Titles cited from *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*
General ed. John M. Robson. 33 volumes. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Accessible online via *The Liberty Fund Online Library of Liberty*
http://oll.libertyfund.org

*A System of Logic Rationcinative and Inductive*, CW VII: *Part I (Books I-III)* and
*CW VIII: Part II (Books IV-VI)*

*An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, CW IX (entire).

*August Comte and Positivism*, CW X: *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*


“The Bain’s Psychology,” CW XI: *Essays on Philosophy and the Classics*
“The Bentham,” CW X: *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*

Bentham “Obituary,” CW XXIII: *Newspaper Writings, August 1831 – October 1834*

“Civilization,” CW XVIII: *Essays on Politics and Society (Part 1)*

“Coleridge,” CW X: *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*
Considerations on Representative Government, CW XIX: Essays on Politics and Society (2nd Vol.)

Editorial Notes to James Mill’s Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind, CW XXXI: Miscellaneous Writings


“Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews,” CW XXI: Essays on Equality, Law, and Education


On the Logic of the Moral Sciences, CW VIII: System of Logic, Part II, Book VI.

“Nature,” 1st of Three Essays on Religion, CW X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society

On Liberty, CW XVIII: Essays on Politics and Society (1st Vol.)

“Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy,” CW X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society

“Repeal of the Union,” CW VI: Essays on England, Ireland, and the Empire

“Spirit of the Age,” (5 essays; 7 parts), CW XXII: Newspaper Writings, December 1822 – July 1831.

The Subjection of Women, CW XXI: Essays on Equality, Law, and Education

“The Utility of Religion,” 3rd of Three Essays on Religion, CW X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society

“Theism,” 2nd of Three Essays on Religion, CW X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society

Three Essays on Religion, CW X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society

Utilitarianism, CW X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society