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# *Radical Son: The Apprenticeship of John Stuart Mill*

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Few parents raise their children from infancy to assume a specific occupation or role in life. Fewer still raise them to be radical reformers. This, however, is precisely what James Mill did with his first-born child, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). At the time of his son's birth, James Mill was a struggling man of letters who had left his native Scotland for London after stints as a scholar, a preacher, and a tutor. In 1808 he met Jeremy Bentham, the eccentric philosopher and legal reformer, and adopted his doctrines wholesale, while Bentham in turn embraced the radical politics of Mill. The two would join forces in a crusade to transform an aristocratic and semi-feudal England into a modern democracy. Mill, Bentham, and their followers would become known as the "Philosophic Radicals" and were for a time represented by a small, but vocal, contingent of MPs in the House of Commons. Thoroughly convinced of the truth, justice, and practicality of his creed, James Mill nonetheless understood that the battle for reform would require additional talents if the final victory was to be won. His mother had taken great pains to see that he was highly educated, exempting him from all duties save study. The precocious child won a scholarship to the University of Edinburgh where he distinguished

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himself in a number of fields. Bentham was also a prodigy of learning, perhaps the youngest student ever to graduate from Oxford. Given the ideas and ambitions of these two men, it was no surprise that John Mill would be groomed from an early age in the image of his father.

As told in his famous *Autobiography*, Mill began learning Greek at the age of three and arithmetic shortly thereafter. By eight he was reading Greek authors and learning Latin. Over the next four years his studies expanded to encompass the entire circle of the liberal arts: history, mathematics, the classics, logic, political economy, and literature. He took notes, made abstracts, compiled tables, and conversed intelligently with his father. He was a *petit monstre* of learning. As a result of this ambitious “experiment” in home-schooling, John Mill by the age of fourteen possessed “an advantage of a quarter of a century over [his] contemporaries.”<sup>1</sup>

In the *Autobiography*, Mill says almost nothing about his early *political* education, but there can be little doubt that he imbibed the doctrines of Radicalism as readily as his Greek and Latin. The Mill household was the Radicals’ effective headquarters, and young John grew well-acquainted with a number of the group’s leading figures.<sup>2</sup> From David Ricardo, a close friend of his father’s, he learned the principles of classical political economy—principles he largely retained for the rest of his life. Bentham himself took a special interest in the boy, and agreed to continue the “experiment” if his father should not live to oversee its completion. *Pere* Mill survived a serious illness and in 1820 arranged for John to stay a half-year with the family of Bentham’s brother (himself a man of distinction) in Restoration France. In Paris Mill *filis* was intro-

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<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962-1991), vol. 1 (1981), 33. The remaining quotes from the *Autobiography* appear in chapters 2-5.

<sup>2</sup> As a boy Mill was sheltered from other children (besides his many siblings), but grew up in the very heart of London in a highly turbulent era. As Ann Robson relates, James Mill “brought him up in the centre of the riots, assassinations, treasonous plots, and mass meetings that were the political manifestation of the social upheaval of early industrial England. The world around the young boy . . . was violent, brutal, anarchic, filthy, and noisy.” “Introduction,” in *Newspaper Writings*, ed. Ann and John Robson, *Collected Works*, vol. 22 (1986), xx.

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duced to a number of liberals, some of whom were correspondents of English Radicals, including the noted economist Jean-Baptiste Say. Settled in southern France, John would continue his rigorous course of study—logic, zoology, chemistry, higher mathematics, and literature. (Religion and theology, as under his father’s tutelage, were conspicuously absent from the curriculum.) He also kept a journal, mastered French, attended lectures, explored the countryside, and made his first boyhood friend. So pleasant was his stay that he was permitted to extend his sojourn for an additional six months. He returned to England in July, 1821, a confirmed Francophile.

*Religion  
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of study.*

What occurred shortly thereafter would change his life forever and reveal the higher purpose of his hot-house education. Confident that his “experiment” had been a success, James Mill decided the time was nigh to bring young John into the church of Radicalism. First, he arranged for him to study law under John Austin, an eminent jurist and convert to Benthamism. He then gave John a copy of Bentham’s *Traité de législation civile et pénale*, a French redaction of Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy. Young Mill had already absorbed the “greatest happiness principle” at the heart of utilitarianism, for his education had been “in a certain sense, already a course in Benthamism.” He had yet to realize, however, that Bentham had utterly exploded the foundations of all previous systems of morals and legislation and replaced them with a new standard at once universal and revolutionary. For Bentham, hoary phrases such as “law of nature,” “right reason,” and “moral sense”—used for centuries to anchor legal and moral theory—were simply “fictions,” or worse still, “dogmatism in disguise.” With a single sweep of the scythe, Bentham’s *principle of utility*, with its sole concern for the *consequences* of conduct (public and private) on *human happiness*, had (in Mill’s words) rendered all prior moral reasoning obsolete, ushering in a “new era of thought.”

The impact of these revelations on Mill was electric. “I felt taken up to an eminence from which I could survey a vast mental domain, and see stretching out into the distance intellectual results beyond all comprehension.” To this intellectual epiphany was added “the most inspiring prospects of practical improvement in human affairs.” With each leaf of the *Traité* he turned over, Mill gained a “clearer and broader con-

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*Exposure to Bentham's "principle of utility" made Mill "a different being."*

ception of what human opinions and institutions ought to be, how they might be made what they ought to be, and how far removed from it they now are." As he finished the last page of the last volume, he was fully transformed—he "had become a different being." The efficient cause of this transformation was Bentham's "principle of utility," which supplied the unifying "keystone" to Mill's "detached and fragmentary" body of knowledge. The boy who had "never had" religion had undergone a religious experience, and emerged with a faith. "I now had opinions; a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy; in one of the best senses of the word, a religion." And just as epiphany had led to conversion, so conversion led to evangelism. The young disciple now saw that "the inculcation and diffusion" of the Benthamite gospel "could be made the principal outward purpose of my life," and he delighted in the "grand conception . . . of changes to be effected in the condition of mankind." The fifteen-year-old polymath now had a vocation, "an object in life"—he would be "a reformer of the world."

A second event that occurred near this time served to give historical color and context to Mill's new-found creed and career: his intellectual encounter with the French Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Remarkably, his vast (if selective) historical studies, and his stay in France, had left him untouched by the most stupendous event of modern times. He knew of the Revolution *per se*—the overthrow of the monarchy and execution of the King, the Terror and the rise of Bonaparte—but was unaware of its ultimate significance. Upon reading a history of these events, he was amazed to learn that "the principles of democracy" had triumphed in France just three decades ago. This lacuna in the education of a young radical is explained easily enough. While sympathetic to the aspirations of the French people and enemies of aristocracy everywhere, neither Bentham nor James Mill was an enthusiast of the principles or practices of the revolutionary leaders. The men who proclaimed the natural and universal "rights of man" and declared war on the

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<sup>3</sup> For the remainder of the 1820s Mill's enthusiasm for France and the French Revolution was nearly unbounded. He became an authority on French affairs and planned to write a history of the Revolution. His disappointment with the Revolution of 1830 dampened his enthusiasm for the Revolution of 1789 and led him to abandon the projected history. See John Coleman, "J. S. Mill on the French Revolution," *History of Political Thought*, 5 (1983), 89-110.

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crowned heads of Europe—while removing countless others along the way—could hardly have supplied a fitting model for young John. Indeed, it was the excesses of these “ruffians” (as James Mill called them) that had set back the cause of reform in England for a generation.

Bentham and the elder Mill did not sharply distinguish the moderate from the extreme French revolutionists, but John Mill did. In addition to embracing the grand narrative at the heart of the Revolution—the struggle of liberty vs. tyranny—he identified the Gironde party, the relative moderates who attempted to establish a constitutional monarchy, as the heroes of the Grand Drama. He even entertained the prospect of a parallel event occurring in England and could envision nothing more glorious than “figuring, successful or unsuccessful, as a Girondist in an English convention.” Later Mill would not only defend the Girondists, but shower praise on “the purest and most disinterested body of men, considered as a party, who ever figured in history . . . .”<sup>4</sup> Here it is sufficient to note that as an aspiring “democratic champion,” he was willing to sacrifice himself in the crusade for reform: the Girondists were ultimately unsuccessful, and not a few paid for failure with their heads.

This is not to say that Mill was literally willing to give his life for the cause of radical reform. Like his mentors, he abhorred violence and hoped to achieve the goals of Radicalism without the chaos and uncertainties of revolution.<sup>5</sup> The main point of the foregoing is simply to underscore the peculiarity of Mill’s upbringing as a protégé and a “successor worthy” of Bentham and his father,<sup>6</sup> and highlight the *bathos* of a fifteen-year-old boy who guilelessly identified himself as a “reformer

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<sup>4</sup> “Scott’s Life of Napoleon” (1828), *Essays on French History and Historians*, ed. John M. Robson, in *Collected Works*, vol. 20 (1985), 99.

<sup>5</sup> For Mill and the Radicals, such considerations were far from theoretical. The political conversation at the Mill residence “was not the talk of abstract philosophers but of men committed to the society, a society on the brink of revolution or dissolution, of which they felt themselves the proper leaders. The young Mill’s world was exciting; all about him was radicalism verging on revolution, not necessarily violent but violent if necessary.” Ann Robson, “Introduction,” xxii.

<sup>6</sup> James Mill to Bentham (28 July 1812). Quoted in Joseph Hamburger, “Introduction,” *Essays on England, Ireland, and the Empire*, ed. John M. Robson, in *Collected Works*, vol. 6 (1982), viii.

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*Mill groomed as a tool in the service of an ideology.*

of the world." Students of Mill have tended to lay stress on his education (which was certainly peculiar) but have downplayed the more remarkable fact that he was being groomed as a tool in the service of an ideology. This was hardly uncommon in the cause of *religion*, but in *politics* it was something new and startling. True enough, Mill came to maturity in the Age of Reform, a period consumed with human betterment, and cluttered with philanthropists, cranks, and visionaries. Alongside these exotic growths were the practical reformers, both in and out of Parliament, who applied themselves to effect specific and incremental improvements. The Benthamites, including John Mill, had a foot in each camp. Ultimately they hoped to fundamentally transform society but recognized that the millennium could not be ushered in overnight: ignorance, superstition, and "sinister interests" were stubborn facts only to be felled by dogged persistence. Hence the need to recruit the next generation of leaders to the Radical cause. By design of his handlers, John Mill would prove the most distinguished and influential of these.

When Mill returned from France and underwent his conversion to Benthamism, his days as the intellectual leader of the "Philosophic Radicals" (a term he coined) and leading proponent of the Utilitarian philosophy were well in the future. The years 1821 to 1830 were spent in a kind of apprenticeship in the workshop of doctrinaire Radicalism. Over the course of this decade, Mill would form study groups, engage in debate, write for newspapers and periodicals, and correspond with other reformers. He also earned a living, working under his father at the headquarters of the British East India Company in London. Students of Mill, who since the 1950s have produced a mountain of scholarship, have largely ignored the writings of this period. Biographers have duly noted young Mill's activities but have given little consideration to the substance of his thought. Conversely, studies of Mill's thought treat his first efforts as little more than juvenilia—a mere preliminary to the "early Mill" of 1830-1840.

On the surface there appear good reasons for this attitude. First, Mill himself (writing as the famed author of the *Logic*, *Political Economy*, and *On Liberty*) dismissed his earliest writings as lacking "sufficient permanent interest to justify re-

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printing.” Even the best of these, he declared, “should remain buried in . . . oblivion,” and if not for his meticulous records this would likely have been their fate. Second, Mill’s earliest works are highly derivative in their approach and topical in their subjects. Had he written nothing after 1830, he would be remembered (if at all) as a mere mouthpiece of Bentham and a mimic of this father—precocious and clever, but hardly original.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Mill’s earliest works (including journals, correspondence, and debate notes) were not readily available to scholars until the *Collected Works* was completed in 1991. The introductions to the relevant volumes contain a wealth of biographical and textual details but rarely discuss the substance of the writings themselves. This task would be left to subsequent scholars, yet in the half-century since the appearance of the *Collected Works*, there is still no study of Mill’s earliest thought.<sup>8</sup>

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But is there a need for one? After all, Mill consigned these writings to the void, works admittedly second-hand and ephemeral. But why take Mill’s word for it? He also disavowed “The Spirit of the Age” (1831), his first theoretical essay, which has figured notably in Mill scholarship since its ‘discovery’ by F. A. Hayek in 1941. Admittedly, there is little in Mill’s earliest writings quite as striking, but it too is derivative, albeit derived from the Saint-Simonians rather than Bentham. More to the point, the early writings of a thinker as prominent as Mill would seem to merit the attention frequently given to such figures as Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. Indeed, in some respects Mill’s literary output between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four is even more impressive than that of his German counterparts—the volume and range are truly remarkable. The main difference is that Mill’s earliest efforts are almost wholly concerned with *public affairs* as opposed to philosophy, history, or religion *per se*. This in large part accounts for

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<sup>7</sup> Scholars have tended to agree with the judgment of John Roebuck, an early friend, who called young Mill “the mere exponent of other men’s ideas, these men being his father and Bentham.” More specifically, his earliest writings “are made of Bentham’s opinions in James Mill’s tones.” John M. Robson, *The Improvement of Mankind: The Social and Political Thought of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Recent full-length studies by Dale Miller (2010), David Brink (2013), and Frederick Rosen (2013) continue the practice of ignoring Mill’s apprenticeship.

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their ephemeral nature. Yet Mill was never a mere journalist, even when writing for the newspapers. From the beginning he assumed the persona of a principled public intellectual and expressly distinguished himself from the “hacks of the press” who dominated the literary scene.<sup>9</sup> This is evident in the high-tone, polished style, and theoretical quality of these writings. Not unlike Burke, whom he both admired and despised, Mill frequently cast his opinions and policies against the backdrop of general *principles*—a method designed to impose coherence and consistency on an otherwise disparate body of arguments.<sup>10</sup> The more principled the argument, the more permanent; the more permanent, the more persuasive—and Mill was most emphatically in the business of persuasion.<sup>11</sup>

The mature Mill may have consigned his pre-1830s *writings* to “oblivion,” but the *experience* of the 1820s could not be so easily dismissed. Scholars often note the short shrift he gives to the second half of his life in the *Autobiography*, but rarely observe that well over a third of that work is devoted to a single decade—the 1820s. Nowhere else does Mill provide as much detail regarding his activities, associates, and current affairs. Interestingly, this period begins and ends in France. His first trip in 1820-21 marked the beginning of a lifelong *affaire d’amour* with what would become his adopted country—with its history, culture, and especially its politics. Young Mill had very little to say about politics in the journal he kept, but in one instance he did show an interest in French government

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<sup>9</sup> “The Coalition Ministry” (1827), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, ed. John M. Robson, in *Collected Works*, vol. 26 (1988), 406. Mill’s contempt for “hack” writers and the popular press was bottomless. He compared the former to pimps and prostitutes (who are “surely far more respectable”) and described the latter as engaged in an enterprise akin to “gin-making.” To Gustave d’Eichthal (7 Feb. 1829), *The Early Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812-1848*, ed. Francis E. Mineka, in *Collected Works*, vol.12 (1963), 39; “The Present State of Literature” (1827), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 417; “French News” (7 Nov. 1830), *Newspaper Writings*, 180.

<sup>10</sup> This method was consciously adopted by the Benthamites as a distinguishing mark of “philosophic” as opposed to “plebeian” radicalism. Bentham and his followers held popular radicals like William Cobbett and Henry Hunt in contempt, while Cobbett and Hunt returned the compliment.

<sup>11</sup> “Mill’s radicalism, as an extension of the Benthamite position, is readily distinguished from other radical doctrines. Its principled basis allowed him to claim that it was uniquely philosophic . . . .” Joseph Hamburger, “Introduction,” *Essays on England, Ireland, and the Empire*, viii.

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and identified—without comment—a number of issues that would occupy his attention as a reformer: the franchise, liberty of the press, religious tolerance, the law of inheritance, and education.<sup>12</sup> The subsequent claim that the “chief fruit” of his first visit to France was “a strong and permanent interest in continental liberalism” appears exaggerated in light of the journal’s reticence on the subject, yet at least one entry suggests that Mill was a *radical* in politics well before his conversion to Benthamism a year later.<sup>13</sup>

*Mill a radical in politics before his conversion to Benthamism.*

We have received most excellent news of the revolutions in Italy; a constitution is establishing [sic] in the kingdom of Naples, and all Italy, Rome inclusive, is revolutionized—the Pope’s temporal power is done away with: (a most fortunate circumstance;) and all Europe seems to be following the example so successfully set by Spain.<sup>14</sup>

The entry also suggests that Mill was a *revolutionist* before he realized the full import of the French Revolution following his return to England. The discovery that Rome had *not* actually revolted (and Pius VII retained his dominions) must have come as a disappointment, but neither the persistence of papal power in Rome nor the defeat of the *insurrectos* in Naples and Spain would dampen his enthusiasm for democratic revolution. Over the course of a long public career he would grow accustomed to similar setbacks in the inexorable “march of intellect.”

By the time his father placed Bentham’s *Traité* in his hands, John Mill surely knew he was destined to join the battle for reform in England. The Benthamic epiphany which followed—aided by the real-life heroics of the Girondists—confirmed that he would. For the moment he continued his studies apace—law, philosophy, economics—and absorbed additional works of Bentham in his spare time. It was during this period that James Mill placed another book in his son’s hands, another work by Bentham as compiled by the historian (and Radical) George Grote. Published under a protective pseudonym, an *Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind* was the latest in a series of

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<sup>12</sup> 16 June 1820. *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 23–24.

<sup>13</sup> As A. Robson notes, Mill was “a true radical” by the time he arrived in France. “Introduction,” xxiv.

<sup>14</sup> 28 July 1820. *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 58.

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Mill wanted  
to replace  
theological  
morality with  
a purely  
human  
counterpart.

pointed attacks on religion—revealed, natural, or otherwise. Bentham, a confirmed atheist, aimed to extirpate religious beliefs from the minds of mankind, including the Deism of the *philosophes* and their progeny. It would appear that James Mill shared these views, and he elected to share them with his son. John Mill, who claimed never to have held religious beliefs, was nonetheless deeply moved by Bentham's *Analysis*—calling it “one of the books which by the searching character of its analysis produced the greatest effect upon me.” Like his encounter with the principle of utility and his romance with the Girondists, Mill's engagement with Bentham's atheism proved a deep and abiding experience that would inform his labors for the remainder of his life. As Linda C. Raeder has noted:

Bentham's treatise on morals and law affected the young Mill with the force of a religious conversion. The reason for this . . . was not the treatise's promise of “rational objectivity” or even its satisfaction of Mill's “strong relish for . . . classification,” as Mill himself suggests. What seems to have struck Mill with the force of a conversion was the possibility of replacing what he called theological morality with a purely human counterpart . . . radically divorced from traditional theological constraints and radically reoriented toward the intramundane dimension of existence.”<sup>15</sup>

About this same time, shortly after he turned sixteen, Mill began to prepare for his first forays into public life. He wrote practice essays, conversed with his father's friends, and became acquainted with such Cambridge lions as Charles Austin and Thomas Macaulay. He also organized the Utilitarian Society, a small discussion club, where he developed some of his first friendships, and in late 1822 began writing for the newspapers. His club never had more than ten members and his first articles were but a few paragraphs, but it was a start and a stage, and there would be no looking back. He had found his *métier*, and for the next fifty years John Stuart Mill would be a tireless engine of thinking, writing, and persuading. At the time of his death in 1873, he was the most famous philosopher and public intellectual in England and perhaps all of Europe. But for the teenager who dreamed of reforming

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<sup>15</sup> Linda C. Raeder, *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 28.

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the world, fame was but the distant echo of heroic deeds to come.

The next eight years of Mill's life, from 1823 to 1830, may be equally divided by the "mental crisis" he experienced in 1826. Students of Mill have been in the habit of placing great stress on this event in accounts of his life and thought, a habit encouraged by Mill's own dramatic rendering in the *Autobiography*. While there is no reason to doubt Mill's sincerity—so vivid and detailed is the account—his "crisis" not only went unnoticed by those around him, but would have gone unsung by posterity were it not for Mill's memoir—for besides a single oblique reference in his correspondence there is no other record of the event. The crisis went unnoticed because Mill concealed his distress and carried on with his accustomed activities. During the "melancholy winter of 1826-1827," he may have been "mechanically" going through the motions, but he continued to write, publish, debate, and hold down his job at India House.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, his public writings and speeches from this period through 1830 show no sign of a rejection (or significant modification) of Benthamism as a philosophy or of Radicalism as a program. In his final debates (1828-29) he does show an appreciation for Coleridge and Wordsworth, whom he had been reading as part of his recovery from depression, but not at the expense of Bentham. At one point he disavows being "a follower of Mr. Bentham," but only when goaded by an attack on his own independence as a thinker, and concludes with a firm defense of Bentham's ideas.<sup>17</sup> Whatever his internal condition, Mill remained a steadfast warrior in the cause of Radical reform.<sup>18</sup>

Mill's correspondence through 1830 is similarly void of

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<sup>16</sup> John Robson is one of the few to note this anomaly in Mill's crisis. "[I]t is useful to recall from all the evidence, his normal routine was unaffected for some time; when he withdrew from some of his activities two or three years later there were other obviously valid reasons." *Improvement of Mankind*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> "Montesquieu" (1829) in *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 444, 451.

<sup>18</sup> As Richard Reeves observes, Mill "remained a loyal adjutant to his father and Bentham. Intellectually, almost all of the arguments made by Mill in print, or indeed in debate, could be traced back to his father, Bentham or to other members of the radical school." *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), 52.

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any overt apostasy from Benthamism or the Radical creed. Just as his exposure to the “speculative Toryism” of Coleridge and Wordsworth left no outward signs of heresy, his first encounter with the Saint Simonians led to a flat rejection of their ideas, including the notion of a *pouvoir spirituel*. “There is positively no place in England for M. Comte’s system,” he informed a devoted proselytizer.<sup>19</sup> (Auguste Comte was an early disciple of Saint-Simon but broke away over philosophical differences.) Later, when Mill began to warm to the Saint-Simonian philosophy, he made it clear that his debt was only partial and formal, not substantive. The prospect of his “entire conversion,” moreover, was “extremely unlikely,” for “I still retain all my objections to your practical views, to your *organisation*, which appears to me impracticable, & not desirable if practicable.”<sup>20</sup> Mill’s *volte-face* on the desirability of an intellectual elite (the *pouvoir spirituel*) was more apparent than real—he mocked the Comtean idea of an official *cognosenti*. Mill shared the belief in government by elites, but not one drawn from the current establishment or imposed from above. His elite would exercise an “insensible influence of mind over mind” through “private communication, the pulpit, & the press.”<sup>21</sup> He also agreed with the Saint-Simonians that morals and politics could (and should) be placed on a scientific or “positivist” basis, but this too was a belief he already held, an inheritance of Benthamism.

Mill intrigued  
by Saint  
Simonism’s  
philosophy of  
history.

In the end, what Mill found most intriguing in Saint-Simonism was its *philosophy of history*, particularly in its progressive, historicist, and idealist character. It was consistent with his idea of social progress, bestowed purpose on earlier phases of historical development, and gave priority to the influence of mind over the course of humanity. Even here the Saint-Simonians were far from original, but as a theoretical reformer their schema provided Mill with a grandiose conceptual framework that harmonized fetchingly with his regnant Radicalism. The first fruits of this cross-cultural synthesis would appear in “The Spirit of the Age,” the leadoff work of Mill’s ‘early’ period.

Nothing in the *Autobiography* contradicts the written record Mill compiled following the onset of his mental malaise in au-

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<sup>19</sup> To d’Eichthal (9 Oct. 1829) *Earlier Letters*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> 9 Feb. 1830. *Earlier Letters*, 46, 47.

<sup>21</sup> 7 Nov. 1929. *Earlier Letters*, 41.

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tumn 1826. Yet the former's hallowed status as the touchstone of his intellectual development has led scholars to cleave his apprentice years into pre- and post-crisis periods without further ado.<sup>22</sup> The fact that there was no parallel discontinuity in his writings of this period or in his political commitments has hardly been noticed much less presented itself as a puzzle to be solved. On its face it suggests that the mental disruption was not a crisis of philosophic creed (Benthamism) or political identity (Radicalism), but of *vocation* (Reformer).<sup>23</sup> A letter written by Mill in the spring of 1829 to his close friend John Sterling supports this interpretation. In the only extant reference to his acute mental condition outside the *Autobiography*, Mill says nothing of philosophy or politics but poignantly alludes to "the comparative loneliness of my probable future lot"—the lot of a theoretical reformer whose "sympathies with society . . . were never strong" and whose "extremely painful" states-of-mind had verged on "misanthropy."<sup>24</sup> Mill adds that his particular loneliness—"which has accompanied me through the greater part of my life"—was the melancholy condition of the solitary soldier, who being engaged in "an arduous undertaking" has no brother-in-arms to encourage him or that he could encourage in turn. In this rueful disposition, even those who shared "a common object with me" could be little more than "an instrument for the furtherance of my own" purposes. Lacking the preconditions for "perfect

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<sup>22</sup> This is the practice of all his principal biographers. See Packe (1954), Robson (1968), Capaldi (2004), and Reeves (2007).

<sup>23</sup> Reeves attributes Mill's crisis to the recognition of the "hollowness of the philosophical religion to which he had subscribed." *Victorian Firebrand*, 63. Nicholas Capaldi also sees the "intellectual" component of the crisis in terms of "a growing awareness of the inadequacies of philosophic radicalism . . ." *John Stuart Mill: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 55. John Robson assigns Mill's crisis to a young man's impatience with the slow pace of reform and the lack of a signal victory. "He needed some kind of triumph and it was not forthcoming." *Improvement of Mankind*, 22. R. J. Halliday asserts that Mill rejected "the whole ethos of radicalism" but without any "single or dramatic collapse . . ." *John Stuart Mill* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), 14, 15. The following analysis shows why none of these explanations is adequate.

<sup>24</sup> To John Sterling (15 Apr. 1829), *Earlier Letters*, 29. As this letter makes clear, Mill's decision to quit the London Debating Society was not (as Capaldi claims) "a move that reflects his total disenchantment with radicalism," but his disenchantment with society at large—and with himself. *John Stuart Mill*, 75.

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friendship," Mill conveys his intention to "avoid all occasions for debate, since they cannot now strengthen my sympathies with those who agree with me, & are sure to weaken them with those who differ."<sup>25</sup>

*A self-professed  
friend of  
mankind  
who lacked  
sympathies for  
individual  
human beings.*

Mill makes the painful admission that his zeal for the cause of reform led him to look upon even like-minded associates as serviceable tools and to subordinate imperfect friendships to personal ends. The account of this period in the *Autobiography* is largely consistent with these sentiments. "The personal sympathies I wished for," Mill observes, "were those of fellow labourers in this [reform] enterprise . . ." While he undoubtedly received such sympathies from others, he found it difficult to return them. For a time this did not present a dilemma as Mill's *soi-disant* persona found validation in the growing climate of reform. When the mental storm broke, however, Mill's deadening impassivity was both the source of the *crisis* and the cause of his despair of a *cure*. The former was found in the painfully perceived dichotomy at the heart of Mill's psyche—that of a self-professed friend of mankind who lacked any real sympathies for individual human beings. This, at least, seems clear from the letter to Sterling. The *Autobiography* is more opaque on this point and perhaps misleading. There he attributes the onset of despair to a hypothetical question he poses to himself regarding the fulfillment of his dreams as a reformer: If all these dreams were granted, "would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" Mill's answer in the negative signaled the fall of the ax. "At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down."

Like his anguish over the prospect of composers eventually exhausting all melodies, Mill's alarm at the equally unlikely prospect of a perfected society strikes a somewhat hollow note.<sup>26</sup> Was not much of the "certainty of a happy life" he enjoyed prior to his breakdown anchored in the fact that the task

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<sup>25</sup> *Earlier Letters*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Scholars have failed to note that Mill anticipated this very prospect more than a year before his crisis, but without any apparent distress. Writing on the Corn Laws he observes, "[i]f the task of the philosopher and of the philanthropist were at an end, when the great truths which he teaches have been once demonstrated, and their bearings upon the great interests of mankind once pointed out" it would be redundant to bring up "so hackneyed a subject." "The Corn Laws" (1825), *Essays on Economics and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, in *Collected Works*, vol. 4 (1967), 47.

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of the reformer “could never be exhausted by complete attainment”? Why then would the contemplation of an unrealizable ideal have sent Mill into a death spiral? It was not so much this thought, but Mill’s *answer* that drove him to despair. His “No” to the ideal society was a “No” to the happiness of humanity! When placed in the balance against the requirements of his ego—his own happiness—Mill was forced to admit that mankind was the loser. The recognition of his “bad faith”—his lack of sympathy for his fellow man and the vanity of his pretensions on behalf of humanity—proved too much for the twenty-year-old prodigy. Even the images of nobility and greatness that had nourished and sustained him had lost all their charm—“my love of mankind . . . had worn itself out.”

Mill does not directly blame his mental crisis on the upbringing he received at the hands of his father or presume that it was as “peculiar” as it appeared at the time. He does, however, identify “the idiosyncrasies of my education” as lending a “special character” to his condition which gave it a far more terrifying aspect—that it was *irreversible*. Mill had not merely been severely educated by his father, he had been thoroughly *programmed*, and he knew it. Taught from infancy to be a “reasoning machine” and trained to habitually associate pleasure with happiness, and happiness with the good of “mankind on a large scale,” he despaired of ever breaking the cognitive chains forged by his indoctrination.

Mill’s description of his psychologically debilitating education and his struggle to overcome its effects is among the most moving vignettes in philosophical literature. It has earned Mill much sympathy among readers and his father not a little censure. As a victim of James Mill’s pet theories of education, one might expect that John would question, if not jettison, a fair amount of the Utilitarian philosophy on which it was based. This, however, he refused to do: “I never, indeed, wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life.”

He did come to question the overall adequacy of Benthamism as a comprehensive philosophy, but for the time found its alleged defects more “in applying the theory to practice, than as defects in the theory” itself. Conversely his subsequent exploration of non-utilitarian thinkers (*viz.*,

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Coleridge, Carlyle, Comte) never led him to reject Bentham's eighteenth-century mode of thought: "I never joined in the reaction against it . . ." Even Macaulay's scathing critique of his father's "Essay on Government"—a breviary of Radical political ideas—could not shake Mill in his Benthamic conviction that politics—like morals—could be reduced to a science. While he could no longer accept the precise theoretical basis of his father's politics, he did not adopt any other<sup>27</sup> but retreated into a speculative concern with the "principles from which the institutions suitable to any given circumstances might be deduced." More importantly, Mill remained a Reformer and a Radical. Even in his darkest hour, "the destiny of mankind was ever in my thoughts, and could not be separated from my own." Similarly, no amount of philosophical displacement could "alter my political creed as to the requirements of my own time and country. I was as much as ever a Radical and a Democrat for Europe, and especially for England."

*Mill's mental crisis had little effect on his future thought and activities.*

Mill's adherence to the principle of Utility, the politics of Radicalism, and the program of Reform *in spite* of his mental crisis contains an irony all but lost on his expositors. With their concern for the dynamics of his intellectual development (and their susceptibility to Mill's *post hoc* construction), few have underscored the relative *insignificance* of his crisis for his thought and activities during the remainder of the decade and beyond. As noted above, the *Autobiography*—read in the light of the writings of the late 1820s—makes this very point if only in an elliptical way. Alternatively, the excessive focus on the crisis has led scholars to overlook significant developments which occurred *before* its onset. As early as 1824 Mill ceased calling himself a Utilitarian, or claiming formal association with any sectarian group. Admittedly, this was largely a matter of out-

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<sup>27</sup> Hamburger claims that Mill's "heresy" as an orthodox Benthamite had been primed by his flirtation with Saint-Simonism and ignited by Macaulay's critique. Mill certainly recognized the limitations of his father's political reasoning as exposed by Macaulay, but the assertion that he "found a substitute in the St. Simonian writings, particularly in [their] elitism," is somewhat misleading. *Intellectuals in Politics: John Stuart Mill and the Philosophical Radicals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 78-79, 81. As noted above, Mill was already an elitist and viewed the physical sciences as the model for moral and political science before his encounter with Saint-Simonism.

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ward form, for he persisted in a “real inward sectarianism” for much longer. Whether he ever shed it entirely—as he claimed—remains a matter of dispute.

More significantly, Mill credits his year-long editing of Bentham’s *Rationale of Judicial Evidence* for a marked improvement in his “powers of composition.” In conjunction with his “assiduous reading of other authors . . . my writing lost the jejuneness of my early compositions; the bones and cartilages began to clothe themselves with flesh, and the style became, at times, lively and almost light.” With no little pride, Mill relates that his improvements in style were crowned with the gift of original thought, as first displayed in the new Radical organ *Parliamentary History and Review*.

These writings were no longer mere reproductions and applications of the doctrines I had been taught: they were original thinking, as far as that name can be applied to old ideas in new forms and connexions; and I do not exceed the truth in saying that there was a maturity, and a well-digested character about them, which there had not been in any of my previous performances.

Although at least one scholar has questioned Mill’s claim to originality—“all his moves were straight from the Bentham-Mill rulebook”<sup>28</sup>—the mature Mill believed his 1825 articles marked a break-through as a thinker and writer. Yet a further stage of development followed the formation of a reading group that digested weighty tomes on political economy, logic, and philosophy of mind. “I have always dated from these conversations,” Mill reflected, “my own real inauguration as an original and independent thinker.” During this same period, his practice of writing debate notes proved a boon to his ability to express himself—“I greatly increased my power of effective writing.” Although this second phase of development occurred *after* the crisis, its description in the *Autobiography* is wholly unrelated to that event. By his own account, Mill’s development as an original thinker and an effective writer had little to do with his mental ordeal of 1826-27.

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<sup>28</sup> Reeves, *Victorian Firebrand*, 52. “Mill was overstating his claim to early independence. Although elegantly turned, these articles are in fact as doctrinaire as most of his other material from this period.”

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Conversely, Mill's creative development did little to cure his susceptibility to recurrent bouts of depression and misanthropy. In early 1830 the suicide of Eyton Tooke, a friend and disciple, sent Mill into a state of mind disturbingly reminiscent of his earlier mental crisis. Once more life seemed meaningless and mankind a bore. Why? Because Mill had lost a choice fellow-traveler, a kindred spirit to whom he could look for "sympathy and approbation" in the pursuit of the "great objects" they shared.<sup>29</sup> In the *Autobiography*, Mill identified John Sterling as his closest and most intimate friend, but in the throes of his grief for Tooke, it seemed as if he had "never cared for any one but him . . . ." And were it not for "two or three living" like Tooke, "who had sufficient native energy and firmness to pursue cheerfully the good of posterity," he would utterly despair and "no longer value existence."<sup>30</sup>

*Root cause of Mill's crisis a stunted view of the meaning of life.*

Mill's most recent biographer attributes the onset of his mental crisis of 1826 to a sudden recognition of "the hollowness of the philosophical religion to which he had subscribed."<sup>31</sup> This was no more the case in 1826 than in 1830. The root cause of both periods of crisis was an extraordinarily narrow and stunted view of the purposes and meaning of life. Cut off from any spiritual sources of solace or understanding (whether religious or poetic) he was incapable of finding meaning in anything but the "cause of humanity," or of placing value on anyone but its "few, very few" champions. This left Mill little room for maneuver in a fallen world and poorly equipped to cope with the many disappointments of life. What Eyton Tooke said of the Saint-Simonians may just as aptly be applied to his high-minded and fastidious friend: "You always start from the happiness of the whole human race, from the future progress of the whole human race, as if you were concerned only with the human race as a collective being, and lost sight of the individuals who compose it."<sup>32</sup>

As a would-be reformer, Mill was by no means unaware of his exposed position as a self-appointed spokesman on behalf of mankind, particularly among a public that frequently

<sup>29</sup> To d'Eichthal (9 Feb. 1830), *Earlier Letters*, 44.

<sup>30</sup> *Earlier Letters*, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Reeves, *Victorian Firebrand*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1954), 95.

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scoffed at such earnest endeavors. He often complained of the “laughter and derision” that greeted expressions of solicitude for the betterment of humanity, and condemned the “indifference, [and] moral insensibility” of the English people as worse than their bigotry.<sup>33</sup> The Radicals as a group received their share of ridicule from their Whig, Tory, and Populist opponents and were further handicapped by a general English distrust of wholesale political theories such as Benthamism. In view of the latter, Mill advised the Saint-Simonian point-man in England to “carefully conceal” the systematic features of his philosophy if he hoped to make any progress among the people.<sup>34</sup> What troubled Mill to the point of disgust, however, were not political attacks—which he was in the habit of making himself—or general skepticism towards new ideas, but rather “the repulsive tone of heartless levity, and recklessness about good and evil” that pervaded English society.<sup>35</sup> Mill acknowledged that this same society was improving and was on the whole better off than it had ever been before. But this was a relative standard—injustice and corruption, cynicism and brutality were still common and pervasive—and the obstacles to further improvement were entrenched and formidable.

Mill showed frequent frustration with the pace of reform (and a notable disdain for its “enemies”), but he never betrayed any doubts about the wisdom or virtue of the crusade itself. What he did occasionally express was a self-consciousness regarding his own place in the grand struggle. A sensitivity to the point of defensiveness appears in Mill’s attempts to justify his role as a propagandist and sanctify the cause of reform. In the *Westminster Review*, the Radical organ founded by Bentham in 1824, he identified himself as one “who writes for the benefit of the species,” while in the *Morning Chronicle* he assured readers that “it is possible for a periodical writer to pursue steadily the greatest good of the greatest number.”<sup>36</sup> It

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<sup>33</sup> “The Church” (1828), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 424; To d’Eichthal (15 May 1829), *Earlier Letters*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> To d’Eichthal (9 Feb. 1830), *Earlier Letters*, 48.

<sup>35</sup> “Modern French Historical Works” (1826), *Essays on French History and Historians*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> As Stefan Collini shrewdly observes, “it may have become important to Mill to exaggerate the extent to which he was a lonely crusader, lacking the supporting army (a few white knights aside), sustained only by the

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was in debate, however (where Mill came under direct attack from skilled adversaries), that he vigorously defended the high calling of the reformer.

A political reformer should be a man who can resist temptation—who can command his passions—who looks to distant and durable enjoyments rather than to those which are immediate and transitory and who can toil half his life thankless and unrewarded, undervalued and perhaps abhorred by the majority of mankind with nothing to support him but the cheering consciousness that his labours and his sacrifices will one day be appreciated.<sup>37</sup>

*Mill viewed himself as a solitary knight tilting on behalf of posterity.*

These remarks (delivered in 1825) reveal that Mill's portrait of himself in the correspondence of 1829/30 as a solitary knight tilting on behalf of posterity was no post-crisis construction. Well before his twentieth year he had adopted the heroic-cum-tragic persona of the unsung champion of humanity, that rare exemplar of vision and virtue, whose only living reward is the thought of posthumous fame.<sup>38</sup> What apparently bolstered Mill in this chivalric pose was the conviction that his (Radical) beliefs would in time be vindicated—an honor that would be denied his (Tory) opponents in debate. These may gain the cheap applause of their contemporaries, but the true reformer could look to a reward of a far more exalted kind.

The reward I look to, and it is no small one, is of another kind—a kind which the honourable opener [of the debate] and his fellow labourers in the same vineyard will never know: it is the consciousness that these opinions are daily gaining ground; and that the time is approaching, though we who are living may not see it, when every intelligent and disinterested Englishman shall be a radical reformer.<sup>39</sup>

Had Mill possessed the emotional capacities of a normal

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righteousness of the cause and the kinship of a scattering of rare spirits in other countries. Certainly, it is an identity which a self-described 'radical' thinker is always likely to find comforting, since it simultaneously flatters the intellect, provides a sense of purpose, and explains away failure." *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 129.

<sup>37</sup> "Brodie's History of the British Empire" (1824), *Essays on England, Ireland, and the Empire*, 4; "Effects of Periodical Literature" (27 Dec. 1824), *Newspaper Writings*, 101.

<sup>38</sup> "Catiline's Conspiracy" (1826), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 345.

<sup>39</sup> "The British Constitution" [1] (1826), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 369.

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twenty-year-old, he may have maintained this heroic posture without interruption. But there was nothing normal in the emotional life of John Stuart Mill. Infected with what Poe called “the mad pride of intellectuality,” he was driven to construct a grand narrative in which he played the part of a political St. George, slaying the dragons of privilege, corruption, and ignorance and reaping the benediction of a grateful posterity. In his *Autobiography*, Mill confessed that such a vision buoyed his every effort and served as a kind of *substitute* happiness prior to his mental crisis. He also revealed, if only indirectly, that happiness was virtually impossible for a man whose life was animated by dreams of “the indefinite improbability of human affairs . . . .” Like many intellectuals, Mill experienced “[t]he dissatisfaction with life and the world, felt more or less in the present state of society and intellect by every discerning and conscientious mind . . . .” His “recovery” neither cured the underlying condition of his malady nor led him to abandon his resplendent dreams. Just as the sudden loss of a fellow-traveler (Tooke) could trigger feelings of despair and futility, news of a revolution in France (1830) could inspire the grandest hopes and dreams—only to be shattered by a feckless humanity.<sup>40</sup> (As an elitist *and* a democrat, Mill was particularly prone to this type of disappointment.)

Upon his return from Paris in the autumn of 1830, Mill wrote on French affairs for the newspapers and in early 1831 published a series of articles that betrayed his engagement with the Saint-Simonian philosophy and appeared to indicate a break with Benthamism. He also fell in love with Harriet Taylor, who would supply Mill’s want of an intellectual and emotional soul-mate until her death in 1858. Students of Mill have tended to bracket the next decade (1830-1840) as a distinctive (“conservative” or “romantic”) phase in his intellectual development. These matters are beyond the present scope. The purpose here has been to clarify a number of puzzling features surrounding the apprentice years of one of history’s greatest prodigies. A principal finding is that an excessive

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<sup>40</sup> For Mill’s reaction to the Revolution of 1830 see Iris W. Mueller, *John Stuart Mill and French Thought* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 17-47.

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focus on Mill's "mental crisis" has led scholars to exaggerate (or misconstrue) its impact on his thought and activities, and more generally to neglect his writings of the 1820s. The latter is particularly unfortunate, for a review of Mill's earliest efforts reveal a thinker far more interesting and independent than the "parrot" one typically encounters in the literature.

*Mill called for the "questioning of all established opinions," particularly religious opinions, for the "good of mankind."*

Mill did endorse the principal practical reforms advanced by Bentham and his father: frequent elections, reapportionment, equal electoral districts, an expanded franchise, free public education, freedom of the press, freedom of conscience, and free trade. Yet in spite of his heavy dependence on doctrinaire Benthamism, young Mill frequently struck out on his own, often in a more radical vein than was easily reconciled with Bentham's claim that "radicalism [was] not dangerous."<sup>41</sup> For example, in defending the interest of the working class—"the majority of the whole population"—he claims he would rather "suffer every other person in the community to starve, rather than that they [the workers] should be inadequately provided with the necessaries of life."<sup>42</sup> He also endorsed the equal or near-equal distribution of wealth as that "which tends to the general happiness," and which "the legislator ought to favor."<sup>43</sup> Just how this might be achieved "in every way not inconsistent with that security of property" he does not say. Elsewhere Mill flirts with revolution, even violent revolution, for "the idea of a bloodless Revolution is, when rightly considered, visionary and absurd. All great reforms must injure many private interests, and cannot, therefore, fail to raise many enemies." While no advocate of mindless violence, he declares it "not mercy but weakness" to spare the enemies of the people.<sup>44</sup> He also calls for the "questioning of all established opinions," particularly religious opinions, in the interest of "[t]he good of mankind," and even anticipates "the downfall of the [established] church in my time."<sup>45</sup> Mill's dogmatism is evident in his contempt for the "stupidity and vulgar prejudice" of those who do not

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<sup>41</sup> *Radicalism Not Dangerous* was a tract published by Bentham in 1819.

<sup>42</sup> "Cooperation: Intended Speech" (1825), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 312.

<sup>43</sup> "Primogeniture" (1826), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 336, 337.

<sup>44</sup> *Newspaper Writings*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> "The Universities [1]" (1826), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 350; *Early Letters*, 28.

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share his principles, while his elitism appears in the contrast he draws between the “quack politician” and the “scientific statesmen,” which reads like a passage from Plato’s *Republic*.<sup>46</sup> Finally, there is Mill’s utopianism, his belief in the perfectibility of man and the indefinite progress of society. According to Mill, “the wisest men of all political and religious opinions . . . have been something nearly to approaching perfectibilians.” Far from being visionary, such men understood that “an extremely high degree of moral and intellectual excellence may be made to prevail among mankind at large.”<sup>47</sup>

Mill was aware that such radical views would meet with hostility and even outrage among traditionalists and moderates alike. Before he withdrew from public disputation in 1829, he seemed to welcome the scorn that often greeted his more extreme statements. In one such outburst, he invited his opponents to think the worst of him: “I am content however that they should call me a radical, revolutionist, anarchist, jacobin, if they please. I can be content to be treated as any enemy to establishments, to institutions, and to order.”<sup>48</sup> While clearly engaging in hyperbole, young Mill was sufficiently radical to warrant such epithets in the minds of non-radicals, whether Whigs or Tories. On the other hand, he was neither an “anarchist” nor a “jacobin,” or even a “revolutionist” as these words are commonly understood. Moreover, his more extreme and petulant moments must be balanced against the body of his writings, which are full of strong opinions, but rarely violent or threatening. Still, Mill was a confirmed radical who dedicated his life to the “regeneration of mankind.” His commitment to this effort—primarily through a large body of writings composed over the course of half a century—constitutes the thread that weaved his life into one coherent cloth—his zeal for reform and the cause of humanity. Whatever his intellectual wanderings and excrescences over a long career, the attendant diversity was in the end purely *intellectual*.<sup>49</sup> At its heart,

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<sup>46</sup> *Newspaper Writings*, 183; “Paper Currency and Commercial Distress” (1826), *Essays on Economics and Society*, 111-115.

<sup>47</sup> “Perfectibility” (1828), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 429-430.

<sup>48</sup> “Parliamentary Reform [1]” (1824), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 262.

<sup>49</sup> As Bruce L. Kinzer notes. “[i]ntellectual authority mattered to Mill principally because of the moral and political ends it could be made to serve.” *J. S. Mill Revisited: Biographical and Political Explorations* (New York: Palgrave,

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his vision of reform—which never lost its radical edge—was independent of any orthodox philosophy or iron-clad theological commitments. As he correctly prophesied at the age of nineteen, the passion for human improvement he had imbibed as a child would only surcease in the silence of the tomb.

So long as there is a glimmering hope remaining, there is no exertion, no sacrifice which I would not spare rather than renounce those cheering anticipations of the indefinite improvement of mankind which I have cherished from my cradle, and which it is probable I should carry to my grave.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> “Cooperation: Closing Speech” (1825), *Journals and Debating Speeches*, 324.