

interpretation

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John Stuart Mill: The Reformer Reformed

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Over the century since its first publication, countless readers have been impressed, intrigued and charmed by John Stuart Mill's autobiographical account of his intellectual development.¹ Those of us who are products of the affluent and easygoing democratic society which his influence has helped to sustain and render even more permissive, tend to be particularly impressed by the apparently austere and rigorous regimen imposed upon him by his father, in the latter's effort to groom him for the life of a social reformer and philosopher. And those of us who have also been formed in an era in which psychology has tended to become the queen of the sciences (a development which Mill also assisted) are inclined to interpret Mill's touching account of what he terms the "crisis" in his "mental development", in terms of subconscious forces somehow generated by that austere boyhood. That tendency of interpretation appears to be warranted by the fact that Mill's account of his "crisis" and its immediate aftermath centers upon "the feelings." Thus, interpreters commonly refer to the event as Mill's "mental crisis," a phrase more congenial to connotations of dark, nonrational forces at work.

However, Mill's account of this period concentrates upon several intellectual problems which concerned him at that time in his life. And, toward the end of his account of this period, he tells us that he has "only specified such of my new impressions as appeared to me, both at the time and since, to be a kind of turning points, marking a definite progress in my mode of thought" (175). Mill, thus, stresses that this is fundamentally an account of the development of this thought or understanding. That does not preclude the possibility that an essentially psychological explanation of his "crisis" is correct, since Mill's account is a very compressed one which does not explicitly connect all of the cited intellectual problems to the crisis *per se*, or to each other. Much is left to further interpretation; and it is not surprising that there has resulted a variety of differing interpretations of the precise character and cause of his crisis.

There have been three main lines of interpretation and explanation. Some commentators, following Alexander Bain, who knew Mill personally, emphasize overwork and consequent physical exhaustion. Others, like A. W. Levi and Clinton Machann, have stressed subconscious psychological disturbances, especially pertaining to Mill's relationship with his father. And still others, like John

1. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, in volume 1 of the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson and associates (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967-82). Specific page references to the *Autobiography* will be rendered in parentheses in the text. Further references to the *Collected Works* will be rendered simply as *C.W.*, followed by the volume and page numbers.

M. Robson, R. D. Cumming and John Durham, have given greater emphasis to particular philosophic problems with which Mill came to be concerned at that or other times; but the focus of these interpretations tends to be too narrow.² These are not mutually exclusive lines of interpretation, and virtually all commentators give some acknowledgement to all three; but the psychological dimension, even when it is not made the primary focus, tends to distort, when it does not entirely distract attention from, the philosophic problems which were at the root of Mill's despair. Consequently, the most patently questionable feature of the extant interpretations of Mill's crisis, as the following exposition will implicitly show, is that they fail to take sufficient notice of what Mill himself tells us in explanation of his malady and its remedy. That failure no doubt owes much to modern psychological theories which too readily incline the analyst to believe that he knows the motivations of the subject better than the subject himself does.

Although some commentators have connected Mill's crisis with one or another of the intellectual problems with which he was grappling, none, so far as I know, attempts to explain it by reference to a *connected* view of the successive intellectual problems which he mentions. The present paper will attempt to do so. Through such a connected view of the elements included in Mill's own account, it will become evident that his was essentially a crisis of the understanding. Whatever ambivalence may have afflicted Mill's feelings about his father, and whatever physical or mental weariness may have beset him on the threshold of that crisis, is substantially irrelevant to a proper understanding of the nature of that crisis, its cause and its resolution. Mill's crisis was caused by the realization that the philosophy or connected view of things to which he had been led by his father was seriously defective. The story of his resolution of that difficulty is a story of his struggle with a logically connected series of intellectual or philosophical problems. His account of that struggle is a brief sketch of his break with his intellectual beginnings. And that account makes it clear that the break was intimately connected with Mill's understanding (or misunderstanding) of nature and its relation to human choice and action.

Mill's resolution of his basic problem appears to have been worked out in stages, through a series of successive insights or alterations of understanding, as well as exposure to new emotional stimuli. In the initial stages he is primarily concerned with the emotional overtones or reverberations. It is only in the later

2. See: Alexander Bain, *John Stuart Mill: A Criticism* (London: Longmans, Green, 1882), 37–38; A. W. Levi, "The Mental Crisis of John Stuart Mill," *Psychoanalytic Review*, 32 (1945), 86–101; Clinton Machann, "John Stuart Mill's 'Mental Crisis': Adlerian Interpretation," *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 29, No. 1 (May 1973), 76–87; John M. Robson, *The Improvement of Mankind: The Social and Political Thought of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), ch. 2; R. D. Cumming, *Human Nature and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), II, 370–88; John Durham, "The Influence of John Stuart Mill's Mental Crisis on His Thoughts," *American Imago*, 20 (1963), 369–84; Crane Brinton, *English Political Thought in the 19th Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 89; J. Stanley Yake, "Mill's Mental Crisis Revisited," *The Mill News Letter*, IX, No. 1 (Fall 1973), 2–12.

stages that he addresses the strictly intellectual causes of his problem, as we shall see. We shall also see that it is only in the last stages that Mill arrives at a coherent understanding of his problem and the things to which it relates, albeit one that remains problematical. It will be best to examine these stages or steps by which Mill emerged from his depressed state, more or less in the order in which they occurred. The brevity and imprecision of Mill's later autobiographical account of his thinking during this period leaves some uncertainties as to some details of the sequence, but the general direction of movement appears fairly clear.

I. THE PROBLEM: THE "FAILURE" OF THE "FEELINGS"

In the autumn of 1826, at the tender age of twenty years, with a past record of intellectual and journalistic activities and a reputation as a social reformer which belied his youth, Mill ceased to find pleasure in the work which had previously given meaning to his life. He reports that he was, at the time, "in a dull state of nerves, such as everybody is occasionally liable to; unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement; one of those moods when what is pleasure at other times, becomes insipid or indifferent . . ." (137). The "mood" itself may have been wholly or partly the product of obscure emotional or physiological conditions; but the "mood" did not constitute the "crisis." The crisis was the consequence of the thought which followed.³ And, while the "mood" and whatever generated it may have helped to trigger the thoughts, there is no evidence to suggest that the thought which ensued was in any way determined or distorted by the "mood" or any subrational elements underlying it.

In his depressed state of mind, Mill put to himself the following question: 'Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?' To his dismay, "an irrepressible self-consciousness instantly answered, 'No!'" The effect was devastating. "At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. 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" (139). The "end" to which he refers, of course, is his benevolent objective of promoting the happiness of his fellow men; and the "means" were his specific reformist objectives and activities.

Mill's initial assessment of the cause of his problem attributed it to a simple failure of the "feelings" or emotional attachments to the primary objects of his

3. "In all probability my case was by no means so peculiar as I fancied it, and I doubt not that many others have passed through a similar state; but the idiosyncrasies of my education had given to the general phenomenon a special character, which made it seem the natural effect of causes that it was hardly possible for time to remove" (145).

aspirations. Mill had been carefully reared by his father in accordance with the philosophic and psychological doctrines which James Mill and others were developing in association with Jeremy Bentham. Young John had been persistently taught that “happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life” (145) and that “the pleasure of sympathy with human beings, and the feelings which made the good of others, and especially mankind on a large scale, the object of existence, were the greatest and surest sources of happiness” (143). The boy’s vigorous dedication to social reform had been based upon these convictions and fueled by such “feelings” for the happiness of others. But now he discovered he no longer really cared about the happiness of others. He had apparently not ceased to care for his own happiness; and he had not ceased to believe in “the happiness principle” and what we might term “the benevolence principle” as its corollary. But the “feelings” necessary to give practical impetus to the benevolence principle were no longer there; and merely “to know that a feeling would make me happy if I had it, did not give me the feeling” (143). Thus, the collapse of his benevolent “feelings” also destroyed the prospects for his own happiness.

If Mill’s continuing happiness was to be secured through the noble struggle for social reform for the benefit of his fellow men, what would become of his happiness if that task was successfully completed? Mill had come to realize that his own happiness was contingent upon the continued existence of conditions of deprivation for others. If all social ills were completely eliminated, he would be deprived of his “object of existence,” the most necessary condition of his own happiness. His benevolent activities were now seen to be paradoxical, both as a means to his own happiness and as a means to the happiness of others.

Although his strong sense of duty was sufficient to support the continuance of his usual activities in pursuit of the public good, even during the periods of his deepest dejection, those activities were carried on without enthusiasm or pleasure. He might dutifully continue to promote the good of others through various measures of social reform; but he now realized that he was unable to truly “sympathize” with them. He felt no pleasure in working toward their happiness, no pleasure in contemplating the happiness which they would presumably derive from his efforts. He concluded that his “love of mankind, and of excellence for its own sake, had worn itself out” (139). It was apparently not enough to believe that the promotion of the happiness of others was “the greatest and surest” *means* to his own happiness. One had to love mankind and virtue for their own sake, and not merely as the means to one’s own pleasure.

Mill’s initial reaction to his new incapacity to take pleasure in the happiness of others was too overlaid with a sense of moral guilt to shed any real light on its causes. It appeared to him that his natural selfish concern with his own happiness had taken on a narrowed and grasping character grossly inconsistent with his rearing—presumably due to some defect in his own character for which he was responsible. He felt that his was not in any way a “respectable distress.” “There was nothing in it to attract sympathy” (139). It was simply “egotistical.” And,

now deprived of the greatest and surest means to his own happiness, even the lesser pleasures lost their flavor. Thus, he came to take “no delight in virtue or the general good, but also just as little in anything else. The fountains of vanity and ambition seemed to have dried up within me, as completely as those of benevolence” (143). “Thus neither selfish nor unselfish pleasures were pleasures to me.” He had thoroughly lost the capacity to draw pleasure from the activities which should please; and he was depressingly preoccupied with the loss.

Mill’s sense of guilt over the loss of his love of mankind could only have been increased by his subsequent recurrent preoccupation with his own dismal prospects for happiness. The whole problem appeared rather sordid and petty to him. It was not even an “interesting” condition, other than in the most narrow personal way, because it revealed no useful general truths of any kind (139). It was only of interest to Mill, the selfish egotist. It was of no interest to Mill, the philosopher or scientist. And it was merely contemptible to Mill, the moralist.

In view of the rather conventional, and that is of course to say “Christianized”⁴ character of his father’s moral beliefs and the consequent heavy emphasis upon love of humanity and benevolence in John’s education, it is perhaps not surprising that he might reproach himself for any perceived deficiency of love for his fellow man. And in view of the intense love of nobility which Mill had acquired, in large measure from the extensive study of classical Greek philosophical and historical texts prescribed by his father, it is little wonder that he would be so devastated by the loss of his greatest opportunity to attain nobility on a grand scale. But these derivative elements of James and John Mill’s moral philosophy rested upon very different foundations than their original ones. The abandonment of Christian theological doctrine must lead to some significant modifications in the meaning and implications of “Christian” love and charity retained within a different framework of thought. And the same may be said of the classical conception of human nobility when divorced from the teleological conception of nature upon which it was originally based. Did the new framework of thought provide a sufficient ground for the retention of that love of humanity and of excellence or virtue for their own sake? Had young Mill’s motivations been wholly consistent with the implications of the basic doctrines he had been taught by his father, Jeremy Bentham and others? Or, had he (and they) been living off an older legacy of thoughts which were inconsistent with that new doctrine? He must have had some doubts and uncertainties about this as he put his sense of guilt aside to seek the cause of his affliction by reflecting upon the “associationist” psychological doctrine which provided that new framework of thought.

“My course of study,” he explains, “had led me to believe that all mental and

4. That is, merely in the sense that the conventional Christian moral principles heavily influenced the content of James Mill’s moral views, as they did those of his son, even though neither adhered to the religious doctrines from which those principles were derived (41–53). The specific influences are reflected in John’s later remarks on the moral legacy of Christianity, in his essay on the “Utility of Religion,” which he began writing in 1854: see note 37, below.

moral feelings and qualities, whether of a good or a bad kind, were the results of association; that we love one thing, and hate another, take pleasure in one sort of action or contemplation, and pain in another sort, through the clinging of pleasurable or painful ideas of those things, from the effect of education or of experience” (141). Therefore, what the particular individual will tend to desire or to avoid, depends wholly upon the associations which are formed by his particular combination of life experiences, especially those which occurred during the earlier and thus more formative period of his life. The wide diversity of such experiences, owing to the wide diversity of circumstances surrounding the lives of different individuals, along with variations in individual gifts or latent capacities, accounts for the observable diversities of aspiration and aversion, as well as of belief and disbelief.

This would suggest that chance plays a very great role, perhaps the chief role, in determining the content of the beliefs, aspirations and aversions of each individual.⁵ But, following his father’s lead, Mill’s “association” theory rather stressed the possibilities of transcending this element of chance, by deliberately seizing control over these variable circumstances and manipulating them in such a way as to shape the “associations” of all men according to plan. If one can deliberately mold the experiences of the individual by controlling and reforming his surrounding environment, one can direct the associative process and thereby inculcate the preferred beliefs and values. Thus Mill approvingly tells us that his father’s “fundamental” psychological doctrine was “the formation of all human character by circumstances, through the universal Principle of Association, and the consequent unlimited possibility of improving the moral and intellectual condition of mankind by education.” He further observes that, of all his father’s doctrines, “none was more important than this, or needs more to be insisted on . . .” (109–10). And, since much of one’s education, in the broadest sense, is acquired informally through the impact of existing social institutions and practices, a proper attention to the education of mankind necessarily embraced a heavy emphasis upon general social reform.

All such reform efforts were of course to be guided by “the happiness principle” and its corollary, the benevolence principle. The basic strategy was to cultivate the capacity of the individual to derive his greatest happiness from serving the happiness of others. “I had always heard it maintained by my father, and was myself convinced, that the object of education should be to form the strongest possible associations of the salutary class; associations of pleasure with all things beneficial to the great whole of humanity and of pain with all things hurtful to it” (141). The perennial problem of mine versus thine, that fertile source of human conflict, was thus to be finally resolved, not by sacrificing the happiness of the individual to society, nor the converse, but by artificially contriving to make them one. For the sake of what was promised to be his own greater and more assured happiness, the individual must learn to care most immediately and in-

5. See: John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*, C.W., VIII, 840–41.

tensely for the happiness of others. And when the requirements for the well-being of others come into direct conflict with his own immediate pleasures, he must sacrifice the latter, and thereby attain an even greater pleasure from contemplating the good to others and his own nobility in facilitating it.

This was assuredly an ingenious and inspiring strategy, if it would work. And it did work, for a time, with young John, whose education had been meticulously directed by this strategy based upon this understanding of the nature and genesis of human aspirations and aversions. But now the strategy seemed to be failing in its most essential feature. Why? What had sundered the “association” between Mill’s sense of pleasure or satisfaction and the happiness of others? If the association theory was correct and the benevolence strategy was a sound practical application of it, then it ought to be possible to explain Mill’s malady in its terms. What does it reveal? In the first place, the deterministic character of the “association” process described by that theory seemed to imply that the cause of any such failed association must be traceable to the formative external circumstances which are beyond the control of him whose character was being thus formed. The theory provided no apparent support for moral self-castigation.

What more might further reflection upon that theory reveal? Was the crucial association in Mill’s case improperly formed; was the doctrine improperly applied? Or was the doctrine itself defective in some important respect? Mill’s thoughts first turn to the possibility of misapplication.

II. THE SEARCH FOR EXTERNAL CAUSES

In keeping with the ostensibly accidental and therefore variable relationship between the specific “feelings” or aspirations and aversions, on the one hand, and the various objects which compose the order of nature or the things which constitute our world, on the other hand, Mill first sought to explain his condition through an investigation of the requirements of a durable *artificial* bond between these two orders which were believed to possess no *natural* links. He was thus led to find fault with the means employed by his “teachers”—principally his father—in their application of the association doctrine to the formation of his “salutary” aspirations and aversions.

He tells us that, looking back upon his education at that time, it appeared to him that his teachers “had occupied themselves but superficially with the means of forming and keeping up these salutary associations. They seemed to have trusted altogether to the old familiar instruments, praise and blame, reward and punishment.” He observes that, while these traditional modes of inculcation are not wholly ineffective, neither are they dependably and durably effective. He explains that he “did not doubt that by these means, begun early and applied unremittingly, intense associations of pain and pleasure, especially of pain, might be created, and might produce desires and aversions capable of lasting undimin-

ished to the end of life" (141). That is to say, they may be effective and durable in some instances or under some conditions, but will not be so under all conditions, and were clearly not durable in the present case. What conditions, then, are requisite to the success of the traditional methods of moral teaching? Or, what alternative methods promise greater success? What is the problem to be solved?

Mill indicates that the problem with the old methods of praise and blame, reward and punishment, is that the associations which they induce contain "something artificial and casual." "The pains and pleasures thus forcibly associated with things, are not connected with them by any natural tie . . ." (141). Lacking such a natural tie, they tend to be vulnerable to destruction—especially, if not exclusively, by "analysis." This vulnerability is due to the peculiar nature of "analysis" on the one hand and the nature of the aspirational and aversive associations on the other hand. Mill reports that he now began to understand something which had previously puzzled and confused him. "I now saw, or thought I saw, what I had always before received with incredulity—that the habit of analysis has a tendency to wear away the feelings . . ." (141). Critical reason is now seen to have an inherent tendency to undermine all artificial or accidental associations; and all associations between the "feelings" or passions and their objects—that is, all aspirations and aversions—are perceived to be artificial or accidental, with the exception of those which relate to the pains and pleasures directly connected with our basic bodily functions.

"Analysis," then, is particularly concerned with the distinction between what is necessary and what is merely accidental. It not only distinguishes between necessary and accidental associations, it somehow strengthens the former and erodes the latter. "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 . . ." However, it does not possess such a power of dissolution over *natural* connections or associations of ideas, those which reflect "the real connexions between things, not dependent on our will and feelings; natural laws, by virtue of which, in many cases, one thing is inseparable from another in fact." On the contrary, it is analysis which enables us to perceive such laws of nature which "cause our ideas of things which are always joined together in Nature, to cohere more and more closely in our thoughts."

Nature thus compels. The order of nature imposes itself on the human mind. The natural associations are invariable, unavoidable, and necessary. The variable and avoidable associations are artificial, accidental, and unnecessary. "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; the entire insufficiency of which to make life desirable, no one had a stronger conviction than I had. These were the laws of human nature," he concludes, "by which, as it seemed to me, I had been brought to my present state of distress."⁶

He blamed his teachers, then, for their failure to generate benevolent "feelings" in him of sufficient strength "to resist the dissolving influence" of analysis, while they cultivated in him an "inveterate habit" of analysis. They were aware that it is the "feelings" which provide the wellspring of action and of the pleasures associated with the loftier aspirations. But they had failed to perceive clearly the antagonism between the "feelings" and critical reason. James Mill was confident that the feelings could take care of themselves; and he was more concerned to avoid the intrusion of the "feelings" into the field of rational discourse.⁷ Having failed to appreciate the threat to the "feelings" posed by "analysis," John's teachers also failed to perceive the necessity of a deliberate, direct and intensive cultivation of the appropriate "feelings" in him. Instead they had sought to appeal to his self-interest through cool calculation, persuading him that benevolence was the best means to his own happiness, and expecting that conviction to serve as a sufficient motive and basis of satisfaction. In like manner, he and his reformer friends had sought to bring about general social reform through "the enlightenment of the selfish feelings" of their fellow citizens, rather than through any direct appeals to "unselfish benevolence and love of justice" (113-14).

What ever degree of cultivation of his "feelings" which had taken place, was merely incidental, accidental in the fullest sense. His salutary feelings were nourished by his reading of tales of valor and exemplifications of the other virtues in books, some of which were self-chosen and others prescribed by his father.⁸ However, it was not specifically for this purpose that his father prescribed them. And even now that John saw his teachers' methods as remiss, he did not

6. (143) Mill's emphasis.

7. "It was not that he was himself cold-hearted or insensible; I believe it was rather from the contrary quality; he thought that feeling could take care of itself; that there was sure to be enough of it if actions were properly cared about. Offended by the frequency with which, in ethical and philosophical controversy, feeling is made the ultimate reason and justification of conduct, instead of being itself called on for a justification, while, in practice, actions, the effect of which on human happiness is mischievous, are defended as being required by feeling, and the character of a person of feeling obtains a credit for desert, which he thought only due to actions, he had a real impatience of attributing praise to feeling, or of any but the most sparing reference to it either in the estimation of persons or in the discussion of things" (113).

8. "The same inspiring effect which so many of the benefactors of mankind have left on record that they had experienced from Plutarch's *Lives*, was produced on me by Plato's pictures of Socrates, and by some modern biographies, above all by Condorcet's *Life of Turgot* a book well calculated to rouse the best sort of enthusiasm, since it contains one of the wisest and noblest of lives, delineated by one of the wisest and noblest of men. The heroic virtue of these glorious representatives of the opinions with which I sympathized, deeply affected me, and I perpetually recurred to them as others do to a favourite poet, when needing to be carried up into the more elevated regions of feeling and thought" (115). But they were unable to rekindle his enthusiasm during the period immediately prior to his reading of Marmontel.

yet have a well-formed notion of the alternative methods which they should rather have employed.

Could the problem be solved, then, merely by a greater timely concentration of emotionally appealing stories glorifying benevolence and the virtues, or some other such method of cultivating the emotional appeal of the salutary objects? There is certainly good reason to doubt it on the basis of what we have been told. Insofar as “analysis” is inherently antagonistic to such “feelings” and so long as the habit of “analysis” continues, the hard won effects of all that assiduous cultivation remain in constant danger and their dissolution cannot likely be postponed for long. But in order to make a proper assessment of the viability of this solution we need to attain a more precise understanding of how and why “analysis” erodes the “feelings.”

III. THE PERILS OF “ANALYSIS”

According to Mill’s account, “analysis” explores the *connections* between things—between causes and effects, means and ends—with particular concern to determine their strength or necessity. And, by “necessity” he understood at this time, pre-eminently, compulsive or mechanical necessity. This is implicitly clear in his account of “the happiness principle” during the period of his crisis.

Mill nowhere suggests that either his *desire* for his own happiness or his *belief* in “the happiness principle” as the first principle of morality were in any way weakened by his habit of “analysis.” And, since his system of classification, which distinguishes between natural or necessary connections and artificial or accidental connections, appears to be an exhaustive one, the survival of these connections would appear to mark them as natural or necessary. Let us see what this may entail in each of the two cases.

Whether the desire for happiness is regarded as a connection between Mill’s “feelings” or passions and the “idea” of happiness, or is construed to be simply his “feeling” (or set of “feelings”) *per se*,⁹ there is no doubt that Mill regarded it as given, compulsively, by nature. The apparently universal incidence of that desire among human beings would seem to be sufficiently convincing evidence of the fact.¹⁰ “Analysis,” then, would have no power to diminish that desire; it

9. This is a point of ambiguity in Mill’s indirect treatment of the subject here. The desire for happiness which Mill had at this time was clearly a desire for a plentitude of pleasures and absence of pain, going beyond merely those connected with “the physical and organic.” And since, in Mill’s account, the latter alone are natural, and yet are insufficient to make life worthwhile, it would appear that nature has given us an appetite which cannot be satisfied by her own provenance. Alternatively, one would have to regard Mill’s fullsome desire as an artificially bloated reflection of the natural “feelings.” But in that case, its successful resistance of the eroding effects of “analysis” remains unexplained.

10. A few years later, in 1833, Mill remarked, in a criticism of the unfairness of Bentham’s blanket repudiation of all natural right philosophies, “No proof indeed can be given that we ought to abide

could presumably only strengthen it, by creating a greater awareness or understanding of its compulsive necessity.

But how can a greater awareness of the compulsive necessity somehow increase the strength of that connection? Was the “connection” not completely compulsive in the first place? Does its compulsive dimension provide some kind of “necessary” guidance to its noncompulsive dimension? A problem lies buried here—a problem which points to another possible kind of “necessity” which can come into play only to the extent that compulsive necessity does not prevail. That is the kind of necessity entailed in moral imperativeness, a kind of necessity which authoritatively directs but does not compel. While Mill’s account implicitly acknowledges this distinction, it does not explore it or the relationship between the two. This was apparently because, at the time, Mill’s thoughts were so completely carried along by the mechanistic view of nature and man that he was inclined to minimize the problem of moral justification, too easily drawing his moral principles from his mechanistic premises.

A moral principle is a prescribed standard by reference to which deliberate choices are properly made; and that would seem to be the antithesis of mechanical compulsion. But Mill, like Bentham before him, saw no great problem in supposing that the latter somehow provides the former. As Bentham says at the outset of his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.”¹¹

But nature’s power to compel in this regard is far from absolute. And it remains obscure how one can logically derive a principle of deliberative choice, which Mill’s “happiness principle” appears to be, from a mere rule of uniformity of tendency of mechanical force—*unless* one is willing to attribute intelligent and purposeful design to the mechanism which ostensibly provides the “principle.” To the extent that human actions are “determined” by compulsive necessity over which we can exercise no deliberative control, there is no place for “principles” of deliberative choice. And where there *is* a place for such principles, they are needed because there is a possibility and a probability of action in a contrary direction. Mill’s “happiness principle,” on the other hand, attempts to deduce what men should do from what they cannot help doing and therefore what they can be counted upon to do—more or less.

Mill had of course been too thoroughly schooled, as a “modern” philosopher, in the repudiation of the notion that nature is capable of providing authoritative

by these [natural] laws [alleged by writers criticized by Bentham]; but neither can any proof be given, that we ought to regulate our conduct by utility. All that can be said is, that the pursuit of happiness is natural to us. . . .” “Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy,” *C.W.*, x, 6.

11. Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Hafner, 1948), 1. Bentham’s emphasis. For a discussion of the problem of inferring the moral principle from the psychological generalization, see: Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (7th ed.; New York: Dover, 1966), 42; and James Steintrager, *Bentham* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1977), 35.

directives, other than compulsively, to be willing to base his moral imperatives explicitly on the argument from nature. That argument, in all of its various forms, presupposes that nature is good or that what is natural is, at least in a qualified sense, authoritative or imperative for man. And that is precisely what Mill, along with so many other modern philosophers, vigorously and consistently denies in his explicit treatments of this subject in his later writings. He was well acquainted with the older tradition which taught that nature provides the authoritative ethical directives in the form of ends (*τέλος*) to which man is inclined to be drawn more than pushed, by the proper combination of nature and nurture. But though, as previously noted, Mill drew moral inspiration and understanding from those ancient texts, he was thoroughly modern in his utter rejection of their teleological view of nature, including human nature. And in the absence of a natural telos, the only sense in which nature could supply directives for human action is the mechanical or compulsive sense. But that entails a fundamental ambiguity as a standard of guidance for voluntary actions, as we have seen. It appears that Mill's powers of "analysis" were not up to the task of fully sorting out this problem at the time. His mechanistic perspective led him away from the examination of the necessity of the happiness *principle* to an eventual preoccupation with what he perceived as the "fatalistic" implications of his mechanistic understanding of the nature of the associative process—"fatal," that is, to his secondary moral principle, benevolence, and therefore his prospects for happiness as well.

What exactly did "analysis" so devastatingly reveal to Mill about his secondary moral principle, benevolence? What was the logic of its destruction? Mill's "analysis" apparently revealed, in the first place, that benevolence was not a natural or necessary objective, not an end in itself, and not an intrinsic good for its practitioner. It revealed this by disclosing that the inclination to benevolence is not naturally connected directly with one's "feelings"; man has no natural compulsion to love his neighbor or virtue as he loves himself or his physical pleasures. There is no natural desire to dedicate one's life to the promotion of the happiness or well-being of others; and there could be no natural or necessary pleasure in doing or having done so. The association between benevolence and Mill's "feelings" had been completely dissolved by "analysis" because it was wholly artificial; it was not even based upon a natural inclination to compassion for one's fellow creatures. As James Mill explained it at about this time, the sympathetic pleasures and pains which we nominally feel for others are really a form of feeling for ourselves. "We never feel any pains and pleasures but our own."¹² Our natural inclinations are all selfish. An "analysis" based upon such a view of human nature was bound to undermine benevolence in one way or another. John observed just a few years later

12. James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 2nd ed.; ed. by John Stuart Mill, with illustrative and critical notes by John Stuart Mill, Alexander Bain, Andrew Findlater and George Grote (2 vols.; London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1869—reprinted in New York

Upon those who *need* to be strengthened and upheld by a really inspired moralist—such a moralist as Socrates, or Plato, or (speaking humanly and not theologically) as Christ; the effect of such writings as Mr. Bentham's, if they be read and believed and their spirit imbibed, must either be hopeless despondency and gloom, or a reckless giving themselves up to a life of that miserable self-seeking, which they are there taught to regard as inherent in their original and unalterable nature.¹³

John's analysis led him to understand that he had been pursuing benevolence (and the other virtues) both as an end in itself and as the primary means to his own happiness. And it further revealed that his pursuit of benevolence for its own sake had been generated and sustained by two different kinds of "association": *direct* connections between his emotions or "feelings" and benevolence, generated by purely emotional stimulation—for example, stirring tales of noble actions; and *indirect* connections, by way of the intellect, in the form of the rational conviction of the intrinsic goodness of benevolence. He concluded that there was too little of the former, in his own case. His zeal for the good of mankind, his "strongest sentiment," was, he tells us, "as yet little else, at that period of my life, than zeal for speculative opinions. It had not its root in genuine benevolence, or sympathy with mankind; though these qualities held their due place in my ethical standard" (1113). He thus distinguishes between a true love of mankind and a mere coldly calculated sort of decency. Both apparently succumbed to analysis; although he seems to imply that his true love for mankind would have endured if it had been more intense. The basis of that expectation is not made clear. But it is not difficult to see the vulnerability of the intellectual conviction to an analysis based upon Mill's mechanistic presuppositions. Moral necessity requires us to love the good because it is good. But Mill's mechanistic psychology insists that only that is good for us which we happen to love; and the only things which we love necessarily are our own pleasures and avoidance of pain, and, more specifically, those which are connected to our basic physical and organic functioning. Therefore, the love of mankind and virtue for their own sake could no longer be justified nor, consequently, psychologically sustained.

That, of course, did not preclude the possibility of another morally justifiable *indirect* link between the "feelings" and benevolence, a calculated association of benevolence as *means* to an end rooted directly in the emotions. Mill stresses the presence of this further association in his own case and indicates that he had not

by Augustus M. Kelly, 1967), II, 217. Hereinafter cited as *Analysis*. The first edition was published in 1829. Young John was proof-reading the successive chapters for his father as they were completed during the period of his crisis. In an editorial note in the 1869 edition, John observes that his father's "mode of expression" on this point fails to guard against the erroneous possible implication that "the pleasure or pain is consciously referred to self" in all cases, thus implying that we are never truly able to sympathize with others—for *their* sake and not our own. John's rather equivocal way of making his point neither confirms nor denies that his father intended that "erroneous" implication. I believe that John was alert to that possible interpretation because it had previously been his own, as well as his father's.

13. "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy," *C.W.*, x, 16. Mill's emphasis.

ceased to believe that benevolence was the best means to his personal happiness. But despite his retention of the belief in the causal connection between benevolence and his own happiness, which he could not help desiring, that linkage now proved incapable of connecting his “feelings” of desire and pleasure with his benevolent activities. That appears paradoxical. One would expect that the motivational association would be mediated, if not completely governed, by the perception of the causal association. Thus, believing that benevolence is “the greatest and surest” means to one’s own happiness (which remains the primary desire) ought to generate a desire for benevolence more or less proportionate to the desire for the end which it serves. Why, then, does it fail to do so?

Mill does not directly tell us. The answer emerges only gradually, piecemeal and by implication. It is that there is a peculiar relationship between the end, of one’s own desired happiness, and the means of attaining it; and that peculiarity is due, in turn, to the peculiar character of happiness as the end. “Analysis,” by laying bare those peculiarities, fatally destroys the efficaciousness of the means.

In his later discussion of the “anti-self-consciousness theory” which he devised as a partial solution to the problem, Mill tells us he had come to the conclusion that happiness could be attained only “by not making it the direct end.” The “enjoyments of life” cannot bear up under critical scrutiny. They are sufficient to make life “a pleasant thing” only “when they are taken *en passant*” and not made “the principal object” of one’s strategic calculations and choices. As soon as one makes them the primary focus of attention and effort “they are immediately felt to be insufficient” instruments of one’s happiness. “Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so” (147).

But why must happiness diminish as the consequence of the conscious effort to take notice of it and to assess its sufficiency? It is due to the fact that one question logically leads to another; and the successive answers have a chilling effect on the pleasures previously forthcoming. One cannot give a fully thoughtful answer to the self-put query, “Am I happy?” without addressing the logically prior question, “What is happiness?” And, insofar as “happiness” is construed as something which may be acquired or attained in varying quantities, the assessment of sufficiency leads to the further questions, “How much happiness is minimally necessary to justify the troubles which one’s life embraces; and how much is maximally possible?” “How can one acquire more of it?” “Which activities and pursuits are more and which less productive of happiness?” “How or why does any particular activity or pursuit produce or contribute to happiness?” The scrutiny of one’s current happiness and its sufficiency thus leads to the scrutiny of one’s current activities and pursuits, as well as alternatives which might provide a sufficiency not yet attained. And one is led to ask of each current activity and pursuit, not only “How much happiness does it bring me?” but also, “Can it and will it bring me more?” and perhaps, “How much happiness should it bring me?” and, finally, “Why should I expect it to bring me any happiness at all?” It thus becomes, at least implicitly if not explicitly, a search for some *necessary*

connection between the activity or pursuit and the happiness of the actor. And this search, if well conducted, can, in Mill's view, only result in putting much of one's attained happiness "to flight by fatal questioning" and "forestalling in imagination" one's future happiness (147).

But why must the questioning of "happiness" and its relationship to each of the loftier activities destroy the latter's prior capacity to bring pleasure? It is because "analysis" reveals to us that those pleasures were necessarily based upon illusions. Mill implicitly distinguishes between four different types of activity, each of which has its associated desires and pleasures: (a) physical and organic; (b) moral or ethical; (c) intellectual; and (d) aesthetic. The latter three of these constitute the realm of the loftier aspirations and pleasures. As we have seen, Mill makes a sharp distinction between the standing of the physical pleasures, on one hand, and that of mental pleasures associated with these loftier activities, on the other hand, regarding the former as natural and necessary, and the latter as artificial and accidental or optional. The mental pleasures are apparently based upon a calculation; and the indispensable core of that calculation is the belief that the activity is intrinsically valuable or necessarily good for its practitioner. "Analysis" now discloses that that belief is, in every case, an illusion.

The pleasure derived from benevolent activity is apparently based upon the illusion that moral goodness inheres in such activity, that its perceived intrinsic goodness is real and not merely an artificial concoction. The pleasure derived from the philosophic dedication to the pursuit of truth is apparently based upon the illusion that such truth or understanding is real and good as it seems, that it is necessary to our well-being. And the pleasure derived from poetic tributes to nature's beauty is based upon the illusion that nature's beauty is real and that our enjoyment of it is a necessary consequence of our attunement to that good. "Analysis" destroys these underlying illusions by revealing that nature does not possess any certifiable dimension of goodness which provides support (necessity) for these "loftier" possible activities. Nature does not prescribe ends for man; it merely compels. Where it fails to compel, it is merely indifferent, if not hostile.

It appears, then, that it is *not* the case that benevolence is perceived to be good because it happens to bring us pleasure, but rather, it brings us pleasure because it is perceived to be intrinsically good. And when the belief in its intrinsic goodness is eroded, its capacity to provide pleasure to its practitioner is undermined and destroyed.

Mill thus defines "happiness" in terms of pleasure and insists that the only value which an activity can have derives from its pleasure-producing capacity. And, since the activity and the pleasure are apparently not one and the same thing, the activity can reasonably be valued only as a means to pleasure, and not as an end in itself. And, if its pleasure-producing capacity is dependent upon a belief in its intrinsic value, then that capacity is also dependent upon a lack of thoughtfulness, or the avoidance of what Mill terms "self-scrutiny." That is why he concludes that happiness is attainable only by putting it out of mind and

pursuing other things for their own sake, not consciously as a means to one's own happiness.

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 (145–46).

If Mill's analysis is correct, then life and happiness do indeed depend upon illusions. But the case is not so self-evident as Mill makes it appear.

Mill's Benthamic reduction of "happiness" (the term employed to identify the authoritative end or object of human existence) to more or less compulsive pleasures, and the resulting disjunction between "happiness" and all of the loftier activities which appeared to Mill to be necessary for a full and meaningful life, is of course a highly debatable view. Earlier thinkers such as Aristotle defined human life and happiness in terms of activity itself, and especially virtuous activity.¹⁴ While there were perceived to be some tensions between life (or happiness) and the critical understanding of human life, the two were not perceived to be in fatal conflict. Virtuous activity, including the pursuit of intellectual virtue through critical analysis, was seen to be the pursuit of a natural end, the satisfaction of a natural need. But despite Mill's acknowledgement of the insufficiency of the physical pleasures to provide a full and satisfying life, his contrary conception of the order of nature prevented him from perceiving his unsatisfied loftier desires as necessary or authoritative.

If compulsive necessity is the primary consideration underlying the difference in the standings accorded by Mill to the physical and the mental pleasures, as appears to be the case, then Mill may be guilty of absolutizing what is only a relative difference. While it is apparent that the physical pleasures result from activity which is more mechanical or compulsive than the activity which produces the mental pleasures, the difference is one of degree, even though of significant degree. On the one hand, the loftier activities also appear to derive at least their initial or rudimentary motivation from some rather compulsive inclinations or attractions not acknowledged by Mill: a natural attraction and sympathy for our fellow human beings; a natural, seemingly "idle" curiosity; and a natural attraction to the beautiful. These three, however, appear to be more heavily dependent upon further cultivation to attain their full potential, than is the case with the physical pleasures. On the other hand, some cultivation and calculation is required for the most successful attainment of the physical pleasures as well. If one allows oneself to speak of evident purposes in nature (as, at least, modern biologists continue to do, although usually disguisedly as "functions"), then even in the case of the "physical and organic" a greater or lesser amount of calculation may be required, due to two considerations. First, the associated physical pleasures are distinct from the purpose served. Eating, for example, is apparently for

14. E.g.: *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1176^b.

the purpose of preserving life and supporting healthy growth, not primarily for the gustatory pleasure which it provides as inducement to satisfy the need. Pain and pleasure on the physical level provide thoughtless (compulsive) motivation in lieu of more thoughtful motives based upon the understanding of the proper ends. But, secondly, since human intelligence enables man to transcend such natural mechanisms, in the direction of excess or deficiency, his well-being, even on the physical level, comes to depend upon a thoughtful understanding of his nature and needs, rather than the endless seeking of pleasures per se. And experience teaches us that the endless pursuit of such pleasures without due regard for the purpose served, results eventually in the defeat of that purpose, of healthy growth, and a diminished capacity for the pleasures so highly esteemed.

Mill's reported loss of zeal for his altruistic endeavors, then, appears to reflect a growing awareness that his preference for benevolence was perhaps little more than a mere arbitrary conventionality, if not a merely personal idiosyncrasy or eccentricity. It seems that Mill, the energetic social reformer and self-styled "radical," had come to at least suspect that his benevolent objectives were no more underwritten by objective necessity or the natural order of things, than those political institutions and social practices which were the targets of his righteous indignation. His new understanding of the implications of some of the principles which he had long accepted provided poor sustenance for his former level moral necessity of his benevolent inclination and activities.

It would appear that there is a contradiction between the happiness principle, as an expression of the natural selfish desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and the benevolence principle or strategy which requires the subordination of one's own natural desires and pleasures in favor of the pleasures of others. That contradiction, however, is fatal only to those who are analytically aware of it, for that awareness prevents the fulfillment of the promise of even greater personal happiness as the consequence of the nominal "sacrifice." But those who remain unaware of the paradox would presumably escape its unfortunate consequences, blissful in their ignorance. Benevolence and the other lofty aspirations could still bring happiness to those whose belief in their intrinsic goodness had not been destroyed by "analysis." And that meant that it was still possible for the reformer to devise possibly successful strategies for promoting the happiness of others by, among other things, shielding them from the fatal paradox revealed by "analysis."

It was apparently too late for Mill himself to benefit from any such strategies. His "character" had already been destroyed. "And there seemed no power in nature sufficient to begin the formation of my character anew, and create in a mind now irretrievably analytic, fresh associations of pleasure with any of the objects of human desire" (143). If such a reformation were to be effected at all, it would apparently have to be nature's doing, since Mill's habit of analysis precluded the possibility that a merely artificial association could provide effective motivation and satisfaction. The apparent hopelessness of his own situation provided him

with little motivation to devise the strategies which might save the happiness of others. However, Mill continued to busy himself with reform activities, without enthusiasm and without flair. He later found two lines of Coleridge¹⁵ which provided a “true description” of his state of mind at this time.

Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And hope without an object cannot live (145).

IV. NEW HOPE

Mill reports that at this point the first “small ray of light” broke in upon his gloom when he was “accidentally” reading a moving tale of the noble actions of Jean François Marmontel as a young boy, in the latter’s *Mémoires*. While he had previously “sought relief” by reading his favorite books, which contained “memorials of past nobleness and greatness” from which he had “always hitherto drawn strength and animation,” they no longer produced the desired effect. They had lost their capacity to charm him (139). But the account of young Marmontel’s noble actions succeeded where they had failed.

A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment my burthen grew lighter. The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone. I was no longer hopeless. I was not a stock or a stone. I had still, it seemed, some of the material out of which all worth of character, and all capacity for happiness, are made. Relieved from my ever present sense of irremediable wretchedness, I gradually found that the ordinary incidents of life could again give me some pleasure . (145).

This was not the end of his troubles or the final resolution of his “crisis.” It was only the beginning of a solution, at best. He had “several relapses” into depression, “some of which lasted many months,” but he “never again was as miserable” as he had been.

What lessons of a less personal nature did he draw from this encouraging experience? He does not say. And yet it raises some salient questions. Something had apparently survived “analysis” after all, some of the necessary “material” capable of being activated and attracted by nobility. Was it something natural? Is that why it was not destroyed by analysis, and why it was also capable of becoming active again, even in the wake of “analysis”? Or had he merely exaggerated or misconstrued the relationship between “analysis” and “the feelings”? It was only later that he was led to explore these further implications. In the first flush of his renewed hope he was preoccupied with efforts, first, to devise a protective strategy to prevent “analysis” from destroying his new “feelings,” and, second, to discover the most effective methods of stimulating or cultivating “the feelings.”

15. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Work Without Hope,” in *The Poetical Works of S. T. Coleridge*, 3 vols. (London: Pickering, 1828), II, 81.

The protective strategy which he hit upon was the “anti-self-consciousness” theory already mentioned. This new “theory of life” entailed a stubborn act of blind faith in the intrinsic value of more or less conventionally acquired aims and values. It was a deliberate attempt to insulate the “salutary” aspirations and aversions from contact with “analysis” so as to prevent exposure of the illusions which animated them. This was to be accomplished, not by suppressing or failing to cultivate the capacity and habit of “analysis,”¹⁶ but rather by redirecting their focus of attention or employment. With all thought of your own happiness severely repressed, he explains, you must “let your self-consciousness, your scrutiny, your self-interrogation, exhaust themselves” on the substituted objectives; and he assures us that “if otherwise fortunately circumstanced you will inhale happiness with the air you breathe . . .” (147). That is to say that one must preoccupy one’s critical faculties with the practical problems involved in the attainment of the “ideal ends” and *not* with the scrutiny of the moral standing or imperativeness of the ends *per se*.

In light of Mill’s own diagnosis of the problem, and considered by itself (that is, without supplementary assistance from other strategies), Mill’s “anti-self-consciousness” strategy provides a rather tenuous solution. It attempts to circumvent any thoughtful association between the powerful natural desire for happiness and the activities of the individual; it seeks to restrain the critical understanding within prescribed boundaries. But where the analytical habit of mind already exists and has become “inveterate,” it is not likely to allow itself to be fettered within boundaries imposed arbitrarily by itself at an earlier point in time or by some other source. The strategy therefore enjoyed some prospective success among the relatively unenlightened many, but much poorer prospects among the elite group of highly enlightened reformers themselves. It would seem to require the highly analytical reformers to deceive themselves as to their true end, to regard a substitute end, which is really only a means, as an end in itself, despite the fact that their critical understanding tells them that its intrinsic value, if any, is unevident or undemonstrable. And if they are to deceive themselves about this, how can they (or we) be certain that they are not further deceiving themselves about their own motives? May not a desire for power over others be masked by the professed desire to improve their lot? And might not a satisfying sense of their own power as readily contribute to their own happiness as a confessedly questionable dedication to the well-being of those others, given the ostensibly accidental character of all such “associations”? And, even in the absence of such dark motives, might not such unreflective or self-deceiving liberal benefactors end up also deceiving themselves about the condition and state of happiness of those whom they are dedicated to serve? And, finally, even supposing all of these possible pitfalls successfully negotiated, is it not likely that the deter-

16. He assures us that he “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” (147).

minedly brave front which these critical sophisticates must strive to maintain would, at least periodically, be broken down by irrepressible "analysis," and give way to bouts of despondency and despair? It is not surprising, then, that Mill does *not yet* report the final termination of his recurrent periods of dejection.

The Marmontel incident, along with his analysis of the shortcomings of his teachers' methods, suggested a supplementary strategy which would increase the effectiveness of the anti-self-consciousness strategy: the early and intense cultivation of an artificial association between the sense of pleasure and the salutary objects, such as the happiness of others, by specifically *emotional* stimulants. His experience had taught him 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." There would be no neglect of "intellectual culture"; "the power and practice of analysis" was still regarded as "an essential condition both of individual and of social improvement." But its enervating consequences were to be corrected "by joining other kinds of cultivation with it." Consequently, "the cultivation of the feelings," he tells us, "became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed. And my thoughts and inclinations turned in an increasing degree towards whatever seemed capable of being instrumental to that object" (147).

This new strategy required a shift in the focus of emphasis in the reform program. Mill tells us that he now "ceased to attach almost exclusive importance to the ordering of outward circumstances, and the training of the human being for speculation and for action"; and "for the first time, gave its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual" (147). This added dimension of "internal culture" was to be accomplished through the calculated employment of the "imaginative arts." The artists, authors, poets and composers were now seen to be as indispensable to progress as the philosophers and reformers. They would skillfully manipulate the emotions of the young so as to inculcate in them an intense love of mankind and virtue and a distaste for selfishness, cruelty and other forms of baseness. If begun early enough and properly conducted, these "associations" would become "so intense and inveterate as to be practically indissoluble, before the habitual exercise of the power of analysis had commenced" (141).

The apparent hope was that this intense cultivation of the emotions would produce direct "associations" with the "salutary" activities so strong that those artificial links would constitute a kind of "second nature" (although Mill does not employ that term). Such "associations," on Mill's analysis, could not be wholly immune to dissolution by analysis, so long as they partake in no way of "first nature"; but they would presumably have a relatively high degree of resistance to analytical destruction. To dissolve such strong emotional attachments to virtue, would require a more sustained analytical onslaught than all but a very few were likely to subject their motives and aspirations to. Those few could be expected to suffer periodic bouts of depression due to their analytical thoughts straying into

the prohibited area; but a strongly inculcated sense of duty, like Mill's, might be expected to carry them through these dark intervals, while they restored themselves with massive doses of artistic stimulation.

It appeared, then, that the problem caused by nature's lack of positive support for the loftier activities necessary to individual happiness was perhaps manageable by human artifice after all—at least it might be, so long as nature was only passively indifferent in the matter and not actively hostile to the artifice.

V FRESH CAUSE FOR DESPAIR

Mill's search for effective emotional stimulants among the imaginative arts soon brought him to new grief. As he explored, first, the uses of music, he began to perceive evidence of nature's opposition to his artificial solution to the problem of human happiness. Music was the only one of the imaginative arts in which he had previously taken "great pleasure." But he now concluded that it could be of only limited utility for the purpose of cultivating the feelings. It is, he concluded, superlative in "exciting enthusiasm; in winding up to a high pitch those feelings of an elevated kind which are already in the character, but to which this excitement gives a glow and a fervour, which though transitory at its utmost height, is precious for sustaining them at other times" (147). But its utility as a method of primary cultivation of "character" was doubtful; and even its secondary use was limited, because the pleasure which it provides "fades with familiarity, and requires either to be revived by intermittence, or fed by continual novelty" (149). And Mill morosely reflected upon the limited number of possible pleasant combinations of the "five tones and two semitones" which constitute the octave, and the consequent limits to such novelty.

This was but the beginning of a train of reflections which provided the depressing bases for his later formulation of the law of "doubles" or contrast. In 1869, in an editorial note in the second edition of his father's *Analysis*, he remarks that his father, in "endeavouring to express the most fundamental fact of consciousness—the necessity of change, or transition from one state to another in order to our being conscious"—does not quite convey the important point that "all consciousness, all sensation, all knowledge must be of *doubles* the state passed from and the state passed to, are equally recognized by us." He explains that this means we know things only by contrast. "Any single thing is unknowable by us; its relative opposite is a part of its very existence." "Opening the eyes to the light, for the first time, we know a contrast,—a present light, a past privation—but for the one we should not have known the other."¹⁷ There is no way of ascertaining precisely when Mill formulated the point in these universal terms. But as the broader possible implications of the transitoriness of music's pleasures formed in his mind, he began to fear that, "if the reformers of society

17. *Analysis*, II, 12n. Mill's emphasis.

and government could succeed in their objects, and every person in the community were free and in a state of physical comfort, the pleasures of life, being no longer kept up by struggle and privation, would cease to be pleasures" (149). Those who have never known the unhappiness which comes from deprivation will be unable to appreciate their present bountiful condition and therefore derive satisfaction or contentment from it. What hope could there be of any permanent or significant improvement in the condition of mankind, as the result of the implementation of the preferred social reforms, if the recipients of this largesse could be expected to exhibit increasing ingratitude, egotism, and grasping selfishness as their external circumstances were improved? And what grounds therefore remained for believing that the reform effort would bring real happiness to its ostensible beneficiaries? The belief in the possibility of an artificially contrived harmony of interests in society and increased and assured happiness for all of its members must have begun to appear to be a piece of naivete based upon a faulty reading of the nature of the human psyche.

Mill now recalled an earlier perception of another manifestation of the law of contrasts, which had occurred when he was assessing his own lack of desire and pleasure relative to worldly success. Personal success, he believed, had come too quickly and easily to him. He had not had to experience the pain of protracted struggle, a period of deprivation, of unsatisfied hunger. "I had had (as I reflected) some gratification of vanity at too early an age: I had obtained some distinction, and felt myself of some importance, before the desire of distinction and of importance had grown into a passion: and little as it was which I had attained, yet having been attained too early, like all pleasures enjoyed too soon, it had made me *blasé* and indifferent to the pursuit" (143). And now he concluded that "the flaw in my life, must be a flaw in life itself" (149).

This law of contrasts also illuminated the significance of another curious fact, previously noticed, about man's natural responsiveness to pain and pleasure. Mill, like his teachers, had observed that the painful "associations" were stronger and more durable than the pleasurable ones. Or, as James Mill expressed it, the "pleasurable sensations" are not so "pungent" as the painful ones.¹⁸ Therefore, of the traditional methods of inculcation of moral scruple, blame and punishment were more effective tools than praise and reward. Deprivation and struggle could be expected to form a character more firmly committed to the righteous path than could be produced through rewards or the free gift of all of the good things in life. One would also have to expect aversions, which are based upon pain, to better endure, while positive aspirations falter with the fading of their previously associated pleasures or perhaps due to satiety and boredom.

Mill does not attempt to account for this greater responsiveness to pain, but Bentham does. "Want and pain are . . . natural; satisfaction and pleasure artificial, and invented." Pleasure is "something super-added to the satisfaction of our

18. *Analysis*, II, 203.

wants by a farther reach of artifice. . . .”¹⁹ Pains are visited upon us by given specific causes; but the pleasures attendant upon the satisfaction of our desires are always dependent upon a strategic calculation and choice among alternative possible means of satisfaction or alleviation. One might say that pain is the case of the world, including our own given nature, acting upon us, insofar as pain is inflicted upon us or unwillingly experienced and fled from. And pleasure entails the individual acting upon the world, insofar as pleasure is actively pursued and embraced. In other words, pain is more completely compulsive than is pleasure; and nature is pure compulsion. It would seem to follow that “the pleasure principle” as a directive principle, is not really given by nature after all. Nature, at best, gives us a pain-avoidance principle. We are merely driven *from* painful situations; we are not directed *to* anything in particular.

This attribution of greater naturalness to pain than to pleasure appears to be a corollary of the modern emphasis upon the fear of death and violence as the most powerful natural passion, as so forcefully expounded by Thomas Hobbes. And the importance attached to this feature of human behavior in modern thought is a reflection of the modern insistence upon identifying “nature” with origins rather than ends, with least common denominators rather than highest attainments; as it is also a reflection of the tendency to associate nature with only “efficient” causes or mechanical compulsion. Thus, the pleasures and especially the pains connected with our most elementary or “primitive” wants, those which function most mechanically, are taken to be those which define our most essential nature and which provide the grounds for understanding our other pains and pleasures as well.

On the Benthamic view of the matter, one can still distinguish between pains which are natural in every respect, the “physical and organic,” and pains which are imposed by the artifice of other men, as in a penal system or by a father tutoring his son. According to Mill’s account, the “associations” generated by the latter would be vulnerable to “analysis,” while those of the former would not. But the durability of Mill’s sense of duty and its motivational effectiveness during his depressed periods would appear to be a testament to the durability of even the artificial associations forged in pain, since Mill’s later account of “duty” identifies pain as its enforcing sanction.²⁰ Similarly, the pleasures derived from the satisfaction of our more natural physical wants, as Mill stresses, generate associations which are very durable, while the pleasures not directly connected with our “physical and organic” machine, the pleasures of social engineering, for example, are more fragile and vulnerable in all of their apparent loftiness.

The greater compulsiveness of pain was, of course, no new discovery. Aristotle long ago pointed out that it is characteristic of the lower or elementary pleasures (except those of smell) that they are inextricably connected with the allevi-

19. Bentham, *Natural Religion*, ch. I; quoted by Élie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 492–93.

20. *Utilitarianism, C.W.*, x, 228.

ation of prior pain (as in the case of hunger). He argued that it is one of the marks of superiority of the loftier pleasures that they do not share that characteristic. And it was seen to be a mark of a properly cultivated noble soul or character that it is motivated by the natural attraction of nobility and virtue; while persons of base character, “whose desires are fixed on pleasure of the lower kind, must be chastised by pain, like a beast of burden.”²¹ The young and virtuous Mill, who was highly attracted to nobility and virtue, was attached to a philosophy geared to the motivations of the base; and he was therefore unable to give a supportive analytical account of his own noble inclinations and aspirations.

Mill’s previous reformist expectations had no doubt been colored by his appreciation of the apparent loftiness of his own motives. His father had effectively convinced him that his accomplishments were due to the advantageousness of his circumstances, especially to the quality of his teachers, and not to any special merits of his own. Consequently, young John was inclined to regard his own natural gifts as quite ordinary. Therefore, if he could be so successfully educated to a love of mankind and virtue, why could not all? But now, as he began to grasp the further implications of the Benthamic teaching more clearly, and concluded that his reform objectives were perhaps unattainable, and that his efforts in their pursuit were therefore incapable of bringing real happiness to others, he must have realized that his continued pursuit of those activities, out of a sense of duty and as the means to his own happiness, was an anachronism. If the pursuit of benevolence was merely the means of alleviating the pains of a conscience which retained some emotional residue of unmasked illusions, then Mill’s happiness depended more on the continuance of conditions of deprivation for others than on their elimination. He seemed to be in the position of a dog chasing its own tail. And yet, somehow, “the destiny of mankind in general was ever in [his] thoughts.” And he concluded that, “unless I could see my way to some better hope than this for human happiness in general, my dejection must continue . . .” (149).

Now it appeared that, due to the refractoriness of human nature, the contradiction between the happiness principle and the benevolence principle is fatal, not only to those few who are analytically aware of it, but also to the many, who are fated to become aware of it through practical experience. It is, of course, logically coherent and easy to say that the pain of human conflict cannot be eliminated unless each of us curbs our selfish clamor for more or less immediate pleasures with little or no regard for the deprivation and pains of others. But if the more compelling reality to which human nature responds is the pain of frustrated selfish desire, rather than the anticipated pleasure of a harmony of interests which has not yet even been manifest, or the current pleasure of a sense of noble sacrifice, then the benevolence principle is a mere pious wish or prayer rather than a viable social policy.

The Biblical version of the benevolence principle, the admonition to love

21. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1180^a

one's neighbor as oneself, was of course given very strong support by arguments from nature and divine will, including the promise of rewards and punishments of unprecedented magnitude and duration in an after-life—supports which Mill abjures. But, for the reformer who has abandoned such supports, it is one thing to imagine a world of perfect beauty and harmony emerging from one's reformist efforts—a world more perfect than that of nature, a world in which the Biblical injunction is assuredly fulfilled. It is yet another, less inspiring, prospect to anticipate a never ending struggle in the soul of every man, which is bound to corrupt, in one degree or another, every social plan, every political institution, every public policy; and which requires some constant resort to punitive measures, to avoid a complete relapse into a condition of barbarism and savagery. In the latter case, how can the reformer go on, unless he can perceive some kind of significant support in nature for the effort which must be expended for the sake of relatively modest gains, if any, over the course of his own lifetime? And where nature's support does not take the form of compulsions which assure success, it must take the form of attractive natural ends, the approximation of which, by the individual, produces its own real and superior pleasures,²² not merely artificial ones which are unable to compete successfully with the "physical and organic" pleasures which are admitted to be rooted in nature. How could one hope to generate a love of mankind and virtue for their own sake by the emotional manipulations of the imaginative arts, when the greater pungency of pain promises the recurrent destruction of the inclinations to self-restraint thereby generated? Pain is not a promising method of creating a wholly artificial love of lofty things for their own sake, as Mill recognized.

Can the reformers, then, repeatedly rescue themselves and their fellow men from the wilderness of skepticism and apathy generated by the development of critical reason, and the grasping selfishness imposed by nature—by seeking out admittedly artificial stimulants to jack up admittedly artificial "salutary" "associations" or aspirations and aversions? What is an "appropriate" stimulant? What is a "salutary" association? Is there any reason to expect that all would respond as Mill did to the reading of Marmontel's tale? Might not some be more moved by the tales of the Marquis de Sade? What grounds are there for preferring Mill's inclinations to those of de Sade's admirers? What grounds are there for an expectation that Mill's preferences in such matters must necessarily prevail? Or, to take first things first, can the reformers deliberately contrive to reshape themselves according to a prior calculated model? Or are they, too, spared this necessity by be-

22. There was no basis, in the Benthamic calculus, for promising qualitatively superior pleasures as the reward for the sacrifice of more immediate and accessible pleasures adverse to the happiness of other people. If pushpin is as good as poetry in the quality of the pleasure which it provides, as Bentham maintained, then it follows that the choice is reduced in every case to considerations of relative quantity and certainty of attainment. Thus, Bentham identifies seven dimensions of measurement and comparison, all of which focus upon various aspects of quantity and certainty: (1) intensity; (2) duration; (3) certainty or uncertainty; (4) propinquity or remoteness; (5) fecundity; (6) purity; and (7) extent or number of persons benefitted. *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ch. 1v.

ing deprived of the capacity for it, by nature, conceived as an irresistible compulsive machine?

Mill's despair over the apparent manifestation of nature's active opposition to his highest reformist hopes and expectations was compounded by his increasing awareness of another and even more fundamental natural obstacle to deliberate reform efforts of any kind. He tells us that, "during the later returns of my dejection, the doctrine of what is called Philosophical Necessity weighed on my existence like an incubus" (175). A central implication of that doctrine, as Mill then understood it, "was the operative force in the depressing and paralysing influence" which plagued him (177). Consequently, he says, "I felt as if I was scientifically proved to be the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances; as if my character and that of all others had been formed for us by agencies beyond our control, and was wholly out of our own power."²³ He wished that he could "disbelieve the doctrine of the formation of character by circumstances" but he could not. Thus, by following out the logical implications of the mechanistic conception of nature which he had imbibed from his father, he was led to distressing conclusions which had escaped his father's notice and which completely undercut his reformist, moralistic endeavors. He saw himself in the paradoxical and burdensome position of believing the doctrine of "Fatalism" to be true but morally destructive, and the doctrine of "freewill" to be false but morally beneficial. That is, of course, an ambiguous perspective on the problem, since the notions of the morally destructive and the morally beneficial are contradictions in terms, if the doctrine of "fatalism," as described, is strictly true. But Mill was apparently aware of the ambiguity and was struggling to resolve it.

Confronted by the realization that his moral preconceptions were inconsistent with his basic conception of nature and causality, Mill was reluctant to sacrifice his morality to his metaphysics. But he could not readily bring himself to abandon the latter. His eventual resolution of the dilemma appeared to be both simple and ingenious, for it seemed to allow him to save both, through a mere "correction" in his understanding of the implications of the latter. He tells us that he "pondered painfully on the subject, till gradually I saw light through it. I perceived, that the word Necessity, as a name for the doctrine of Cause and Effect applied to human actions, carried with it a misleading association"—the implication of irresistible compulsion. It seemed to imply that our actions are the inev-

23. The unknown author of the following limerick might well have had the young Mill in mind:

There was a young man who said, "Damn,
It grieves me to think that I am
Predestined to move
In a circumscribed groove,
Not even a bus, but a tram."

Not even the manipulation of other people's grooves can provide a sense of accomplishment when you come to believe that it is merely the inevitable consequence of the inescapable rut you are yourself in.

itable consequence of our “character,” and that our “character,” in turn, is irresistibly shaped by external circumstances. The process thus did not appear to admit of any possibility of one exercising deliberate control or direction of one’s fate. But he explains that he now saw, to the contrary, that “though our character is formed by circumstances, our own desires can do much to shape those circumstances.” There seemed to be a place for morality and responsibility after all.

What was it that enabled Mill now to “see” that his prior fatalistic view was an erroneous interpretation of the necessary implications of the doctrine of “Philosophical Necessity”? The answer is provided in his *Logic*,²⁴ to which he directs us for the fuller account of this phase of his solution to the problem. There we learn that Mill simply applied Hume’s caveat concerning our knowledge of “causes.” His application of Hume’s argument leads to the conclusion that, since we are incapable of any direct observation of “causes,” or “secret powers” capable of compelling, we cannot assert their existence. “Causality” is therefore nothing more than a hypothetical construct based upon the much more limited observation of mere “invariable, certain, and unconditional sequence.” It is merely our imagination which “retains, the feeling of some more intimate connexion, of some peculiar tie, or mysterious constraint exercised by the antecedent over the consequent.”²⁵

While Hume’s caveat allows for the possibility, it does not require the conclusion which Mill draws from it. Hume’s critique equally restricts us from thinking that we *know* that one billiard ball which strikes another possesses a power which compels the latter to move as it does; but we are not required to believe that the second ball possesses any deliberate “control” over the direction or speed of its own movement. We are rather inclined to continue to *believe* that the movement of the second ball is indeed compelled by the force or power exerted by the first, as the only way of making sense of what we observe, even if we are willing to concede Hume’s skeptical point. But Mill concludes that it is a “grand error” to suppose that *we* are thus irresistibly compelled by forces over which we have no control. What sort of “control” do we have, then? And how do we exercise it?

Mill explains that what one will do in any circumstance depends upon his “character”; and one has, “to a certain extent, a power to alter his own character.”

Its being, in the ultimate resort, formed *for* him, is not inconsistent with its being, in part, formed *by* him as one of the intermediate agents. His character is formed by his circumstances (including among these his particular organization); but his own

24. Book VI, ch. II, especially pages 837–42.

25. It is this product of our imagination which, “considered as applying to the human will, conflicts with our consciousness, and revolts our feelings. We are certain that, in the case of our volitions, there is not this mysterious constraint. We know that we are not compelled, as by a magic spell, to obey any particular motive. We feel, that if we wished to prove that we have the power of resisting the motive, we could do so, (that wish being, it needs scarcely be observed, a *new antecedent*;) and it would be humiliating to our pride, and (what is of more importance) paralyzing to our desire for excellence, if we thought otherwise.” *Logic, C.W.*, VIII, 837–38. Mill’s emphasis.

desire to mould it in a particular way, is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least influential.²⁶

But one's desires, in turn, are seen to be dictated by, or reflections of, one's "character." How, then, does one manage to break out of the vicious circle? We may easily imagine the potential beneficiaries of the reform activity being reformed through the interventions of the reformers. But is there any possibility that the reformers can break out of their own original mold and reform themselves on a loftier plane? Mill tells us that we can reform ourselves by first forming the desire to change our shape, and then proceeding to will and create the external conditions necessary to bring about the desired change in our character.²⁷ But do we have any deliberative control of what desires we can or will have? Or, are our loftier desires wholly determined by external circumstances generating artificial "associations"?

Mill states that such desires for self-reform are ultimately generated by "experience"—including education, "experience of the painful consequences of the character we previously had," and "strong feelings of admiration or aspiration, accidentally aroused." But he has not retracted his earlier account of the wholly negative impact which the "analysis" of experience has on all of the loftier aspirations. What does all of this add up to, then? Do we have a degree of freedom or autonomy in what we desire and will for ourselves; or are we merely more complicated parts of a more complicated machine than was first presupposed? Does our rationality provide us with a significant degree of potential freedom from the force of circumstances acting upon our "feelings" or desires; or does it merely produce a more complex process of predetermined response in accordance with inexorable mechanical "laws"? It is apparent that we are not compelled to act upon every inclination or aspiration which may by chance be momentarily aroused; but is that due to an autonomy-generating rational capacity to judge the propriety and control the impelling effects of those desires or "feelings," or is it merely due to the greater compulsive force of countervailing desires over which we have no deliberate control? If Mill means to imply that we are, after all, more than merely complicated machines, it will be necessary for him to identify and explain the source of the rational principle(s) or standard of judgement by reference to which the propriety and relative priority of each of the possible desires is judged; for without such principle our "choice" must ultimately be guided or "determined" by something other than reason—presumably by the passions or "feelings" as shaped by the cumulative impact of accidental external circumstances, in accordance with the same body of mechanical "laws" which are in-

26. *Logic*, 840. Mill's emphasis.

27. "We cannot, indeed, directly will to be different from what we are. But neither did those who were supposed to have formed our characters, directly will that we should be what we are. Their will had no direct power except over their own actions. They made us what they did make us, by willing, not the end, but the requisite means; and we, when our habits are not too inveterate, can by similarly willing the requisite means, make ourselves different."

voked in explanation of the movements of the billiard balls. And in that case there is no meaningful sense in which we can be said to be in real control of our destiny.

In Mill's "fatalistic" view, man appears to be a strange and ill-fated machine. He possesses unexplained and unprecedented potential for the development of intellectual and moral capacities not perceived to be the gift of nature. The most complex and astounding of those capacities is the ability to perceive himself as an aspirational machine without a given purpose, and without a proper work to do. And his most pathetic feature is the perfect antagonism between this developed critical self-awareness and his developed moral capacity to demand reasoned justifications for his actions, by reference to some necessary or authoritative purpose. Thus, it appears that when the machine attains full self-awareness, its motive power is destroyed and it can no longer sustain itself.

VI. A NEW VIEW OF NATURE AND THE "FEELINGS"

Mill's continuing efforts to see his way to a better prospect for mankind finally took a fruitful turn when he discovered that the poetry of Wordsworth provided a potent medicine for his ailment. Wordsworth's poems, with their descriptions of "rural beauty"—that is, the beauty of nature—"seemed to be the very culture of the feelings" for which he had been searching (151). It was not that Wordsworth's poems provided the most beautiful depictions of nature. "Scott does this still better than Wordsworth, and a very second-rate landscape does it more effectually than any poet." The special value of Wordsworth's poems, Mill explains, is "that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty." That is to say that Wordsworth focuses on the link between nature's beauty and the "feelings." And he made that connection appear so natural, so necessary, that Mill was led to revise his earlier conception of a disjunction between nature and the loftier "feelings."

Mill had now discovered sources of pleasure which he regarded as substantial enough to make life desirable, and which did not require deprivation and struggle as a condition of their enjoyment or attainment. The Wordsworthian type of poetry appeared to enable the reader "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" (151). From Wordsworth he learned "what would be the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life have been removed." The quiet contemplation of the beauties of nature, along with the unfailing exercise of virtue, would provide that happiness for all. Those who possessed a poetical nature could attain that happiness in direct communion with nature, on walking tours in the fields

and mountains, for example, as Mill himself did. Those who possessed “unpoetical natures,” or whose poetical natures had been stifled by lack of proper cultivation, would be assisted by artful interpreters of nature such as Wordsworth and other practitioners of the imaginative arts.

But how can these pleasures escape destruction by “analysis”? And how can they be independent of the law of contrasts? They are now seen to be more or less natural pleasures, derived from natural connections between the “feelings” and other facets of nature. Though they require “cultivation” and are therefore not wholly “necessary” in the compulsive sense, they are nevertheless perceived as natural when they occur. The “feelings” are seen to be attuned to certain dimensions of nature to which we do not have access through our other cognitive faculties. Mill tells us, in the “Early Draft” of his autobiography,

My faculties became more attuned to the beautiful and elevated, in all kinds, and especially in human feeling and character, and more capable of vibrating in unison with it . . . (189).

And we find him, in a late stage of the resolution of his problem, regretting his friend Roebuck’s lack of receptiveness to this newfound appreciation of “the feelings,” in these terms: “It was in vain I urged on him that 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 . . .” (157).

The emotional inspiration which one receives from observing a colorful sunset is now seen to be yet another facet of the order of nature. Our experience of the beauties of nature, whether viewed directly or through the poet’s eyes, is not properly to be regarded as an accidental and arbitrary product of the individual nervous system; it is the perception of a quality or dimension of nature not accessible to the other cognitive faculties. These perceptions through “the feelings” do not compete or conflict with the perceptions supplied by our other faculties or capacities; they supplement them. Mill tried unsuccessfully to convince Roebuck that an emotional product of this sort, “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.” There is, then, nothing to be found in the other facets of nature which requires us to be disrespectful of our emotional responses *per se* and there is nothing in the emotional responses which requires us to ignore the other facts of nature. “The intensest feeling of the beauty of a cloud lighted by the setting sun, is no hindrance to my knowing that the cloud is vapour of water, subject to all the laws of vapours in a state of suspension; and I am just as likely to allow for, and act on, these physical laws whenever there is occasion to do so, as if I had been incapable of perceiving any distinction between beauty and ugliness.”

Thus, Mill appears to be giving both this aesthetics and his moral principles

an epistemological status equivalent to that of his science. It seems necessarily to be implied that the beauty of the virtues, the moral sentiments, and excellence is a natural beauty; and it is our perception of their beauty which properly leads us to love them for their own sake. It now appears that, underlying the seeming disorder or disharmony of nature, there is actual harmony after all. And, contrary to Mill's earlier expressed fear that there was "no power in nature" capable of reforming his character and generating "fresh associations of pleasure with any of the objects of human desire," that power existed in nature after all (143). The contributions of Marmontel and Wordsworth lie in their facilitation of nature's exercise of that power over Mill, and perhaps others.

This new perspective on the relationship between the emotions and the order of nature of course led Mill to reassess the relationship between the aspirational "associations" and "analysis." He concluded that it is not properly conducted "analysis," but rather only "precocious and premature analysis," which possesses the tendency to "wear away the feelings" and thereby undercut the aspirations by destroying our confidence in their necessity and therefore their propriety. It now appeared that "analysis" endangers happiness only "when no other mental habit is cultivated, and the analysing spirit remains without its natural complements and correctives." Mill's earlier "analysis" had been destructive of his aspirations, then, because it was based upon an incomplete view of the natural order, mistakenly construed to be a complete account. By misconstruing the character of our emotional responses to the world in which we live, he was led to an incomplete and therefore distorted understanding of our perceptive capacities and of the multifaceted order of nature, one which implicitly denied the reality of that facet or dimension which is of the utmost human significance. But his more "mature," "corrected" analysis, based upon a new appreciation of the natural character of our emotional responses to the salutary objects of aspiration, provides support for those aspirations which give meaning to our existence and therefore allow us to derive happiness from them. Wordsworth made the pleasures which Mill derived from the beauty of nature seem perfectly natural and necessary; and Mill concluded that "the delight which these poems gave me, proved that with culture of this sort, there was nothing to dread from the most confirmed habit of analysis" (153).

It seems, then, that the law of contrasts does not apply to the vibratory relationship between the "feelings" and the inspirational dimension of nature. The loftier objects evidently possess the power to attract us directly; our responsive capacities do not require us to be impelled by the repulsiveness of the painful things which lie below or elsewhere. They possess that power of attraction because, first, they are truly good for us, truly necessary to our well-being; and, second, we possess a natural capacity to become tuned in to their goodness, their necessity.

Some individuals possess this sensitivity in a higher degree than others; and

those most sensitive souls, the “poets,” make an invaluable contribution to the happiness of the others. It is not entirely clear whether this disparity is attributable to nature or to nurture; but Mill’s remarks give the impression that it is ultimately a matter of natural gift. And while the sensitive souls, who so acutely experience the necessity of the loftier aspirations, have nothing to fear from “analysis,” those who possess duller sensibilities cannot afford to be very analytical about their happiness. The anti-self-consciousness strategy remains the best course “for those who have but a moderate degree of sensibility and of capacity for enjoyment, that is, for the great majority of mankind” (147).

Mill’s confidence in the viability of his project of benevolent reform appears to have been completely restored at this point. That suggests that the law of contrasts has no significant application, even to the relatively insensitive many, at least in the long run. It implies that the many can be sufficiently sensitized to a satisfying resonance with virtue and brotherly love to eliminate any backsliding into selfishness and the resulting pains of conflict and deprivation. But their probable sensitivity, and therefore their firsthand knowledge of the necessity of the lofty things, appears to be severely limited and uncertain. Hence the continuing danger of “analysis” and the continuing need for a kind of poetry which *tells* them what they *should* feel in response to the beautiful and noble things. Their own firsthand knowledge or spontaneous “feelings” therefore would seem to provide no sufficient protection from the possible stings of skeptical philosophers and false “poets.”

Mill was now more fully convinced than ever of the need for the reformer to stress the cultivation of the internal resources of the reformees, as well as his own. The motivational response mechanism must be fine tuned; the “feelings,” like the understanding, must be cultivated. They require deliberate directional assistance as well as stimulation and intensification. The reformer must therefore be able to make the requisite discriminations between the salutary vibrations and the vicious ones. And, while it would appear that he does this by consulting his own “feelings,” how can he be reasonably certain that the vibrations which he is consulting are indeed salutary or “necessary”? He cannot merely assume that his vibrations are always in tune with nature merely because they are his own. Critical analysis must somehow confirm their naturalness; and it must do so by locating them in a coherent account of the order and necessities of nature. Does this not mean that it must provide a rational principle of deliberative choice? Or is it possible that nature provides a more mechanical solution to the problem? It is uncertain how clearly Mill perceived these lingering problems at this time; but he could not have been wholly unaware of them. However, he was able now to proceed, cheerfully confident that no fatal pitfalls remained to undermine his new and more hopeful understanding of the human condition. He felt himself “at once better and happier” for having come under the influence of Wordsworth’s poems. And from that point he “gradually but completely emerged” from his “habitual depression” and never experienced it again (153).

VII. NATURE AS A PROGRESSIVE MACHINE?

It was about this time, Mill tells us, that he ceased to participate in the Debating Society he had helped to form a few years earlier. He felt that he needed more time to clarify his thoughts in private, and less pressure to exhibit them in public. He found the “fabric” of his “old and taught opinions giving way in many fresh places”; and so he was “incessantly occupied in weaving it anew” to prevent it from falling to pieces. He was not content to be a casual eclectic or a dilettante; he strove to maintain a consistent, coherent, comprehensive philosophy. And when an alteration of one of his old opinions generated confusion and inconsistency in that connected view of things, he confronted the difficulties until consistency and coherence were apparently restored (163–64).

The next significant change in his “old and taught opinions” was triggered by Thomas Macaulay’s highly critical review of James Mill’s essay on “Government,”²⁸ in 1829.²⁹ This controversy would eventually lead John to conclude that his mentors had fundamentally misconstrued the science of politics and also the science of psychology upon which it was based. Mill’s account of his reaction to Macaulay’s critique suggests that he was initially unpersuaded by Macaulay’s fundamental criticism of James Mill’s method of inquiry and reasoning about politics, although he saw merit in Macaulay’s comments on the narrowness of his father’s premises and the resulting defectiveness of his derivative conclusions concerning the means of securing good government.³⁰ It was his disappointment over the dogmatic character of his father’s response to Macaulay which persuaded him that “there was really something more fundamentally erroneous in my father’s conception of philosophical Method, as applicable to politics, than I had hitherto supposed there was” (167). But more than a year would pass before he was able to formulate a clear notion of the specific character of the methodological flaw.

It was during his subsequent inquiry into the logic of induction that the explanation suddenly “flashed” upon him. Macaulay had criticized James Mill’s method of political science as inappropriately deductive and a priori: a political science modelled on Euclid’s geometry. Macaulay insisted that it should rather be empirical and inductive: modelled on the science of chemistry. John concluded that they were both wrong: the appropriate model for the science of politics was provided by “the deductive branches of natural philosophy,” such as “dynamics” i.e., mechanics or mathematical physics. It could not be empirical

28. James Mill, *Essays* (London: Innes, n.d. 1825).

29. Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Mill’s *Essay on Government: Utilitarian Logic and Politics*,” *Edinburgh Review*, XLIX (March 1829), 159–89.

30. “Identity of interest between the governing body and the community at large, is not, in any practical sense which can be attached to it, the only thing on which good government depends; neither can this identity of interest be secured by the mere conditions of election” (165).

and inductive because it could not be “a science of specific experience”; the “laws,” the underlying causes, which explain political behavior are not unique; they are not specifically political or social. They are the “laws of mind” and of character formation which explain all forms and varieties of human behavior. The science of politics must therefore be essentially derivative, deductive. But geometry does not provide the appropriate model since it is not “a science of causation at all.” As he explains in his *Logic*, “geometry affords no room for what so constantly occurs in mechanics and its applications, the case of conflicting forces: of causes which counteract or modify one another. . . .”³¹ But in political events one is constantly confronted with such conflicting forces; and it requires something more than simple armchair deductions, made at a far remove from the concrete political contexts where those variable forces clash, to arrive at adequate explanations of the results which ensue.

John now concluded that the narrowness of his father’s premises was due to a misconstruction of his more fundamental science of psychology. It was, here, he concluded, that the chemical analogy more appropriately applied. The narrowness of his father’s premises was associated with a static quality in his conception of the mental process. He did, of course, allow for the accidental emergence of new and higher aspirations growing out of the rudimentary natural predisposition to seek the “primitive” pleasures and avoid pain: he explains that, as the consequence of a long indirect association between a means and the pleasure derived from the end which it serves, we eventually come to make a direct association between the means and the pleasure, thus converting the means into an end in itself.³² But his reductionist explanation denied any properties to such “compounds,” which are not seen to be present in the simple, primitive elements of which they are ostensibly composed. His theory of the mind, like the atomistic explanation of the physical world, upon which it was apparently modelled, granted no real integrity to the proliferation of complex ideas and lofty motives, no further enrichment of the basic fabric of life through transformation and irreducible development. And that meant that he was unable to account for the “loftiness” of the ostensibly lofty aspirations.³³

James apparently saw nothing problematical about the authoritativeness of such accidentally generated and tenuously maintained ends. He was quite impatient with Sir James Mackintosh when the latter suggested that his reductionist

31. *Logic*, 887–88.

32. *Analysis*, II, ch. XXII. See the exposition of this element in John Mill’s philosophy, by Fred R. Berger, “Mill’s Concept of Happiness,” *Interpretation*, 7 (Sept. 1978), 95–117.

33. E.g., “It is interesting here to observe by what a potent call we are summoned to Virtue. Of all that we enjoy, more is derived from those acts of other men, on which we bestow the name Virtue, than from any other cause. Our own virtue is the principal cause why other men reciprocate the acts of virtue toward us. With the idea of our own acts of virtue, there are naturally associated the ideas of all the immense advantages we derive from the virtuous acts of our Fellow-creatures. When this association is formed in due strength, which it is the main business of a good education to effect, the motive of virtue becomes paramount in the human breast,” *Analysis*, II, 292–93.

account of the virtues was deflationary and destructive of them: "Gratitude remains gratitude, resentment remains resentment, generosity remains generosity in the mind of him who feels them, after analysis, the same as before," he insisted.³⁴ However, contrary to James Mill's firm assurances, young John had, in fact, found it impossible to maintain his enthusiasm for his noble goals after analysis had made clear to him their dubious foundations in self-regarding utilitarianism.

While John shared Mackintosh's concern over the ignoble motives which lie behind apparently noble objectives as described and explained by his father, John found a way, through the "chemical" analogy, to preserve the psychological theory of the lowly origins and accidental genesis of our "higher" and less selfish aspirations, while providing them with a character and standing not reducible to those origins in the "primitive" selfish desire to secure pleasure and avoid pain. In chemistry, "the junction of certain elements generates a compound whose properties are very different from the sum of the properties of the elements themselves";³⁵ some of the properties of the elements disappear, while new properties, unique to the compound, appear. The new entity thus comes to have an existence and integrity of its own, irreducible to its origins. If there were such a mental "chemistry," true nobility and human excellence or virtues not reducible to their lowly primitive origins—that is, nobility, virtue and morality as more commonly understood—could be seen among its products. That, the younger Mill concluded, was indeed the case.

It is now clear why it is neither necessary nor preferable to rely upon arguments of the "enlightened self-interest" variety in the effort to induce benevolent and virtuous behavior. Not only are such arguments often of uncertain effect or persuasiveness; but they also fail to establish morality on the proper level of nobility. Mill was shortly to conclude that truly virtuous behavior was inconsistent with any such deliberate calculation of pleasurable or painful consequence to oneself. Only when the well-being of others has been synthesized as an end in itself in the psychic constitution of the individual can his right acts become "impulsive," spontaneous, and therefore truly virtuous. Pleasure and pain, and apparently also the law of contrasts, continue to motivate, on this lofty moral plane; but their operation takes a different form. The pleasure and pain experienced on this level, he tells us, "*precedes* the moment of action" rather than succeeding it.³⁶ A positive act of virtue is a pleasurable, spontaneous inclination to some-

34. James Mill, "Fragment on Mackintosh," quoted at length by John Mill in an editorial note in the 1869 edition of his father's *Analysis*, II, 320n. He accused Mackintosh of exhibiting "a total incapacity of thinking upon these subjects."

35. *Logic*, 371–72 and 854.

36. "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy," (1833), *C.W.*, x, 12. Unlike the man who avoids committing a crime, as the result of a calculation of the balance of his "interests," the truly virtuous man "recoils from the very thought of committing the act; the idea of placing himself in such a situation is so painful, that he cannot dwell upon it long enough to have even the physical power of perpetrating the crime. His conduct is determined by pain; but by a pain which precedes the act, not

thing perceived as intrinsically good. And the avoidance of vicious acts involves a spontaneous, painful shrinking from what is perceived as bad. This reversal of order allows Mill to retain pleasure and pain-avoidance as the *motivators* of our lofty actions, while displacing them as the *ends* of those actions. Thus, “the pleasure principle” is retained in sublimated form; and the attraction or pull of the lofty objectives is converted into the push of the transformed pleasure principle.

The law of contrasts, or at least those manifestations of it which Mill had thus far perceived, could now also be seen to have a sublime mode of operation. Pain operates within the properly cultivated imagination in such way as to assure a continued inclination to virtue, without the necessity of a periodic falling into actual vice or deprivation in order to re-awaken the capacity to derive pleasure from virtue and affluence. And the reformer can appeal directly to the compounded lofty sentiments rather than to the “enlightened self-interest” of the people.

Mill’s new “chemical” perspective on “the laws of mind” of course vindicated his recent emphasis upon the internal development of the individual, but it also restored confidence in the viability of the program to eliminate all external conditions of want and deprivation. Insofar as the appropriate internal development is successfully attained, the external reforms would be enabled to accomplish their objective, since the unimaginative application of the law of contrasts would be supplanted by its imaginative application. And those external reforms would still be necessary, to free people’s minds from the lower daily cares and thereby facilitate their concentration upon the process of raising their “feelings” to a due responsiveness to the loftier things. But, while external conditions would continue to be an important factor in the formula for human happiness, the task of external social reform would presumably have a termination point dictated by the success of the program of internal reform. A nation of noble and virtuous human beings should have no insurmountable difficulty in gradually working out the optimum social arrangements and periodically making whatever minor adjustments changing circumstances might require. The ostensible irreducibility of the new aspirational compounds seems to hint at their irreversibility or the impossibility of retrogression, and perhaps even the inevitability of continued progress—an assumed ascent from the lower to the higher.

This conception of “mental chemistry” seemingly converts accident into necessity by one which is expected to follow it. Not only *may* this be so, but unless it be so, the man is not really virtuous. The fear of pain *consequent* upon the act, cannot arise, unless there is *deliberation*; and the man as well as ‘the woman who deliberates,’ is in imminent danger of being lost.” This is Mill’s emphasis. This seems to presuppose that each specific and concrete virtuous action or abstention is an end in itself unrelated to any other possible ends; and that is why it is unnecessary to deliberate the relationship between ends and means or between competing ends. But this is possible only within the framework of an extremely rigid and simplistic set of moral rules. This difficulty is obscured by the lack of specificity and concreteness of Mill’s example. Had he identified a specific “crime,” such as murder or theft, it would have been more apparent that some deliberation is necessary in order to distinguish between justified and unjustified killing or taking of others’ property, and to determine and compare the relative benefits and costs of one course of action or another.

cessity, artifice into nature. As the consequence of such “chemical” transformations, the individual apparently acquires a kind of second nature which supplies what original nature failed to provide for man’s happiness. Does it no longer matter, then, whether our “loftier” vibrations correspond to anything in nature in the strict sense, or are merely the products of subsequent accident or artifice? Once they have been “chemically” synthesized, they become a part of our current “nature” and may be as necessary to our well-being as if they had been there from the start. However, before we allow ourselves to be completely swept along by this line of argument, we need to remind ourselves that, unlike the irreducible transformations of the physical analogue, the mental transformations of which Mill speaks are maintained and transmitted only by continued belief, teachers, and cultural traditions, none of which are immutable or infallible. We are apparently not to accept as morally imperative all such compounded aspirational and aversive associations as have accidentally occurred, else there would be no need for Mill’s dedicated band of reformers. But if some such “associations” are to be selected for encouragement and inculcation, while others are to be eliminated, what provides the principle according to which the selections are to be made? What is the basis for the judgements as to what is higher and what is lower, what is noble and what is base, what is virtuous and what is vicious? Mill’s new theory of mental chemistry could account for the emergence of new aspirations and aversions; but it could not account for their moral imperativeness or “progressive” character, if any.

Mill’s explanation of our responsiveness to nature in terms of sympathetic “vibrations,” as well as his account of the “chemistry” of the loftier aspirations and aversions, evince Mill’s continuing penchant for mechanistic solutions to the problem of ethical evaluation and choice. However, even if we assume that the problem can be solved in such a fashion, it is clear that Mill has not yet fully managed it. The new foundations for Mill’s moral system are not yet complete.

He was himself aware of this incompleteness. He tells us, at this point in his account of his transition from the old to the new philosophy, that his “new position in respect to his old political creed, now became perfectly definite.” Since the methodological and psychological foundations of that creed had undergone significant modification, a reassessment of the creed itself was required. Many elements of the old creed were retained; but they were now cast in a new and richer philosophical context in which they were perceived to be altered in their significance, as smaller and more contingent segments of the whole truth about the political things. Some of the other important segments of that whole truth had yet to be discovered, but Mill had no doubt they were there waiting to be discovered.

He was not long in finding at least the rudiments of the missing dimension needed to complete the foundations of his new system. It was distilled from the various elements of continental European thought which were “now streaming in” upon him—from Coleridge, Carlyle, Goethe, the Saint-Simonians, and oth-

ers. What he chiefly imbibed from these sources was the historical perspective on philosophical and political questions, a “philosophy of history.” He now became convinced that “any general theory or philosophy of politics supposes a previous theory of human progress, and that this is the same thing with a philosophy of history” (169). That is to say that it must “suppose” or be based upon a philosophy of history if it is to approximate the truth with any degree of success. This historical perspective is necessitated by the fact that “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.”

Mill refers to this order of possible progress as a “natural order” and acknowledges a special debt to the Saint-Simonians for his conception of some of its essential features (171). Its central focus is on the development of the human mind, which is seen to proceed through alternating “organic” and “critical” periods. The organic periods are characterized by firm convictions and positive “creeds,” which direct people’s actions in ways more or less suitable to their current needs and circumstances, facilitating some degree of progress. But each such creed is eventually “outgrown,” giving rise to a critical period of rejection and negation, such as that of his own period, which began with the Reformation. In the wake of the destruction of the old creed, a new creed eventually arises, generating a new round of further progress. He expected this pattern of intermittent progress to be topped off with a final synthesis which will “unite the best qualities of the critical with the best qualities of the organic periods.” It would be characterized by

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 (173).

In that golden age, the great disparities in understanding and morality which now mark the distinction between the few and the many will be drastically reduced, if not entirely eliminated. And new political, economic and other social arrangements and institutions will reflect those more fundamental changes in the human makeup.

This order of “progress” was not only conceived as desirable; it was also seen to be more or less inevitable in the long run.³⁷ In keeping with his “Humean”

37. The likelihood of any backsliding or retrogression was seen to be remote, as Mill stresses in his later essay on the “Utility of Religion”: “Are not moral truths strong enough in their own evidence at all events to retain the belief of mankind when once they have acquired it? I grant that some of the precepts of Christ as exhibited in the Gospels . . . carry some kinds of moral goodness to a greater height than had ever been attained before . . . But this benefit, whatever it amounts to, has been gained. Mankind have entered into the possession of it. It has become the property of humanity, and cannot now be lost by anything short of a return to primeval barbarism. The ‘new commandment to

modification of the conception of casual “necessity,” Mill’s abbreviated account of the process of psychic development allows for an element of deliberative human effort operating within an overarching framework of compulsive necessity in predetermined directions. The “active capacities” receive their direction from nature through the “passive susceptibilities,” on an ascending scale. Men’s characters, formed through the combined workings of “the laws of human nature” and particular circumstances or environmental influences, dispose them to specific aspirations, aversions, and actions, associated with particular understandings of themselves and of the world in which they live. These acquired dispositions lead them to deliberate efforts to modify their own characters through the modification or reform of their social institutions and practices. The altered circumstances, in conjunction with the unchanging laws of changing (or developing) human nature, gradually reform the characters and prepare the ground for the next developmental step. And so on.

The primary role of political institutions is now seen to be that of a shaper and educator of people, rather than merely the guardian of their “material interests.” And, since the process of human development has a variable timetable from place to place, people to people, the wise reformer decides what is needed in each case, “mainly by the consideration, what great improvement in life and culture stands next in order for the people concerned, as the condition of their further progress, and what institutions are most likely to promote that” (177). What is appropriate to the more advanced people of Europe would not serve as well for the less advanced people in other parts of the world. And, although Mill had now drastically modified the foundations of his political philosophy, his “practical political creed as to the requirements of his own time and country” remained unaltered. “I was as much as ever a radical and democrat for Europe, and especially England.”

Nature, or history, it seen to work its progressive scheme through a small vanguard of more sensitive, responsive individuals, possessed of “poetic” natures. These poets, artists, authors and philosophers possess the natural capacity to transcend the current level of conventional morality by their resonance with nature’s loftier possibilities, with the next higher stage of history. But they can exercise that capacity fruitfully only if they are not unduly constrained, through law or public opinion, by the current religious, ethical and political beliefs. And it

love one another’; the recognition that the greatest are those who serve, not who are served by others; the reverence for the weak and humble, which is the foundation of chivalry, they and not the strong being pointed out as having the first place in God’s regard and the first claim on their fellow men; the lesson of the parable of the Good Samaritan; that of ‘he that is without sin let him throw the first stone’; the precept of doing as we would be done by; and such other noble moralities as are to be found mixed with some poetical exaggerations and some maxims of which it is difficult to ascertain the precise object, in the authentic sayings of Jesus of Nazareth; these are surely in sufficient harmony with the intellect and feelings of every good man or woman to be in no danger of being let go, after having once been acknowledged as the creed of the best and foremost portion of the species.” *C.W.*, X, 416–17.

would appear to follow that these poetic trailblazers cannot be expected or required to prove to the relatively insensitive natures that the new way is the right way—*before* reform. The latter's resonance to the new way must be a product, not a precondition, of reform. The most delicate and difficult problem of political and social reform then, would appear to be the problem of balancing two prime desiderata which are somewhat antagonistic: the broadening, as much as possible, of the base of political participation and the social authority of the many, to provide the widest possible opportunity for the use and thereby the further development of the moral and intellectual capacities of the people; and the preservation of the liberty of the sensitive souls to violate conventional belief and behavior, to enable them to benefit all, by leading the way to a loftier, more civilized existence.

Although this delicate and unstable balance may be very difficult to attain and maintain in the short run, the "theory of progress" gives cause to be optimistic about the prospects for success in the long run. As Mill conceives it, there is apparently a basic harmony between the requirements of human development and the consequences of power politics, since his high hopes were accompanied by a newly acquired conviction that "government is always either in the hands, or passing into the hands, of whatever is the strongest power in society, and that what this power is, does not depend on institutions, but institutions on it" (169). And he appears to have had no doubts that in the long run it is the people as a whole, the many, who will constitute the strongest power in society. There is, then, at least in the long run, a perfect harmony between the needs of philosophy, the needs of society, and what is needed for the perfection of human nature.

It appears, then, that the problem of moral choice or moral principle is solved by nature itself, understood in historical and compulsive terms. The natural order preordains that the moral sentiments will develop in accordance with the necessities and logic of that predetermined order. Nature provides a more or less automatic guarantee that the *long run* outcome of moral debate will be resolved in favor of the higher of the moral conceptions or principles in contention. The moral truth, along with the rest of the truth, must triumph, in the long run, in a free marketplace of ideas. And the unfree marketplaces are destined for the scrap heap of history. Nature, viewed as gradually unfolding over time, is revealed as harmonious and beneficent after all. Or so it would seem. And yet Mill never clearly draws this conclusion. Nature's precise character and role remain shrouded in ambiguity.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Mill's "crisis" was precipitated by a growing awareness of the problem of reconciling his political and moral objectives and activities with his strictly mechanistic conception of nature and the human mind. He apparently believed

that he had successfully solved that problem, through the series of alterations in his philosophy we have observed, and most especially through the modified view of "causality," the new conception of "mental chemistry," and the adoption of a "philosophy of history." But some evident problems remain.

Critical reason demands the justification of the ends which we pursue, insofar as we have a choice. And if Mill's "Humean" treatment of the problem of "necessity" is anything more than a mere semantic screen or epistemological nicety, and if we really do, therefore, possess a significant degree of potential autonomy, in which our intelligence and understanding is capable of freeing us from complete enslavement to internal and external compulsions, then it is to no purpose unless there are discoverable principles to direct our choices, principles capable of satisfying the demands of critical reason. But the rational grounds, or justifying principles, for the moral imperatives which Mill recommends to us remain obscured in his modified but still mechanistic view of the world. His earlier utilitarian pleasure principle obviously does not suffice to justify the higher ends, even if it were capable of imparting moral imperatives to the lower ends. Nor does it appear that his new "philosophy of history," or what he tells us of it here, is capable of supplying such justificatory principles—unless it contains more than merely an account of what has happened and what is perceived as likely to happen. Some years later, in 1851, Mill himself explicitly repudiated the notion, advanced by Comte, that the possession of a "natural history" of society, "as it is, and as it tends to become," obviates the need for "general principles of Teleology" or "an accurate definition or philosophical estimation of Ends."³⁸ He insists that "a writer on Morals and Politics requires those principles at every step"; and he complains that Comte fails to establish such principles but nevertheless

gives decisions freely respecting right and wrong, every one of which necessarily involves some teleological principle; but having assumed no general teleological standard by which to try all subordinate ends, the particular teleological notions to which he appeals in each instance *pro hac vice* are, like those of common men, a mere compound in varying proportions, of the old moral and social traditions, with the suggestions of his own idiosyncracies of feeling.

But it does not appear that Mill's "chemical" account of the compounded aspirational associations is capable of providing those principles either, since that account merely provides a more detailed view of the ostensible process that compellingly produces what is and what tends to be.

That is to say that these accounts of a mechanical process cannot provide the grounds for justification or authoritative direction of human choices, unless the processes and products which they describe are viewed as parts of a purposeful design. But there is no evidence here of any such belief on Mill's part; and his account of his and his father's views on religion, in an earlier chapter (II) of the *Autobiography*, tends to suggest the contrary. But compulsive necessity which

38. In the 1851 edition of his *Logic*, Book VI, ch. XII, C.W., VIII, 950n.

exists only by chance would seem to be incapable of generating moral necessity, even by “chemical” means. In the absence of a showing of adequate rational grounds for his ends, for his judgements concerning what is higher and what is lower, we are left to wonder if they are not as arbitrary, conventional, and idiosyncratic as he found Comte’s to be. We are not sufficiently reassured by his suggestion, a few years later, that the chief role of “ethical writing” is that of strengthening the “feelings” of “those in whom the feelings of virtue are weak”; and that it is “by a sort of sympathetic contagion, or inspiration, that a noble mind assimilates other minds to itself.”³⁹ Unless the demands of critical reason are also satisfied, we are in no position to vouch for the nobleness, not to speak of the wisdom, of the mind to which our “feelings” are being assimilated. Mill’s philosophy of history can provide no assurance that the self-appointed “poets” who are to lead us to the promised land, will necessarily love what is truly good for them and for us, no guarantee that every poet capable of manipulating our emotions is vibrating in unison with nature’s higher and not her lower potentialities.

Mill’s newfound historical perspective itself provides justification for that kind of skepticism on our part, since that perspective tends to the view that all beliefs and aspirations are shaped and therefore limited and distorted by the historical settings in which they are generated. What assurance, then, do we have that Mill’s “feelings” and conceptions of the appropriate human objectives or salutary “associations”—or, indeed, his conceptions of the “associative” process itself and the natural pattern of historical development of human nature—somehow escape these limitations and distortions and truly represent one of the later stages of such development? What are we to make of the fact that Mill drew much of his moral inspiration from the ancient Greek philosophers and especially from the example of Socrates? (49) His “model of ideal excellence” was found in the distant past, and not as something which could emerge only in a near or distant future. It was, in important part, through his reading of Plato and Xenophon that his love of nobility was cultivated, a love which was to lead him to realize, along with Aristotle, that “to aim at utility everywhere is utterly unbecoming to high-minded and liberal spirits.”⁴⁰ But Mill repudiated the teleological conception of nature which provided the ultimate justification for the noble impulse celebrated by those ancient writers; and it is not at all clear that his historical “teleology”⁴¹ is capable of imparting a comparable moral imperativeness to that legacy from our ancient past.

If Mill has sufficient solutions to these problems, he does not present them in his account of his “crisis” and “the only actual revolution which has ever taken

39. “Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy,” 16.

40. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1338^b. Barker’s translation.

41. Some years later, in a footnote in the 1856 edition of his *Logic*, Mill tells us that “The word Teleology is also, but inconveniently and improperly, employed by some writers as a name for the attempt to explain phenomena of the universe from final causes” *C.W.*, VIII, 949n. The inconvenience to Mill is evident enough; but his assessment of the propriety is presumptuous and misleading.

place in my modes of thinking" (199), by which that crisis was resolved. Whether or not he solves these problems elsewhere, in his later writings, is a further question which must be reserved for another occasion.

In the meantime, one must wonder what Mill would make of the current state (and trend) of public taste, moral "resonance" and moral "convictions," after more than one hundred years of reform led by radical liberal "poetry." I do not doubt that he would be greatly disappointed by it. Would he blame the "poets"?—or the public?—or the liberal politicians who have largely followed his teaching?—or nature itself, as he so often did when confronted with unpalatable realities? Would his reflections, upon the rather sorry state of the "imaginative arts" and the internal development of the people, propel him into another "crisis," necessitating a second "revolution" in his thought? Or would he merely keep his gaze stubbornly and hopefully fixed upon a more perfect, because more distant, expected future? If the limited and apparently declining success thus far achieved by radical liberal political, educational and artistic reforms is due to the faultiness, the oversimplifications, of the psychology and cosmology upon which those reforms and their associated expectations are based, then that anticipated golden age will continue to recede into the future, while current problems mount. It is uncertain how far it would have had to recede in order to precipitate another "crisis" in the "mental development" of John Stuart Mill.