MILL, SPENCER
AND VICTORIAN LIBERALISM

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This thesis is an analysis of On Liberty (1859) by John Stuart Mill and The Man versus the State (1884) by Herbert Spencer. On the whole, historians and philosophers have assumed that these two works were expositions of Victorian "liberal individualism" and that they should be understood as attempts to prescribe "liberty" and "individuality" as the highest social values. The object of this thesis is to argue that Mill and Spencer were not concerned with liberty and individuality in the sense that most scholars have commonly assumed.

The thesis is an attempt to argue a revised and, hopefully, more historically accurate interpretation of Victorian liberalism. The works of Mill and Spencer have been subject to certain kinds of distortion originating in contemporary political preoccupations and needs. Reappraisal of their works is justified in that the predominant modern view of Mill and Spencer should be understood primarily as a response to the needs of contemporary liberalism rather than as an attempt to provide a historically satisfactory analysis of their works.

The first two chapters are expositions of the texts, On
Liberty and The Man versus the State. I argue that the manner in which Mill and Spencer treated the subject of individual liberty is perfectly consistent with the thoroughly determinist accounts of politics and sociology to be found in their other works. What they were really concerned about in these works was the establishment of "scientific" political conduct based on "scientific" knowledge of "laws" of social development. Given this essentially determinist outlook, On Liberty and The Man versus the State cannot be regarded as simple and unambiguous pleas for liberty and individuality as such, but rather as means of leading individuals to a proper recognition of the "laws" of social development.

The final chapter places the writings of Mill and Spencer within the more general context of Victorian political thought. I argue that the relationships between Mill and Spencer and their intellectual contemporaries and peers were too complex and involved too many common assumptions to warrant the view that their political thought may be easily and sharply contrasted with that of thinkers such as Carlyle and Newman who are generally considered to have been illiberal. They were not precursors of twentieth century libertarianism and they were not free from the dogmatic modes of thought of their time.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approval</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I On Liberty</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II The Man versus the State</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III Mill, Spencer and the Victorian</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV Conclusion</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

On one occasion John Stuart Mill described Herbert Spencer as "a considerable thinker though anything but a safe one---& is on the whole an ally."¹ Spencer had similar misgivings about Mill.² Yet, in a number of important ways Mill and Spencer were "allies". They were among the most successful proselytizers of the results of nineteenth century science in that they both developed thoroughly naturalistic accounts of human conduct. They were also liberals and regarded themselves as apostles of human liberty. When he received a copy of On Liberty Spencer wrote to Mill: "I rejoice that it the subject of liberty has been taken up by one whose name will beget for it respectful considerations."³ However he felt that Mill's treatment of the subject was not sufficiently radical and he added: "You do not carry the assertion of private against public claims as far as I do."⁴ Mill had a similarly high opinion of some of Spencer's political views. "There are none


²Among other things Spencer felt that Mill's knowledge of science was inadequate. Herbert Spencer, An Autobiography, 2 Vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), 2:90.


⁴Ibid.
of your writings" he wrote "which I admire more than your 'Over-Legislation'."\(^1\) In 'Over-Legislation' Spencer had proscribed all forms of state interference and in that respect the essay foreshadowed his definitive treatment of the subject of 'liberty' in *The Man versus the State* (1884). Generally speaking, then, Mill and Spencer were both exponents of an ostensibly scientific view of the world and self-proclaimed liberals.

The term "liberal", however, is problematical. It is used in a variety of ways and not all of these necessarily correspond to what Mill and Spencer meant by it. This is especially true of some of the more obvious current uses of the term, which, taken together, express a political temperament far removed from the spirit that animated Mill and Spencer.\(^2\)

We commonly use the word liberal to describe a particular kind of intellectual disposition. We talk of "liberal-mindedness" or "a liberal cast of mind". In effect we use such terms as the antonyms of words like "dogmatic" and "dogmatist". Liberal-mindedness implies an unusual degree of sensitivity and receptivity to different, if not opposing, intellectual positions.

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\(^2\)I do not intend to discuss some of the more controversial uses of the term liberal. Thus I will not discuss the different, and often inconsistent, ways in which writers use the term economic liberalism. Rather, I will merely attempt—at the risk of somewhat oversimplifying the issues—to suggest some of the general intellectual and political characteristics connoted by the word liberal. My reason for doing this is that I think that some of these more obvious and non-historical uses of the term have unfortunately insinuated themselves into various interpretations of Mill's and Spencer's liberalism.
We also use the word liberalism to describe what appears to be a kind of "middle ground" in politics. When we speak of a liberal in this sense we mean someone who eschews the alleged extremes of "left" and "right". On this view the liberal is not wedded to any particular political dogma or creed. This might be described as political liberal-mindedness.

The idea of liberal-mindedness has often been justified on the grounds that no political, intellectual or moral creed can possibly constitute the whole truth on any subject and that consequently there cannot be any warrant for attempting to enforce any exclusive creed or dogma. The corollary of this is the view that individuals must be left free to form their own opinions and, within certain limits, engage in various activities of their own choosing.\(^1\) Thus we also use the word liberal to describe those who allegedly place a premium on such qualities as "freedom" and "individuality"—for this is, in effect, moral and intellectual liberal-mindedness.

Lastly, we may use the word liberal to describe the attempts of certain political thinkers to confute what they regard as determinist political philosophies. On this view determinism is seen as a kind of intellectual totalitarianism which it behoves the liberal-minded thinker to contest. Furthermore, a determinist view of human nature may appear to exclude the possibility of pursuing liberty and individuality. Thus, for instance, Karl Popper has urged that the work of a

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\(^1\) Many writers have felt that this is precisely what Mill asserted in *On Liberty*. I will be arguing that this is not quite the case.
number of philosophers, including Hegel and Marx, should be understood as comprehensive determinist systems (which he refers to as "historicism"); and that, such systems are at variance with the interests of liberal democracy, or, to use Popper's phrase, "open-societies".\(^1\) Bertrand Russell and Isaiah Berlin have proposed similar arguments.\(^2\) In short, opposition to philosophies that are alleged to be determinist may be described as a kind of philosophical liberal-mindedness.

There has been a marked tendency among historians and philosophers—and, possibly, more especially among those writing in the modern "liberal" tradition—to analyse *On Liberty* and *The Man versus the State* in such a way as to make it appear that the style and content of these works somehow corresponds to the various uses of the word liberal I have just outlined. Although no one has ventured to suggest that Spencer was liberal-minded, Mill has often been described in this manner.\(^3\) Some writers have also claimed that Mill eschewed determinism (though, again, no such claims have been made on Spencer's


\(^3\)Currin V. Shields has written: "Mill's biographers agree that he was unusually receptive to the influence of other minds. This a curious and inquiring intellect is perhaps prone to be." *Introduction to On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), p.ix.
behalf). ¹ Most importantly, however, almost all writers have urged that Mill and Spencer were primarily concerned with asserting the freedom of the individual from both governmental and social interference. Thus *On Liberty* has been described as "the classic statement for individual liberty";² and, on another occasion, as a plea for liberty as a "quality of life ...a good in itself."³ Likewise it has been suggested that in *The Man versus the State* Spencer expressed a belief "in the value of individuality and dissent as a good in itself";⁴ and also, that he was concerned with individualizing the individual."⁵ Perhaps--and it is not my purpose to pursue or substantiate this point in any detail--these, and similar interpretations, should be understood primarily as attempts to create a respectable intellectual genealogy for contemporary liberalism.

¹Isaiah Berlin claimed that; "Mill...observes that the human (that is the social) sciences are too confused and uncertain to be properly called sciences at all--there are in them no valid generalizations, no laws, and therefore no predictions or rules of action that can properly be deduced from them." *Four Essays On Liberty*, p.188.


My purpose, rather, is to argue that Mill's and Spencer's thought was more obviously determinist and dogmatic than these writers have been willing to allow; and that, furthermore, On Liberty and The Man versus the State are less concerned with liberty and individuality than may at first sight appear to be the case. In doing so I am not attempting to disparage Mill and Spencer. I simply wish to show that their "liberalism" was, in many respects, significantly different from some of the various political, intellectual and moral positions that go by that name in the middle of the twentieth century.

The arguments proposed in the following chapters may be briefly outlined as follows:

First: Although the rhetoric of individual liberty undoubtedly figures prominently in On Liberty and The Man versus the State, these works do not, by themselves, adequately express their authors' intentions. In both works many assumptions are left unexplained and these cannot be properly elucidated without reference to other works by Mill and Spencer. In these other works they were primarily concerned with arguing that human nature and society could be explained scientifically--and, the paradigm of scientific explanation with which they were conversant was strictly determinist. It rested on the assumption that all phenomena were governed by laws of nature. That is not to say that the presuppositions of nineteenth century science were necessarily that monolithic or clear cut; or,
that developments in science necessarily warranted the kinds of conclusions drawn by Mill and Spencer. The point is, rather, that they interpreted the results of science in a particularly determinist manner and consequently they developed a view of the world which excluded the possibility of free will. It even excluded the possibility of merely contingent actions. In other words they were not concerned with freedom and individuality in the sense that these words are commonly understood. What I wish to suggest is not so much that Spencer's and Mill's use of the word "liberty" was incorrect or inconsistent, but rather, that they used it in a negative and restricted sense which was—at least within the context of their own way of thinking—compatible with a determinist vision of human nature. Chapters one and two are devoted to a discussion of this problem.

Secondly: Any claim about Mill's and Spencer's political thought is conditional in that its validity is contingent upon, among other things, the manner in which the works of other Victorian thinkers are viewed. In this sense their political thought must be understood within the more general context of Victorian liberalism. Chapter three is devoted to this problem. I will argue that on certain key issues the differences among Victorian intellectuals were too complex to warrant the view that there was a clear cut distinction between "liberal" thinkers such as Mill and Spencer and "illiberal" thinkers such as James Stephen, Maine, Carlyle and Newman.
CHAPTER I

ON LIBERTY

Mill wrote On Liberty between 1855 and 1859. Ever since its publication the work has been the subject of numerous different interpretations. In part this has been the result of certain alleged ambiguities attending the main thesis of On Liberty. Mill asserted that human conduct should be divided into self-regarding and other-regarding activities and that government and society could not legitimately interfere with the former. Some writers have found this distinction between two different realms of conduct either ambiguous or unclear. Differences of opinion have also arisen over the question of the relationship between On Liberty and Mill's other works. This question is especially problematical because in many of his other writings, Mill developed ideas that were not compatible with his ostensible prescription of freedom and individuality in On Liberty.

In a series of essays entitled "The Spirit of the Age" (1830-31) Mill strongly condemned individual "private judgment" and he insisted upon the need for moral and intellectual deference to an elite of instructed persons. Similar arguments were proposed in "Civilization" (1836) and "Coleridge" (1840). Furthermore in A System of Logic (1843) he rejected the notion
of free will and argued that both mind and society were governed by universal laws of nature. Generally speaking these writings expressed a view of politics and society that is hardly consistent with the idea of pursuing individuality and freedom.

Some writers have felt that Mill's political position may have changed over the years.¹

On the face of it the suggestion seems plausible enough—On Liberty was published over fifteen years after these earlier works. The problem is, however, Mill kept on insisting upon his earlier ideas in a number of his mature works. In 1862 he added a chapter to Book VI of the Logic in which he further

¹Some of Mill's contemporaries felt that he had changed in this respect. Thus, for instance, James Stephen, who admired the Logic and Political Economy, was of the opinion that the thesis of On Liberty was not consistent with the ideas expressed in Mill's earlier works. He wrote: "I am falling foul of John Mill in his modern - or, rather, I should say, in his sentimental mood - which always makes me feel that he is a deserter of the proper principles of rigidity and ferocity in which he was brought up [that is to say the principles of James Mill and Jeremy Bentham]." Leslie Stephen, The Life of James Fitzjames Stephen (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1895; reprint ed., Farnborough, Eng.: Gregg International Publishers, 1971), p.308.

Recent writers have seen similar changes in Mill's thought. Gertrude Himmelfarb has claimed that On Liberty was written when Mill had fallen completely under the sway of the "dogmatic and mediocre mind" of Harriet Taylor; and that, as a consequence of this, the ideas in On Liberty were antagonistic "in substance and in spirit, to the early essays of Mill." Gertrude Himmelfarb, Introduction to Essays on Politics and Culture by J.S. Mill (New York: Doubleday, 1963), pp.xix, xx. In a somewhat different vein Richard Ansutz has argued that there was a fundamental tension between Mill's adherence to philosophical naturalism and his belief in an autonomous individuality. According to Ansutz, one of the results of this unresolved tension is that On Liberty is "a very muddled book." The Philosophy of J.S. Mill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p.59.
elucidated his determinist conception of social development. As the chapter deals with Buckle's *History of Civilization* the ideas contained in it must have been developed between 1857 and 1862 (that is to say, during the period in which *On Liberty* was published). He also carefully revised the *Logic* in 1846, 1851, 1856, 1862, 1868, and 1872 and there is no evidence that in any of his revisions he attempted to modify his determinist account of psychology, sociology and politics. If anything he was mainly concerned with refining and extending it. Furthermore, in his two major works on democracy, *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform* (1859) and *Representative Government* (1861) he clearly prescribed deference to an intellectual elite. All in all, then, there does not appear to have been any substantial change in Mill's way of thinking about politics and society—although there were undoubtedly a number of minor changes.

I will presently argue that *On Liberty* does not represent any new or radical departure in Mill's thought and that consequently it is perfectly compatible with his other works. In other words I will argue that in *On Liberty* he was not primarily concerned with "freedom" and "individuality". However, I do not mean to suggest that Mill did not really intend to set specific and assignable limits to the coercive powers of society and government. He undoubtedly intended that these limits should "govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual"; and this, among other things, is what separated Mill from other political thinkers such as Fitzjames Stephen and
Carlyle. The purpose of this chapter, then, is not to belittle Mill's assertion of these limits. It is rather, to argue that this, as it were, negative conception of liberty and individuality, was compatible with other ideas and assumptions that were neither "liberal" nor "individualistic" -- namely his determinist and elitist accounts of politics and society.

I

In the introduction to On Liberty Mill wrote:

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used by physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. ¹

In other words, the use of moral or legal coercion is justifiable only if an individual's action produces some obvious social harm. Only the individual's "other-regarding" actions may be regarded as the object of legitimate interference. On the other hand, all those actions that cannot be defined as "other-regarding" fall beyond the scope of legitimate social interference or compulsion:

... there is a sphere of action in which society, as

are distinguished from the individual, has, if any, only an indirect interest; comprehending all that portion of a person's life and conduct which affects only himself, or if it also affects others, only with their free, voluntary and undeceived consent and participation... This... is the appropriate region of human liberty. 1

In short, society is not justified in interfering with the individual's "self-regarding" activities.

At first sight nothing could appear more simply "liberal" and "individualistic" than the distinction between "self-regarding" and "other-regarding" activities. However the principle, thus stated, does not express the whole range of Mill's intentions. The principle is attended by a number of conditions and qualifications, and its precise significance cannot be properly grasped independently of these. When they are taken into account it appears that Mill intended rather more in proposing a distinction between self and other-regarding activities than simply providing a libertarian "rule of thumb" for judging conduct.

Mill did not consider liberty as an "a priori" or "transcendental" right. Throughout his life he was opposed to "a priori" and "transcendental" systems of metaphysics and ethics. 2 Thus at the beginning of On Liberty he wrote: "It is proper to state that I forego any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right as a thing independent of utility. I regard utility as the ultimate

1 Ibid., p.225.
2 See below pp.20-23.
appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being."¹ A connection between liberty and utility is assumed, or implied, in other passages in On Liberty. For example in Chapter IV he wrote that "the strongest of all arguments against the interference of the public with purely personal conduct is that, when it does interfere, the odds are that it interferes wrongly and in the wrong place".² In other words, inappropriate interference will cause unnecessary damage to society (or, at least, certain parts of it). Social utility will be harmed. Without stressing the connection between liberty and utility too strongly, it seems to be assumed in Mill's arguments that the moral validity of the principles of liberty cannot be considered prior to, or independently of, utility. That is not to say that Mill was asserting that the sole object of liberty was to promote utility. Liberty could be pursued for reasons that might not be immediately or directly subsumable under the notion of utility. However, unless utility "in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" was among the objects promoted, either directly or indirectly, liberty could not be considered to have any moral justification. In short, the promotion of utility was an indispensable (although not necessarily sufficient) condition for the assertion of the

²Ibid., p.283.
principles of liberty.¹

The connection between liberty and utility underlies Mill's qualification of the scope of the principle of liberty (a qualification that arises precisely because he did not regard liberty as an a priori or transcendental "right"). He argued that under certain historical and political conditions the principle of liberty would hinder, rather than promote, utility. For instance, liberty should not be asserted in "those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in nonage".² In such states the "difficulties in the way of spontaneous progress are so great that there is seldom any choice of means for overcoming them; and a ruler full of the spirit of improvement is warranted in the use of any expedients that will attain an end perhaps otherwise unattainable".³ In other words "improvement" or "progress" (that is to say utility "grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being") take precedence over "liberty"

¹Alan Ryan has suggested that in On Liberty Mill was concerned with "what lies beyond rationality, in the sphere of imagination, self-culture, (and) personal aesthetics". Alan Ryan, John Stuart Mill (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p.233. Ryan's argument rests on the assertion that Mill was concerned with those actions that lie beyond the sphere of morality and therefore cannot, properly speaking, be considered either moral or immoral. Mill undoubtedly does make this distinction. However, Mill justifies the distinction on moral (utilitarian) grounds and in that sense the realm of liberty is not autonomous in the way that Ryan seems to suggest.


³Ibid.
in that, on occasions, it is perfectly legitimate to secure these ends through coercion. Thus Mill argued that: "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement and the means justified by actually effecting that end... [in such societies there is nothing for men] but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one."\(^1\)

Under other conditions, however, the assertion of liberty is perfectly compatible with (if not, conducive to) the improvement of mankind. Thus the principles of liberty are to be asserted "as soon as mankind have attained the capacity of being guided to their own improvement by conviction or persuasion".\(^2\)

As far as Mill was concerned this stage had been "reached in all nations with whom we need here concern ourselves"\(^3\) - by which he presumably meant nineteenth century western civilization.

Whatever else Mill may have meant by liberty, it is clear that he did not mean something that could be entirely divorced from utility and improvement.\(^4\) If he had meant something else

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\(^1\) Ibid.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Gertrude Himmelfarb has argued that in On Liberty Mill was advocating "the absolute value of absolute freedom of discussion" and that he was "committed to individuality as a good in itself, indeed the highest good" on the grounds that Mill's qualifications of the doctrine of liberty were "too minimal" to carry any other interpretation. Gertrude Himmelfarb, On Liberty and Liberalism (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1974), pp.55, 71, 21. In one sense Mill's qualifications of liberty are
it is hard to see why he should have asserted that coercion was also a perfectly admissable way of securing progress.

In this sense, Mill's principle of liberty was closely connected (at least in his own mind) with his notion of utility "grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being."

The idea of liberty of thought was similarly connected with the idea of progress in that Mill argued that the assertion of liberty of thought would facilitate the emergence of "truth". He summarized his reasons for recommending liberty of thought in the following manner:

First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility.

Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in a manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a more formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction from reason or personal experience. 1

"minimal". However, the qualifications are based on his conceptions of "utility" and "progress" - and as utility and progress play such an important part in Mill's philosophy his qualifications of liberty on these grounds cannot be dismissed that easily.

In other words, freedom of discussion is an essential condition of truth. Without freedom of discussion certain truths might be suppressed. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that truths are held with conviction, and that can only happen if they are continually contested. However, Mill was not recommending an open ended and perpetual dialogue between truth and falsehood:

But what! (it may be asked), is the absence of unanimity an indispensible condition of true knowledge?... I affirm no such thing. As mankind improve, the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase; and the well being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being un-contested [and Mill adds that when this point has been reached, certain artificial means of contesting the truths will have to be employed so that the truths may be held with conviction].

Liberty of opinion, then, will not hinder the emergence of unquestionable "truths". On the contrary, as liberty of opinion is an essential condition of the very existence of truth, so, the assertion of liberty will, if anything, facilitate the emergence of unquestionable truths. Furthermore, the emergence of unquestionable truths will not restrict the scope of liberty as it will be necessary to sustain the conviction with which such truths are held through a process of continual argumentation.

Generally speaking, then, Mill was arguing that the very existence of truth was dependent upon liberty of thought.

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Ibid., p.250.
Furthermore, he considered that truth and utility were inseparable. In this sense the gradual emergence of truth that would attend liberty of thought may be regarded as another facet of the utility of liberty. In short, the idea of liberty appears to have been intimately connected, at least in Mill's mind, with "utility", "truth" and "progress". This is not to say that Mill regarded liberty simply as a means, or instrument, designed to secure these other ends. There is no explicit suggestion in Mill's argument that "utility", "truth" and "progress" should take priority over "liberty" - neither, however, does he suggest that the reverse should be the case. All that can be said, therefore, at this point, is that these various ideas appear to have been inextricably compounded in Mill's mind. Whatever else Mill may have intended by his advocacy of liberty it is clear that he did not mean that liberty should be considered a "good in itself"; that is to say, an end independent of all other moral, social and political considerations. Consequently, there appears

1 Ibid., p.233.

2 Owen Chadwick has claimed that Mill regarded liberty as "a quality of life; not an instrument, but a good in itself, a quality of man and of society which enabled moral personality, moral development, self-realization." (The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century, p.29). This claim makes it seem as though Mill was an exponent of transcendental ethics. However, apart from this implicit distortion of Mill's intentions, Chadwick's assertion appears to rest on a distinction between means and ends that is not entirely appropriate. Mill may indeed have been of the opinion that liberty should not be regarded as an instrument. However, that does not mean that he necessarily regarded it as a "good in itself" - that is to say, an end independent of all other possible ends.
to be a clear warrant for treating On Liberty within the context of Mill's other political writings.

II

Mill was the exponent of a particularly thorough kind of empiricism (which he referred to as the Philosophy of Experience) and his conceptions of utility and progress rested on this empiricism. For a number of reasons his politics and his version of empiricism are inseparable. To begin with Mill was not a sceptic. Unlike Hume he believed that inductions could lead to complete certainty. He argued, in effect, that the existence of "laws of nature", which could themselves be discovered inductively, provided the ultimate warrant for this certainty. One of the main objects of this argument was to show that the phenomena of mind and society were also governed by laws, and in this sense Mill was a determinist. Furthermore he felt that the conflict between empiricism and a priori metaphysics was a political issue of great importance for he repeatedly claimed that a priorism was nothing more than a philosophical justification of political and moral obscurantism. In general, then, some of the more general premises of Mill's political thought are to be found in his account of empiricism.

One of the central arguments of the Logic is that all real inferences are, in the last resort, inductions. Whatever
is not an induction is simply a species of verbal transformation which cannot, strictly speaking, be considered as knowledge.\(^1\) This is the basis of Mill's distinction between "verbal propositions" and "real propositions". A verbal proposition is one "which asserts of a thing under a particular name, only what is asserted of it in the fact of calling it by that name".\(^2\) A real proposition, by contrast, predicates "of a thing some fact not involved in the signification of the name by which the proposition speaks of it".\(^3\) Mill adds that the distinction between real and verbal propositions corresponds to the Kantian distinction between synthetic and analytic judgments.\(^4\) The function and logical value of the syllogism is analogous to that of verbal propositions in that, "no reasoning from generals to particulars can, as such, prove anything: since from a general principle we cannot infer any particulars, but those which the Principle itself assumes as known".\(^5\) The syllogism cannot add to our knowledge; it can only, under certain circumstances, refine it. The premises of a syllogism, however, are inductions and thus, whatever truth is contained in the conclusion of the syllogism is contingent upon the validity of those inductions.

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\(^2\) Ibid., 1:115.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid., footnote, p.116.

\(^5\) Ibid., p.184.
Mill also attempted to show that mathematics and geometry rest on inductions and it is especially in this respect that his empiricism was particularly thorough and radical. He argued that the definitions and axioms of geometry are exceptional in that they are, strictly speaking, fictitious. Nevertheless he considered that these "fictions" are among "our first and most obvious generalizations concerning natural objects." Likewise, numbers are merely descriptions of things; "All numbers must be numbers of something: there are no such things as numbers in the abstract. Ten must mean ten bodies... or ten beatings of the pulse." The only peculiarity of the language of mathematics is its universality. As all things may be equally described in terms of numbers, so there is no need to keep in mind a particular group of things when engaging in a mathematical calculation. In other words the real inductive character of mathematics is merely disguised by the "extreme generality of the language." Mill concluded that as there is evidence in experience for both mathematics and, the definitions and axioms of geometry, so there is no need to construct, or invent, an additional source of testimony independent of experience. Thus, in general he argued that

1 Philosophers, including Frege and Ayer, have generally found this one of the least satisfactory parts of Mill's argument.


3 Ibid., p. 225.

4 Ibid., p. 254.

5 Ibid.
all valid reasoning (and that includes syllogistic logic, mathematics and geometry) either rests on inductions, or is itself inductive, and that consequently there are no processes of reasoning independent of experience.¹

As all knowledge is inductive, it follows that there is no real distinction between an inductive science and a deductive science. Those branches of knowledge that appear to exhibit an exclusively deductive character are themselves based on inductions. However, not all inductions are the same. If the inductions of a science are of a sufficiently comprehensive character then individual propositions of the science may be deduced from them. In such cases there is no longer any need for each individual proposition of the science to rest on its own special induction. A science which exhibits this character has become a deductive science. On the other hand, if this level of generalization has not been attained, then all the individual propositions of the science must rest on special individual inductions. A science which exhibits this character is an empirical science. In this way Mill

¹Mill was asserting the following with respect to the possibility of a priori knowledge.
First: Analytic judgments (which Mill calls verbal propositions) do not constitute knowledge in the sense that they cannot add to existing knowledge. Therefore analytic judgments cannot be used to support the claim that there can be a priori knowledge.
Second: If the definitions and some of the axioms of geometry are to be considered as generalizations from experience then geometry is a posteriori knowledge. The same holds true of mathematics. In other words a priori synthetic judgments are impossible.
Therefore, there can be neither analytic nor synthetic a priori knowledge.
formulated an important distinction between empirical sciences and deductive sciences (although both ultimately rest on inductions). An empirical science, however, may assume a deductive character, and it is this process of transformation that has characterized the progress of the natural sciences:

From being sciences of pure experiment, as the phrase is, or, to speak more correctly, sciences in which the reasonings mostly consist of no more than one step, and are expressed by single syllogisms, all these sciences have become to some extent, and some of them in nearly whole of their extent, sciences of pure reasoning; whereby multitudes of truths, already known by induction from as many different sets of experiments, have come to be exhibited as deductions or corollaries from inductive propositions of a simpler and more universal character. ¹

Mill's distinction between empirical science and deductive science is further clarified by his conception of laws of nature. He argues that every induction is based on the assumption that "the course of nature is uniform" in that an induction "consists of inferring from some individual instances in which a phenomenon is observed to occur, that it occurs in all instances of a certain class."² This assumption is itself a product of experience. Moreover, the general uniformity of nature is the result of the laws of nature. These laws may be regarded as "separate threads of connexion between parts of the great whole which we term nature...[and from which] a great tissue of connexion unavoidably weaves itself, by

¹Mill, A System of Logic, 1:218.
²Ibid., p.306.
which the whole is held together.¹ A law of nature is thus the highest level of generalization attainable by an induction. Once a science is in possession of the laws of nature governing the particular phenomena with which it is conversant, then all further phenomena of the same description may be deduced from those laws of nature. In other words the discovery of laws of nature enables a science to assume a deductive character. An empirical science, by contrast, is one which is conversant with certain partial regularities which cannot be subsumed under a law of nature.² Only when the laws of nature have been ascertained can the propositions of a science be regarded as deductive and necessary truths.

Mill's rejection of the possibility of a priori (or transcendental) knowledge, and his distinction between empirical and deductive sciences, form the basis of his analysis of the logic of the moral sciences. His object in Book VI of the Logic is to rescue the moral sciences from mere empiricism:

...if what has been pronounced "the proper study of mankind" is not destined to remain the only subject which Philosophy cannot succeed in rescuing from Empiricism; the same process through which the laws of many simpler phenomena have by general acknowledgement been placed beyond dispute, must be consciously and deliberately applied to those more difficult inquiries [the moral sciences].³

¹Ibid., p.315.
²Ibid., p.516.
³Mill, A System of Logic, 2:834.
In other words the purpose of the enquiry is to show the manner in which the universal laws of human conduct may be ascertained so that individual social phenomena may be exhibited as deductive and necessary truths.\(^1\) Mill hoped to do for the moral sciences what Bacon had done for the physical sciences.\(^2\)

Following Comte, Mill asserted that the Science of Society deals with two kinds of social uniformities: the uniformities of co-existence, of Social Statics (that is to say, 

\(^1\)It appears that Mill's distinction between empirical science and deductive science was itself the result of certain reflections on the nature of politics. In his autobiography he claimed that his ideas on the subject were sparked off by a dispute between his father and Macaulay over the nature of politics. He wrote: "At this juncture appeared in the Edinburgh Review, Macaulay's famous attack on my father's Essay on Government. This gave me much to think about. I saw that Macaulay's conception of the logic of politics was erroneous; that he stood up for the empirical mode of treating political phenomena, against the philosophical; that even in physical science his notion of philosophizing might have recognized Kepler, but would have excluded Newton and Laplace. But I could not help feeling...there was truth in several of his strictures of my father's treatment of the subject; that my father's premises were really too narrow, and included but a small number of the general truths, on which, in politics, the important consequences depend... I now saw that a science is either deductive or experimental [empirical], according as, in the province it deals with, the effects of causes when conjoined, are or are not the sums of the effects which the same causes produce when separate. It followed that politics must be a deductive science. It thus appeared, that both Macaulay and my father were wrong; that one in assimilating the method of philosophizing in politics to the purely experimental method of chemistry; while the other, though right in adopting a deductive method, had made a wrong selection of one, having taken as the type of deduction, not the appropriate process, that of the deductive branches of natural philosophy, but the inappropriate one of pure geometry, which not being a science of causation at all, does not require or admit of any summing up of effects." J.S. Mill, Autobiography (London: Longmans, 1875), pp.157-61.

\(^2\)Mill, A System of Logic, 2:835.
the connections subsisting between the various phenomena within a given society); and, the uniformities of succession, or Social Dynamics (that is to say, the manner in which one kind of society succeeds another). The uniformities of co-existence are the product of social dynamics as "the uniformities of co-existence obtaining among phenomena which are the laws of causation by which these phenomena are really determined." It follows that the "mutual correlation between the different elements of each state of society, is therefore a derivative law, resulting from the laws which regulate the succession between one state of society and another." In other words the fundamental problem of the social sciences is to discover the laws of social dynamics.

These laws of succession are to be found in history, in that history affords evidence of the laws of progress. However, the law of progress found in history "can only be an empirical law". It can never "amount to a law of nature" because the "succession of states of the human mind and of human society cannot have an independent law of its own; it must depend on the psychological and ethological laws which govern the action of circumstances on men and of men on circumstances". Thus Mill argued that:

1Ibid., p.912.
2Ibid.
3Ibid., p.914.
4Ibid.
The laws of mind... compose the universal or abstract portion of the philosophy of human nature; and all the truths of common experience, constituting a practical knowledge of mankind, must, to the extent to which they are truths, be results or consequences of these.  

The laws of psychology are the ultimate laws of nature upon which the empirical regularities found in history are, ultimately, dependent. Whatever is deduced from the laws of psychology must, therefore, be correlated with the empirical laws of history.

In psychology he was an exponent of the theory of association. He asserted that ideas "are associations naturally and even necessarily generated by the order of our sensations and of our reminiscences of sensation"\(^2\), and that these associations followed fixed laws. He was a psychological determinist and although he couched his exposition of the doctrine of necessity in somewhat ambivalent language his private feelings on the matter were clear enough.\(^3\) On one occasion he wrote to his wife: "I had a visit lately from a rather elderly American, a retired judge of the Supreme Court, Carleton by name... [who] seemed chiefly interested in the doctrine of liberty and necessity, thinking I had conceded too much to the free will side, and I had to explain to him though I object to the word nec-

\(^1\)Ibid., p.861.


\(^3\)He discussed the doctrine of necessity in *A System of Logic*, Book VI, Ch. 2.
essity I am entirely with the doctrine meant by it".¹

To sum up: Mill was an avowed determinist. He was not arguing that social phenomena were susceptible of piecemeal empirical investigation. Rather, he was asserting that all social phenomena were subject to invariable laws and that the object of the social sciences was to discover these laws. One of the main purposes of his logic and epistemology was to support this claim.

III

Mill considered that the conflict between a priori philosophies and the philosophy of experience was fraught with political significance. "The notion that truths external to the mind" he wrote "may be known by intuition or consciousness, independently of observation and experience, is, I am persuaded, in these times, the great intellectual support of false doctrines and bad institutions."² A priorism was "the greatest speculative hinderance to the regeneration so urgently required, of man and society".³

In purely abstract terms the chief strength of a priori metaphysics lay "in the appeal which it is accustomed to make to the evidence of mathematics, geometry, and cognate branches

of the physical science".\(^1\) One of the objects of his attack on the notion that mathematics, geometry, and natural science rest on truths known a priori was "to drive...[a priori metaphysics] from its stronghold;"\(^2\) and in this sense even the more academic portions of the *Logic* served a political purpose. In ethics the conflict between the philosophy of experience and a priorism was nothing less than a conflict between progress and reaction: "The contest between the morality which appeals to an external standard, and that which grounds itself on internal conviction, is the contest of progressive morality against stationary."\(^3\)

Mill argued that a priori ethical theories, by appealing to some standard that was not susceptible of empirical verification, were, in reality, attempts to persuade men to suspend the use of their critical faculties. The object of thus persuading men to suspend the use of their reason was simply to ensure that the authority of some dominant interest in society should be acquiesced in unthinkingly. A priorism in ethics supported the "doctrine that the existing order of things is the natural order, and that, being natural all innovation upon it is criminal."\(^4\) This amounted to nothing


\(^2\) Ibid.


\(^4\) Ibid., p.179.
more than the "deification of mere opinion and habit."¹

However, the attempt to validate custom and prejudice in this manner was often self defeating, as a priorism also led to moral confusion. These moral rules "claiming independent authority [intuition]" could not admit of any "common umpire entitled to interfere between them" and, as a result, such rules "afford a free scope for the action of personal desires and partialities".² Consequently men's opinions "on what is laudable or blamable are affected by all the multifarious causes which influence their wishes in regard to the conduct of others... Sometimes their reason; at other times their prejudices or superstitions; often their social affections, not seldom their antisocial ones, their envy or jealousy, their arrogance or contemptuousness".³ The appeal to intuition led to moral confusion in that the intuitive voice of mankind "so often appealed to is universal only in its discordance".⁴

Mill also regarded a priorism as the chief philosophical support of religion. "The whole of the prevalent metaphysics of the present century" he complained "is one tissue of suborned evidence in favour of religion."⁵ Philosophy was harmed

¹Ibid.


³Mill, On Liberty, p.221.

⁴"Whewell", p.194.

by this collusion and the religious convictions, thus supported, often left much to be desired. "In this age..." he wrote "real belief in any religious doctrine is feeble and precarious." Much of what passed for religious belief was, in effect, nothing more than mere prejudice:

What is boasted of at the present time as the revival of religion is always, in narrow and uncultivated minds, at least as much the revival of bigotry.  

Furthermore, he felt that some of the effects of this collusion between philosophy and religion were morally dangerous. The doctrine, propounded by some a priori metaphysicians, that the moral attributes of the deity lie beyond the realm of human understanding and that therefore they need not conform to the rules of human morality was;

...the most morally pernicious now current; and...the question it involves is beyond all others which now engage speculative minds, the decisive one between moral good and evil for the Christian world.

In short, a priorism resulted in blind acquiescence to authority, moral confusion, and, in some cases, immoral doctrines. The reason that this way of thinking exhibited so many diverse,

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1 Mill, Autobiography, p.70.
3 Hamilton, p.90. The doctrine Mill was attacking was that expounded by Mansel in The Limits of Religious Thought. Mansel was an idealist and disciple of Sir William Hamilton. Mill's hostility towards idealism, or a priorism was often virulent and dogmatic. On one occasion he referred to "Mansel's detestable, to me absolutely loathsome book". (Mill to Bain, 7 January 1863, Later Letters, Vol. 2, p.817).
and not entirely compatible tendencies, was that it belonged to a stage of man's development that was in the process of being superceded. In Comtean language these tendencies belonged to the metaphysical stage of man's progress.

In this context the philosophy of experience represented progress. In ethics this involved the ascendency of utilitarianism - that is to say a system in which the validity of the rules of moral conduct could be ascertained by referring to experience - and in politics it meant the adoption of scientific methods. The main advantage of utilitarianism lay in its appeal to a verifiable external standard: "Though the application of the standard may be difficult, it is better than none at all: while in other systems, the moral laws all claiming independent authority [intuition being among these independent authorities], there is no common umpire entitled to interfere between them."¹ Utilitarianism thus obviated the moral confusion attending a priorism. This secular morality also avoided some of the more flagrant immoralities of certain religious beliefs (such as the belief in a deity that need not conform to the ordinary rules of human conduct). The only advantage of religion and intuitionism lay in their monopoly of the means whereby moral standards are enforced - namely public opinion and education.² Mill, however, felt that these means could easily be appropriated by utilitarianism: "There is evidently no reason why all these motives for observance

¹Utilitarianism, p.226.
should not attach themselves to the utilitarian morality as completely and as powerfully as to any other." He suggested that if utilitarianism "be taught as a religion, and the whole force of education, of institutions, and of opinion, directed, as it once was in the case of religion, to make every person grow up from infancy surrounded on all sides by the profession and the practice of it, I think that no one who can realize this conception will feel any misgiving about [its] ... sufficiency".\(^2\) In this way Mill hoped to see utilitarianism established as a new secular moral consensus; and insofar as the rules of utilitarianism could be considered susceptible of verification, this involved the adoption of inductive methods in ethics.\(^3\)

He also hoped to see similar progress in politics. The aim of politics, he wrote:

"...is to surround any given society with the greatest possible number of circumstances of which the tendencies are beneficial, and to remove or counteract, as far as practicable, those of which the tendencies are injurious."\(^4\)

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\(^1\)Utilitarianism, p.228.

\(^2\)Ibid., p.232.

\(^3\)In Chapter 4 of Utilitarianism, Mill argued that the principle of utility was not itself susceptible of proof. "To be incapable of proof by reasoning" he wrote "is common to all first principles". Nevertheless, the principle, if accepted (and Mill claimed reasons could be given for accepting it) constituted an objective standard according to which particular moral rules could be judged.

\(^4\)Mill, A System of Logic, 2:978.
This involved, among other things, a knowledge of the science of society. Consequently only experts should frame laws.

"There is hardly any kind of intellectual work" he wrote "which so much needs to be done, not only by experienced and exercised minds, but by minds trained to the task through long and laborious study, as the business of making laws."\(^1\)

Mill thus conceived of progress as the application of scientific inductive methods to both politics and ethics. He felt that this positivist revolution would augur the final stage of man's progress. In his autobiography he wrote:

I looked forward through the present age of loud disputes but generally weak convictions to a future...[in which there would be] 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.\(^2\)

This presumably, was the goal of Mill's determinist vision of politics.

IV

Mill, however, was not a crude determinist and the idea of individual human agency placed an important (if not entirely

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\(^2\)Mill, Autobiography, p.166.
consistent) part in his political thinking. Before examining this aspect of Mill's thought in greater detail, his arguments on the subject may be briefly summarized as follows:

First: As the truths of ethics and politics cannot be known intuitively (or a priori), it follows that they cannot be the common property of all mankind. Only the more highly instructed members of society are conversant with these truths. Consequently, on such matters, the uninstructed mass of mankind should defer to the superior judgment of the instructed.

Secondly: The rate of progress of mankind is contingent upon the amount of influence exercised by the instructed. It follows that anything that might tend to limit or trammel the authority of the instructed would also retard human progress.

To return to the first point: The main thesis of the Logic is that the proper method of ascertaining any truth is the scientific process of induction. The corollary of this thesis is that no truths can be known intuitively. It follows that those who are not sufficiently instructed (in the sense that they are not conversant with the methods of induction) are not in a position to ascertain truths:

The observation of nature, by uncultivated intellects, is purely passive: they accept the facts which present themselves, without taking the trouble of searching for more: it is a superior mind only which asks itself what facts are needed to enable it to come to a safe conclusion, and then looks out for these. ¹

¹Mill, A System of Logic, 1:312.
In other words the discovery of truth is the exclusive prerogative of superior minds. One of the most serious handicaps affecting the uninstructed is their inability to overcome habitual psychological associations. Thus the inability to perceive new truths "is most of all conspicuous in uneducated persons, who are in general utterly unable to separate any two ideas which have once become firmly associated in their minds".\(^1\) Cultivated persons are at an advantage in this respect "because, having seen and heard more, and being more accustomed to exercise their imagination, they have experienced their sensations and thoughts in more varied combinations, and have been prevented from forming any of these inseparable associations".\(^2\)

At first sight it might seem that Mill was arguing that the separation between the instructed and the uninstructed was simply a matter of education; and that therefore it was a problem that could be remedied by extending educational facilities. However, although Mill undoubtedly felt that education was very important, he does not appear to have believed that education alone could bridge the gap between the uninstructed and superior minds. On the whole he seems to have believed that, during any given period, the average person could never rise beyond a certain level of intellectual

\(^1\)Ibid., p.238.
\(^2\)Ibid.


development. "It would be a great error" he wrote, "and one very likely to be committed, to assert the speculation, intellectual activity, the pursuit of truth, is among the more powerful propensities of human nature, or holds a predominating place in the lives of any, save decidedly exceptional individuals." ¹ On another occasion he wrote:

I do not believe that...[the mass of mankind] will ever have sufficient opportunities of study and experience to become themselves familiarly conversant with all the enquiries which lead to the truths by which it is good that they should regulate their conduct, and receive into their own minds the whole of the evidence from which those truths have been collected, and which is necessary for their establishment... As long as the day consists but of twenty-four hours, and the age of man extends but to threescore and ten, so long... the great majority of mankind will need the far greater part of their time and exertions for procuring their daily bread. ²

It thus appears that Mill felt that those who are engaged in the ordinary business of life, are ipso facto, disqualified from ascertaining the great truths of ethics and politics.

Only the instructed are in a position to ascertain such truths:

Those persons whom the circumstances of society, and their own position in it, permit to dedicate themselves, to the investigation and study of physical, moral, and social truths, as their peculiar calling, can alone be expected to make the evidences of such truths a subject of profound meditation, and to make themselves thorough masters of the philosophical grounds of those opinions.

¹Ibid., p.926.
of which it is desirable that all should be firmly persuaded, but which they alone can entirely and philosophically know.  

As a result of this difference between the instructed and the uninstructed it followed that the instructed should acquiesce in the opinions of the instructed. "The remainder of mankind" he wrote "must...take the far greater part of their opinions on all extensive subjects upon the authority of those who have studied them." Under natural social conditions "the opinions and feelings of the people are, with their voluntary acquiescence, formed for them, by the most cultivated minds which the intelligence and morality of the times call into existence."

This insistence upon the need for deference to the instructed is undoubtedly most explicit in Mill's early writings. Nevertheless the idea formed, as it were, a permanent deposit in his thinking and in that way it become the foundation of many of his arguments on ethics and politics in his mature works. In Utilitarianism he argued that only instructed persons could decide what constituted genuine pleasure. In his two works on democracy, Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform and Representative Government he advocated political deference to the educated sections of the community.

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1Ibid., p.12
3Ibid., p.36.
4See below pp.95-98
To return to the second point: Mill argued that social progress was almost exclusively dependent upon intellectual progress:

Now, the evidence of history and that of human nature combine, by a striking instance of concilience, to show that there really is one social element which is thus predominant, and almost paramount, among the agents of the social progression. This is, the state of the speculative faculties of mankind; including the nature of the beliefs which by any means they have arrived at, concerning themselves and the world by which they are surrounded. ¹

This progress depends partly on invariable psychological laws as "the human mind has a certain order of possible progress in which some things must precede others". ² However, the rate at which this progress occurs depends upon the role played by the instructed. While the "order of human progress...may to a certain extent have definite laws assigned to it...its celerity...[is determined by] eminent men". ³

The importance of the instructed in determining the rate of progress was asserted more explicitly in "The Spirit of the Age".

...besides getting rid of error, we are also continually enlarging the stock of positive truth. In physical science and art, this is too manifest to be called in question; and in the moral and social sciences, I believe it to be as undeniably true. The wisest men in every age gen-

¹ Mill, A System of Logic; 2:929.
³ Mill, A System of Logic, 2:938.
erally surpass in wisdom the wisest of any preceding age, because the wisest men possess and profit by the constantly increasing accumulation of the ideas of all ages: but the multitude (by which I mean the majority of all ranks) have the ideas of their own age, and no others: and if the multitude of one age are nearer to the truth than the multitude of another, it is only insofar as they are guided and influenced by the authority of the wisest among them.  

The general progress of mankind is thus contingent upon the extent to which the uninstructed defer to the instructed.

Again, this connection between progress and the role of the instructed was not a peculiarity of Mill's early writings. Similar assertions are to be found in his mature works. Thus, for instance, in "Auguste Comte and Positivism" he argued that the rise of Christianity was, in part, dependent upon the intellectual climate of opinion created by the instructed of the ancient world:

The fact was, that Monotheism had become congenial to the cultivated mind: and a belief which has gained the cultivated minds of any society, unless put down by force, is certain, sooner or later, to reach the multitude.  

A similar argument is made in Considerations on Representative Government:

One person with a belief is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only interests. They who can succeed in creating a general persuasion that a certain form of government, or social fact of any kind, deserves to be preferred, have made nearly the most important step which can

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possibly be taken towards ranging the power of society on its side... When therefore, the instructed in general can be brought to recognize one social arrangement...very much has been done towards giving to the one...that preponderance of social force which enables it to subsist. ¹

In this sense the instructed may be regarded as one of the efficient causes of progress; while the final cause of progress must be sought in the laws of the mind.

V

The interpretation of Mill's ideas proposed thus far may be briefly summed up as follows:

First: Mill's assertion of limits to the coercive powers of society was intimately connected with his notions of "utility", "truth" and "progress"; and, in that sense at least, he does not appear to have been making a clear and unambiguous plea for "liberty".

Secondly: He was an avowed determinist. He believed in human progress according to fixed invariable laws, and that these laws could be reduced to more elementary laws of psychology.

Thirdly: He felt that progress itself involved the establishment of positivist methods in politics and ethics.

Lastly: He allowed for individual human agency in the form of a class of instructed persons upon whom the rate of progress

¹Mill, Considerations on Representative Government, pp. 281-282.
depended. He also insisted upon the need for deference to this class.

In *On Liberty* Mill was also concerned with the need for deference to the instructed and the establishment of positive truths; and that, it is in this sense that the assumed connections between "liberty", "utility", "truth" and "progress" must be understood.

Mill argued that it was necessary to assert limits to the coercive powers of society in order to counteract the "hostile and dreaded censorship" of public opinion.¹ He characterized the effects of this censorship thus:

...our merely social intolerance kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men to disguise them or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion... And thus is kept up a state of things very satisfactory to some minds, because, without the unpleasant process of fining or imprisoning anybody, it maintains all the prevailing opinions undisturbed.²

In other words, while the tyranny of public opinion did not incur any of the costs of overt oppression, it was nevertheless just as effective.

However, this tyranny did not directly affect the intellectual powers of the majority of men. Public opinion itself simply expressed the combined "opinions of masses of merely average men".³ Moreover, the intellectual abilities of average men were negligible: "on any matter not self evident

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² Ibid., p.241.
³ Ibid., p.269.
there are ninety-nine persons totally incapable of judging of it for one who is capable."¹ Increasing the free flow of ideas would not directly stimulate the intellectual capacities of people in this condition.

Although the tyranny of public opinion could not directly harm average men, it did pose a grave threat to the instructed:

Who can compute what the world loses in the multitude of promising intellects combined with timid characters, who dare not follow out any bold, vigorous, independent train of thought, lest it should land them in something which would admit of being considered irreligious or immoral? Among these we may occasionally see some man of deep conscientiousness and subtle and refined understanding, who spends a life sophisticating with an intellect which he cannot silence, and exhausts the resources of ingenuity in attempting to reconcile the promptings of his conscience and reason with orthodoxy, which yet he does not, perhaps, to the end succeed in doing. ²

The yoke of public opinion threatened to stunt the intellectual development of the instructed. Consequently: "the counterpoise and corrective to that tendency would be the more and more pronounced individuality of those who stand on the higher eminences of thought. It is in these circumstances most especially that exceptional individuals, instead of being detered, should be encouraged in acting differently from the mass."³ The assertion of limits to the coercive powers of society was thus necessary to ensure the freedom and independence of the instructed.

¹Ibid., p.231.
²Ibid., p.242.
³Ibid., p.269.
The assertion of liberty would also create a climate of opinion favourable to the intellectual development of the instructed:

In the case of any person whose judgment is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner. 1

And, on another occasion:

Persons of genius, it is true, are, and are always likely to be, a small minority; but in order to have them, it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow. Genius can only breathe freely in an atmosphere of freedom. Persons of genius are, ex vi termini, more individual than any other people - less capable consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of molds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own characters. 2

Generally speaking, then, Mill was concerned with prescribing those conditions under which the intellectual development and freedom of the instructed would be most effectively secured.

However, Mill was not exclusively concerned with the instructed as he felt that the benefits of securing the independence and influence of the instructed would ultimately devolve upon the uninstructed:

1Ibid., p.232.
2Ibid., p.267-8.
Many have left themselves be guided (which in their best times they always have done) by the counsels and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed one or few. The initiation of all wise or noble things comes and must come from individuals; generally at first from someone individual. The honour and glory of the average man is that he is capable of following that initiative; that he can respond internally to wise and noble things, and be led to them with his eyes open.

Under these conditions asserted in On Liberty the uninstructed would be aware of the rationality of their deference to the instructed - that is to say they would be able to acquiesce in the opinions of the instructed with their "eyes open". Mill, thus believed that liberty would, ultimately, benefit the whole community.

Mill's friend Alexander Bain felt that On Liberty was exclusively concerned with the idea of an intellectual aristocracy. Mill disavowed this oversimplification of his purpose. However, it is worth noting that he did not deny that he was concerned with the notion of an intellectual aristocracy. He was simply at pains to point out that this was not his exclusive concern. He wrote to Bain:

The "Liberty" has produced an effect on you which it was never intended to produce if it has made you think that we ought not to attempt to convert the world. I meant nothing of the kind, and hold that we ought to convert all we can. We must be satisfied with keeping alive the sacred fire in a few minds if we are unable to do more - but the notion of an intellectual aristocracy of lumières while the rest of the world remains in darkness fulfills none of my aspirations - and the effect I aim at

1Ibid., (my italics), p.269.
by the book is, on the contrary, to make the many accessible to all truth by making them more open minded. ¹

When he wrote that his intention was "to make the many accessible to all truth" he was presumably referring to the ability of the average man to "respond internally to wise and noble things". ² In other words he felt that while only the instructed could be fully conversant with truth, the masses should nevertheless have access to that truth.

The uninstructed would, in short, profit by the assertion of liberty for the following reasons: first, because liberty, by securing the ascendency of the instructed, guaranteed the means whereby mankind could become conversant with the truths upon which progress depended; and secondly because liberty provided the uninstructed with the opportunity for rational and intelligent deference - that is to say, the kind of deference that constituted "the honour and glory of the average man".

Mill also intended On Liberty as an "infidel book". ³ In Chapter one he repeatedly criticized conventional religious beliefs. He described religious revivals as the "revival of bigotry". ⁴ On another occasion he asserted that "not one

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¹ Mill to Bain, August 6, 1859, Mill, Later Letters, 2:631.
² Gertrude Himmelfarb refers to this letter and claims that in it Mill simply "disavowed such an elitist intention". (On Liberty and Liberalism), p.52. That is not so. Mill was trying to qualify his elitist intention.
Christian in a thousand guides... his individual conduct" according to the doctrines of Christianity.\(^1\) Christian morality itself was criticized as "a doctrine of passive obedience."\(^2\) Mill undoubtedly hoped that the assertion of these "infidel" notions would undermine customary religious belief. Privately he felt that "good ethics [utilitarianism] and good metaphysics [positivism] will sap Xianity".\(^3\) The corollary of the weakening of religious convictions would be the establishment of "positive truths".\(^4\) In this sense he presumably felt that the assertion of liberty would facilitate the ascendency of those positivist ethical and political truths that he regarded as an essential condition of mankind's progress.

He was consequently pleased when the work angered religious opinion:

People are beginning to find out that the doctrines of the book are more opposed to their own opinions and feelings than they at first saw, and are taking alarm accordingly and rallying for a fight... As was to be expected they claim for Xianity morality all the things which I say are not in it, which is just what I wanted to provoke them to do.\(^5\)

Furthermore, insofar as Christian believers were concerned he admitted that his intentions were exclusively elitist. He

\(^1\)Ibid., p.248.  
\(^2\)Ibid., p.60.  
\(^3\)Mill to Bain, 14 Nov. 1859, Mill, Later Letters, 2:645.  
\(^4\)Ibid., p.645.  
only wanted to woo the really superior Christian minds. In this respect he felt that Bain's interpretation of On Liberty was correct and he wrote:

But perhaps you were only thinking of the question of religion. On that, certainly I am not anxious to bring over any but really superior intellects and characters to the whole of my opinions.  

In private Mill clearly hoped that On Liberty would help dislocate existing religious sentiment.

It thus appears that On Liberty is, in a number of ways, perfectly consistent with the rest of Mill's political and ethical writings. It contains restatements of certain ideas that recur in all his major works - namely, his insistence upon the need for deference to the instructed and his belief in the progressive ascendency of positivism (although, admittedly, this latter belief only emerges obliquely in On Liberty). In his two works on political democracy, Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform and Considerations on Representative Government, he was concerned with suggesting methods (such as proportional representation and educational qualifications) whereby the political influence of the instructed would be assured. In On Liberty he attempted to apply these ideas to the realms of intellectual and moral conduct. "The liberty it [On Liberty] treats of" he wrote "is moral and intellectual rather than political."  

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2 Mill to Gomperz, 4 Dec. 1858, Later Letters, 2:581.
ence in all these works no doubt explains why liberty appears to have been intimately connected with "utility", "truth" and "progress". Insofar as liberty secured the independence and influence of the instructed (by protecting them from the tyranny of the majority and by creating the conditions under which rational and intelligent deference was possible) so liberty was an essential condition of the realization of truth and progress. In this sense "liberty" and "progress" were inseparable.

In conclusion: Mill's distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding activities may at first sight appear as a libertarian principle, and that, no doubt, is why many historians and philosophers have tended to treat On Liberty as a classic exposition of "liberal individualism". However, Mill, in asserting that principle, was not simply recommending the conditions under which men might pursue various substantive activities. Rather, he was simultaneously prescribing certain substantive ends. These included his belief in the establishment of positive truths in ethics and politics (that is to say, the establishment of a new consensus in society) and his insistence upon the need for deference to the instructed. Insofar as he was prescribing substantive moral and political ends (and not the conditions under which these might be pursued) On Liberty cannot be regarded simply as an exposition of liberal individualism. Furthermore, although these substantive ends are not incompatible with the assertion of lib-
erty - at least insofar as liberty is defined negatively as the absence of coercive power - they cannot themselves be subsumed under the notion of "liberal individualism". Mill's insistence upon the need for deference was not an expression of "individualism"; and his determinist and positivist vision of politics was not entirely "liberal", in the sense that that term is commonly understood.
CHAPTER II
THE MAN VERSUS THE STATE

The Man versus the State consists of four articles first published in the Contemporary Review in 1884. Spencer intended the essays as a "vehement protest" against "the way in which things are drifting towards Communism with increasing velocity".¹ In Spencer's somewhat exaggerated view, the "drift towards Communism" included, among other things, the Liberal party's growing radicalism during the 1880's. In the four essays he proscribed all forms of state regulation and welfare. Unlike On Liberty which was ostensibly concerned with moral and intellectual liberty, The Man versus the State dealt exclusively with political liberty. In short, the work was a radical exposition of "laissez-fairism".²

However, Spencer's doctrine of laissez-faire is ambiguous insofar as it bears on questions of freedom and individuality, and in this respect it is susceptible of two radically different interpretations.

On the one hand the doctrine may be interpreted as a form

²Gertrude Himmelfarb has suggested that Spencer was "the most consistent...laissez-fairist of the epoch." Victorian Minds (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1968), p.143.
of libertarianism. If this is the case then it may be understood as a plea for freedom and individuality. Certain writers have interpreted Spencer in this manner. Auberon Herbert felt that Spencer was arguing that society could not be reformed "until you restore the individual to himself, until you awaken in him his own perceptions, his own judgment of things, his own sense of right". He described the process as one of "individualizing the individual". In a similar vein a more recent writer has claimed that in *The Man versus the State*, Spencer expressed a belief "in the value of individuality and dissent as a good in itself".

On the other hand, as I will presently argue in this chapter, the doctrine may be understood in a purely negative and restricted sense - that is to say, simply as an assertion of limits to the authority of the state. That assertion need not include any plea for freedom and individuality. If the doctrine is understood in this sense then it may be perfectly compatible with a strictly determinist view of human nature. In other words, the political doctrine of laissez-faire may, without being inconsistent, form part of a larger philosophy which excludes various ethical notions of freedom and individuality.

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1Auberon Herbert, *The Right and Wrong of Compulsion by the State*, p.271. Herbert was a late nineteenth century libertarian. He was also strongly influenced by Spencer.

2Donald Macrae, Introduction to *The Man versus the State*, p.32.
The arguments contained in *The Man versus the State* had been foreshadowed in a number of earlier essays published in the *Westminster Review* during the 1850's.\(^1\) In all these political writings Spencer was primarily concerned with proscribing government welfare, education and regulation of industry. Although his political philosophy is implicit throughout *The Man versus the State*, that work was not so much intended as a coherent exposition of political philosophy, but rather as a critique of a number of specific issues.

A large part of the work was devoted to the subject of welfare. Spencer argued that the anonymity of state welfare systems enabled people to ignore the moral shortcomings of the recipients. "If the wretched are unknown or but vaguely known" he wrote "all the demerits they may have are ignored; and thus it happens that when the miseries of the poor are dilated upon, they are thought of as the deserving poor, instead of being thought of as the miseries of the undeserving poor, which in large measure they should be."\(^2\) Moreover, the

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\(^2\)Spencer, *The Man versus the State*, p.82.
"undeserving poor" would in the long run, be harmed both morally and economically by welfare measures. Welfare tended to demoralize the recipients. Apart from these "moral costs" the recipients also payed part of the economic costs as the taxes used to support welfare measures would depress the economy and thus reduce employment opportunities and wages.

Furthermore, the attitudes of the proponents of welfare were morally reprehensible. State welfare was necessarily indirect and anonymous and consequently it could never be "moral" in the sense that private charity might be. "Were the many who express their cheap pity [by advocating welfare measures]" he complained, "like the few who devote a large part of their time to aiding...those...who are brought to lives of hardship, they would be worthy of unqualified admiration." What made the "cheap pity" of the advocates of welfare measures even more galling was that they usually proposed such measures at the expense of others: "the immense majority of the persons who wish to mitigate by law the miseries of the unsuccessful and the reckless, propose to do this in small measure at their own cost and mainly at the cost of others".

Apart from these particular defects, welfare proposals in general were based upon a misapprehension of the nature of

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1Ibid., p.83.
2Ibid., p.87.
3Ibid., p.144.
4Ibid.
the problem to be solved. Firstly, any attempt to simply abolish poverty was tantamount to admitting that the problem could not be cured. Thus the idea of welfare "takes for granted, first, that all suffering ought to be prevented, which is not true: much of the suffering is curative, and prevention of it is prevention of a remedy". Secondly, welfare could never eradicate those defects in human nature which, in the last resort, were responsible for all human suffering. At most these evils could "only be thrust out of one place or form into another place or form".

State-funded education was criticized on similar grounds. Spencer complained of those legislators "who in 1833 voted £30,000 a year to aid in building schoolhouses" and who "never supposed that the step they then took would lead to forced contributions, local and general, now amounting to £6,000,000". Unlike Mill who believed that state funded education was needed in order to create a responsible electorate, Spencer felt that such education would simply demoralize the working classes. "Popular education" he wrote "results in extensive reading of publications which foster pleasant illusions rather than

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1 Ibid., p.93.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., pp.88-89.
4 Spencer corresponded with Mill on this issue. After reading Mill's Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform he wrote: "The mass of those who have the mere rudiments of education, are, I believe, as profoundly ignorant of all matters bearing on legislation as those who cannot read and write." (Spencer to Mill, 25 March 1859, Duncan, The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer, p.94).
those which insist on hard realities."¹ In other words widespread education would lead the working classes to demand precisely those welfare measures that would inevitably lead to their further demoralization.

Spencer also condemned all governmental attempts to regulate various aspects of the economy. Several sections of The Man versus the State were devoted to lengthy discussions of the minutae of government regulations of housing, mines, factories and shipping. He argued that in the long run all such regulations lead to economic inefficiency. Nationalization was criticized on similar grounds. The state, he complained, was already "exclusive letter-carrier, exclusive transmitter of telegrams, and on the way to become exclusive carrier of parcels;" and if those who advocated nationalization of railways were successful, the state would also be "exclusive carrier of passengers, goods and minerals".² Further nationalization could only lead to the kind of economic inefficiency that existed on the continent.

All these different forms of governmental activity presaged the development of an uncontrollable and ubiquitous bureaucracy. Once a bureaucracy grew beyond a certain point people would want to join it in increasing numbers as it would offer more attractive career prospects than the private sector. Every time someone joined the bureaucracy, not only would the

¹Spencer, The Man versus the State, p.96.
²Ibid., p.105.
bureaucracy be strengthened by one, but the rest of the community would also be weakened by one. Further, a bureaucracy that developed beyond a certain size could easily become a serious threat to the rest of the community: "A comparatively small body of officials, coherent, having common interests, and acting under central authority, has an immense advantage over an incoherent public which has no settled policy, and can be brought to act unitedly only under strong provocation. Hence an organization of officials, once passing a certain stage of growth, becomes less and less resistable."¹

Apart from these dangers, a bureaucracy could never resolve the more fundamental problems besetting a society. To begin with, a bureaucratic organization was unusually prone to the corruption and inefficiency that plagued all organizations, for while a private organization might be destroyed by these failings, a well-established bureaucracy could only continue to grow more inefficient and corrupt. Moreover, the most any bureaucracy could do was to simply redistribute those goods and services that the society had already created: "The officials can never create the needful supplies; they can but distribute among individuals that which the individuals have joined to produce. If the public agency is required to provide for them, it must reciprocally require them to furnish

¹Ibid., p.94.
the means."¹ In short, all bureaucracies, regardless of their intentions, were inevitably bound to be both inefficient and superfluous.

The corollary of Spencer's proscription of various kinds of governmental interference was his prescription of an extremely limited form of government. He argued that the most general object of government was simply to protect citizens from both external and internal aggression: in other words government should provide for defense against foreign invasion, and it should prevent citizens from harming one another's property and persons.² Besides this, government should provide the framework within which citizens might freely enter into contracts with one another. Thus: "there must, in the first place, be few restrictions on men's liberties to make agreements with one another, and there must, in the second place, be an enforcement of the agreements which they do make".³ Apart from the protection of property and persons, and the enforcement of contracts, government had no legitimate authority.

The object of "liberalism" was to bring about this kind of political organization. Spencer wrote The Man versus the State partly because he felt that in the latter part of the

¹Ibid., p.107.
²Ibid., p.179.
³Ibid., p.177.
nineteenth century, liberalism was failing to fulfil what he conceived of as its true political purpose. "Most of those who now pass as Liberals" he wrote "are Tories of a new type."\(^1\) The historical purpose of liberalism was simply to limit the power of government, whereas the purpose of Toryism was to maintain, or increase, that power. In a typical whig-liberal interpretation of history he argued that these two opposing principles had emerged in the constitutional conflicts of the 17th century, and that the subsequent political history of England was simply the story of the growing ascendency of the liberal principle.\(^2\) The great Whig reforms of the 1830's (such as the Reform Bill and the Municipal Reform Bill) were truly liberal in that they sought to emancipate the many from "the coercion of the few".\(^3\) However, in the course of the nineteenth century a certain confusion developed over the meaning of liberalism. The original attempts of liberalism to reduce the coercive powers of government were also seen as "mitigations of evils which had directly or indirectly been felt by large classes of citizens, as causes of misery or as hinderances to happiness".\(^4\) Consequently "these measures came to be thought of as so many positive benefits; and the welfare

\(^1\) Ibid., p.63.
\(^2\) Ibid., pp.64-65.
\(^3\) Ibid., p.66.
\(^4\) Ibid., pp.69-70.
of the many came to be conceived alike by Liberal statesmen and Liberal voters as the aim of Liberalism".\(^1\) Spencer considered this as a perversion of the proper aims of liberalism for "the real issue is whether the lives of citizens are more interfered with than they were; not the nature of the agency which interferes with them".\(^2\) True Liberalism was as opposed to paternalistic democratic government as it was to paternalistic monarchical government; and Spencer concluded *The Man versus the State* with the following plea: "The function of Liberalism in the past was that of putting a limit to the powers of kings. The function of true Liberalism in the future will be that of putting a limit to the powers of Parliaments."\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Ibid.

\(^2\) Ibid., p.77.

\(^3\) Ibid., p.183.
On the face of it Spencer's "liberalism", or "laissez-fairism", may perhaps be understood as a plea for freedom and individuality. Spencer himself, on a number of occasions justified his position as a plea for "liberty". He argued that the progressive growth of government would ultimately lead to socialism, and that socialism was a form of slavery:¹

The degree of his [a citizen's] slavery varies according to the ratio between that which he is forced to yield up and that which he is allowed to retain; and it matters not whether his master is a single person or a society. If, without option, he has to labour for the society, and receives from the general stock such portion as the society awards him, he becomes a slave to society. ²

In other words "liberty" was exclusively contingent upon the extent of government interference. Thus "the liberty which a citizen enjoys is to be measured, not by the nature of the governmental machinery he lives under, whether representative or other, but by the relative paucity of the restraints it imposes on him".³

This conception of "liberty", however, was purely negative in that all Spencer meant to suggest by it was the absence of certain kinds of restraints. If freedom and individuality are taken to mean individual self-determination (or, perhaps, "self-realization") then clearly Spencer's "liberty" does not include or incorporate these notions. In short, the

¹Ibid., p.100.
²Ibid., p.101.
³Ibid., p.79.
word liberty was used in an extremely restricted sense in The Man versus the State and there is no warrant within the text itself for assuming that Spencer intended it to be understood in any other sense.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Spencer's justification of laissez-faire only depended in part upon his advocacy of "liberty". Overall, his main concern was to propose those political conditions under which, he felt, certain kinds of social development would take place. The impositions of government were proscribed in order that the "laws of life" might act unhindered.\(^1\) In this sense, he was proposing a distinction between the restraints of nature and the artificial restraints of government. The individual was to be freed from the latter set of restraints in order that he might be properly subjected to the former set of restraints. Consequently, Spencer's conception of natural "laws" of social evolution played a crucial part in his justification of laissez-faireism.

At the beginning of The Man versus the State he argued that the terms Toryism and Liberalism corresponded to two distinct types of social organization. Toryism was the political creed of what he described as the "militant" type of society. This was a "regime of status" exemplified "in an army of conscripts, in which the units in their several grades have to fulfil commands under pain of death and receive food

\(^1\)Ibid., p.170.
and pay and clothing arbitrarily apportioned".\(^1\) By contrast, Liberalism was the political creed of the "industrial" type of social organization. This type was exemplified "in a body of producers or distributors, who severally agree to specified payments in return for specified services, and may at will, after due notice, leave the organization if they do not like it".\(^2\) In short, militant societies were based upon coercion whereas industrial societies were based upon contractual agreements and cooperation. These two kinds of social organization represented two different phases of social evolution and in that sense, presumably, the progressive ascendancy of liberalism was inevitable.

Spencer proscribed government interference because he felt that it would counteract these "natural processes of social evolution". He argued that the social organism was so complex that any act of government would ultimately modify it in ways that could not possibly be foreseen:

There is the fact, also in its broader manifestations universally recognized, that modifications of structure, in one way or other produced, are inheritable. No one denies that by the accumulation of small changes, generation after generation, constitution fits itself to conditions... To which there comes the undeniable corollary that every law which serves to alter men's modes of action - compelling, or restraining, or aiding, in new ways - so affects them as to cause, in course of time, fresh adjustments of their nature. Beyond any immediate effect wrought, there is the remote effect, wholly ignored by most - a remoulding of the average character: a remoulding which may be of a desirable

\(^1\) Ibid., p.63.
\(^2\) Ibid.
kind, but which in any case is the most important of the results to be considered. ¹

Given this complexity, politicians should not attempt to tamper with the "spontaneously-formed social organization". Paternal government could only obstruct the processes of natural selection upon which all genuine social progress depended.

It is clear, then, that Spencer's justification of laissez-faire depended largely upon his conception of social evolution. His arguments in this respect may not have been altogether consistent for there is a sense in which government welfare measures might themselves—without doing any injustice to Spencer's own premises—be regarded as an integral part of the evolutionary process. However, apart from questions of consistency it appears that Spencer intended to rest his justification of laissez-fairism on a more general theory of evolution.

II

Spencer devoted most of his life to constructing a comprehensive system of philosophy. The object of the system was to show how all phenomena could be explained in terms of a

¹Ibid., p.133.
theory of evolution. His plans for the future System of Synthetic Philosophy appear to have matured in late 1857.\textsuperscript{1} He subsequently decided to try to issue the prospective volumes of the system by subscription and in 1860 a programme (to which was attached a list of influential sponsors, including Mill, Huxley and Darwin) was printed and distributed.\textsuperscript{2} During the next thirty-three years he carried out the scheme. First Principles was published in 1862; Principles of Biology, 1864-67; the second edition of Principles of Psychology, 1870-72; Principles of Sociology, 1876-96; and lastly Principles of Ethics, 1879-93.

Spencer's theory of evolution began with an account of processes of change in the inorganic world.\textsuperscript{3} All phenomena, he argued, were manifestations of "force". This force was displayed either as matter or as motion. That matter was a manifestation of force could be shown by examining the character of our sensory perceptions:

\textsuperscript{1}Spencer, Autobiography, 2:15-18.
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., pp.479-484.
\textsuperscript{3}Spencer's theory of evolution was first outlined in Social Statics (1855) and in an essay entitled "Progress: Its law and cause" (1857). His theory was thus pre-Darwinian and his intellectual predecessors in this respect were Lyell and Lamarck. Spencer, however, went beyond all other evolutionists in that he attempted to fuse his notion of evolution with the theory of the conservation of energy - which was being developed by nineteenth century physicists - in such a way as to produce a comprehensive cosmology.
Body is distinguishable from space by its power of affecting our senses, and, in the last resort, by its opposition to our efforts. We can conceive of body only by joining in thought extension and resistance; take away resistance, and there remains only space.  

Motion, the other mode of force, was the product of "universally co-existent forces of attraction and repulsion".  

The two different modes of force known as matter and motion can neither be created nor destroyed. The indestructibility of matter is one of the necessary presuppositions of science, for our ability to weigh things depends upon the assumption that the matter forming the weight remains the same while it is being weighed. In other words, it is necessary to presuppose that matter cannot simply dissipate itself without any outside interference. This presupposition is also both logically and psychologically necessary in that it is unavoidably entailed in our conception of matter:

Our inability to conceive matter becoming non-existent is immediately consequent on the nature of thought...it is impossible to think of something becoming nothing, for the same reason that it is impossible to think of nothing be-


2 Ibid., p.196.

3 Spencer's attempt to give philosophical proof of the principle of the conservation of energy was, understandably enough, met by a certain amount of scepticism. For instance, Mill wrote to Bain: "was there ever so strange a notion (for a man who sees so much) as that the doctrine of the Conservation of Force is a priori and a law of Consciousness?" (Mill, Later Letters, Vol. II, p.818).

4 Spencer, First Principles, p.151.
coming something - the reason, namely, that nothing cannot become an object of consciousness. ¹

The corollary of the indestructibility of matter is the continuity of motion. This too is a necessary presupposition of science:

Like the indestructibility of matter, the continuity of motion, or, more strictly, of that something which has motion for one of its sensible forms, is a proposition on the truth of which depends the possibility of exact science... Motions, visible and invisible, of masses and molecules form the larger half of the phenomena to be interpreted (by science), and if such motions might either proceed from nothing or lapse into nothing, there could be no scientific interpretation of them. ²

Motion can never be lost. It is simply transformed into a number of different forms such as heat, light and sound.

Although matter is indestructible, it is nevertheless subject to continual alterations as a result of the different kinds of motion that are imparted to it. Generally speaking, the transformations that occur in the universe may be described thus:

Every object, no less than the aggregate of all objects, undergoes from instant to instant some alteration of state. Gradually or quickly it is receiving motion or losing motion, while some or all of its parts are simultaneously changing their relations to one another. ³

This perpetual redistribution of matter and motion may be expressed in terms of the laws of evolution and dissolution.

¹Ibid., pp.150-51.
²Ibid., p.153.
³Ibid., p.240.
Evolution occurs when motion is dissipated and matter is integrated. In this sense the cooling of an object may be described as a simple kind of evolution - for, as the temperature of an object is reduced, the movements of its molecules decrease and the object itself becomes increasingly dense, or, "integrated". On the other hand, matter may disintegrate as a result of the absorption of motion. This is the process of dissolution, and it occurs, for instance, when matter is heated.

Evolution, then, involves the progressive formation of homogeneous aggregates of matter. However, this process is complicated by a number of factors. A homogeneous aggregate is unstable because it is exposed to a number of environmental forces. The parts of the aggregate that are thus exposed must adapt themselves in order that there may be some kind of equilibrium between the aggregate and its environment. This adaptation is, in effect, a process of differentiation and consequently the internal structure of the aggregate becomes increasingly heterogeneous. Spencer expressed the final formulation of his "law" of evolution thus:

Evolution is an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion; during which the matter passes from an indefinite incoherent heterogeneity to a definite coherent heterogeneity; and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation. 1

When the various parts of the aggregate are completely differ-

1Ibid., p.240.
entiated and the whole aggregate is coherently organized then it may be said to have reached a state of equilibrium.

Evolution is followed by dissolution. This involves "the absorption of motion and disintegration of matter". In other words the whole process of evolution is reversed. The cycle of evolution and dissolution is exhibited by all organic and inorganic phenomena. Thus, for instance, a living organism evolves as it grows in that its various functions become increasingly heterogeneous and coherent. At death it reaches the point of physical and chemical equilibrium and thereafter it proceeds to disintegrate. The rise and fall of civilizations may be understood in the same terms. The formation of physical aggregates such as the solar system are likewise manifestations of the evolutionary process. Spencer even suggested that the universe as a whole might undergo the cycle of evolution and dissolution ad infinitum.

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1 Spencer, Reasons for dissenting from the philosophy of M. Comte and other essays (Berkeley: The Glendessary Press, 1968), p.27.

2 Ibid., First Principles, pp.452-4.

3 Ibid., p.451.

4 Spencer first discussed the question of the evolution of the solar system in an essay entitled "The Nebular Hypothesis" published in The Westminster Review in 1858. He returned to the subject in First Principles.

Spencer subsumed ethics, politics and religion under his conception of evolution and in this sense he attempted to provide a comprehensive explanation of human conduct. In general his object was to argue that the general laws that governed all organic and inorganic phenomena also governed the relations between human beings.

Moral conduct, he argued, consists of the adjustment of acts to ends; and, insofar as all natural processes involve certain kinds of adjustments so there cannot be a sharp distinction between ethics and natural processes:

Conduct is a whole; and, in a sense, it is an organic whole - an aggregate of interdependent actions performed by an organism. That division or aspect of conduct with which ethics deals, is a part of this organic whole - a part having its components inextricably bound up with the rest.¹

Any action which does not involve an adjustment to some definite end is simply random and purposeless and therefore cannot, properly speaking, be conceived of as conduct. Consequently such actions fall beyond the scope of ethics.²


²Spencer's attempt to describe moral conduct in naturalistic terms has led to the charge that his theory is devoid of any genuine ethical content. In other words, it has been alleged that a theory which denies the possibility of free moral choices cannot be a theory of ethics. Sidgwick, Bradley and Moore were among the more prominent Victorian thinkers who made this criticism.
The moral worth of conduct is contingent upon the extent to which it succeeds in achieving its end. An act may be considered good insofar as it promotes its prescribed end effectively. Conversely, an act may be considered bad insofar as it fails to promote its prescribed end effectively.

Broadly speaking these adjustments, or acts, may be divided into two categories: those that are "self-regarding" and those that are "other-regarding". The end of both self-regarding and other-regarding acts is pleasure. When conduct is properly adjusted the pleasures of self and others coincide. The absence of such coincidence implies that an act is not properly adjusted to all possible ends, and consequently such an act cannot be considered ultimately good (although it may be considered relatively good).¹

Pleasure is the ultimate standard according to which the moral worth of an action is judged. In other words an act is good insofar as it promotes pleasure. Overall, pleasure may be considered as the ultimate well-being of the species. In a sense the "ultimate well-being of the species" resembles the "Greatest Happiness" principle of the utilitarians. However, Spencer felt that utilitarianism suffered from a number of defects, and one of the objects of his theory was to supply these deficiencies. He argued that the application of the utilitarian principle necessarily created certain problems. That which

¹Spencer, The Principles of Ethics, 1:Ch. III.
is immediately pleasurable may not, in the long run, be conducive to the organism's welfare. Likewise that which may promote the individual's welfare may harm the species. A general principle is needed whereby such contradictions may be resolved, and utilitarians have failed to discover this. Utilitarians have been correct insofar as they have identified the good with pleasure. However, their analysis has been based on piecemeal empirical inductions and consequently they have been unable to find a purely rational and deductive method of dealing with the question of the competing claims of different pleasures.\footnote{Ibid., p.92.} According to Spencer, this method can be deduced from biological principles.

An act which is not properly adjusted to its prescribed end will injure the organism. The biological correlative of such injury is pain. Conversely, any act which is properly adjusted to its prescribed end will promote the organism's welfare; and the biological correlative of welfare is pleasure. Insofar as moral conduct is conduct which is properly adjusted, so all moral conduct will promote pleasure. Consequently the pleasure of all is the final goal of moral conduct. In this way, Spencer claimed to have justified the pleasure principle in terms of man's biological nature.

He also argued that man's ability to perceive moral distinctions was explicable in biological terms. As pleasure at-
tends the welfare of the organism, so the continued existence of sentient life presupposes the pursuit of pleasure. The connection between pleasure and survival thus becomes instinctive and it has the force of an unavoidable dictum of consciousness. In short, it is "no more possible to frame ethical conceptions from which the consciousness of pleasure, of some kind, at some time, to some being, is absent, than it is possible to frame the conception of an object from which the consciousness of space is absent". Moral intuition is simply an innate biological instinct which enables the organism to distinguish between various kinds of conduct. Spencer felt that he had given an empirical explanation of a priori ethics:

...the terms 'a priori truth' and 'necessary truth' are to be interpreted not in the old sense, as implying cognitions wholly independent of experiences, but as implying cognitions that have been rendered organic by immense accumulations of experiences, received partly by the individual, but mainly by all ancestral individuals whose nervous systems he inherits. ¹

However, this innate consciousness can only be discovered by repeated inductions. Consequently utilitarians are correct insofar as they attempt to discover ethical standards by inductive and empirical means. In this way Spencer claimed to have supplied the deficiencies of both utilitarianism and a

¹Spencer, First Principles, p.152.
priorism.1

Furthermore, Spencer argued, biological principles enable us to explain why conduct which is immediately pleasurable may, in the long run, injure both the organism and the species. Conduct, like everything else, is subject to the law of evolution. The acts of lower organisms are relatively incoherent and homogeneous compared to those of more highly evolved organisms. The evolution of conduct consists of the development of more heterogeneous conduct in the sense that the adjustments of acts to ends become more varied and complex. The increasing sophistication of these adjustments will enable the more highly evolved organism to cope more successfully with the complexities of its environment. Conversely, if an organism's acts are relatively homogeneous and undifferentiated, then it is likely that the organism will find itself confronted by circumstances with which it cannot adequately cope. Consequently its chances of survival will be diminished. In other words the progressive differentiation of conduct will promote a richer and more varied existence as the

1Spencer repeatedly claimed to have resolved the conflict between idealist metaphysics and empiricism. On the face of it he appears to have compromised with the idealist (or, more precisely, neo-Kantian) doctrines of Hamilton and Mansel. In First Principles he argued that space and time were "necessary" intuitions. In Principles of Ethics he argued about moral intuitions in the same way. In Spencer's philosophy, however, "a priori" or "necessary" truths are simply the product of certain kinds of biological and psychological conditioning. Consequently, in Spencer's system the "a priori" is not a category independent of experience. Rather, it is simply part of empirical reality. In this sense, Spencer did not compromise with idealism. He simply sought to explain the "a priori" in empirical terms.
organism's chances of survival are enhanced. In terms of moral distinctions this leads to the conclusion that more highly evolved conduct is good; while, conversely, bad conduct is relatively less evolved.¹

It follows that the ultimate standard of moral conduct can only be reached by an organism that is perfectly evolved. An act is good in the highest sense possible if it promotes the welfare of the individual and the welfare of the whole species simultaneously. Such an act is perfectly evolved as it is properly adjusted to all possible ends. In other words man will not be able to act in a completely ethical manner until he is perfectly evolved: "just as...evolution becomes the highest possible when the conduct simultaneously achieves the greatest totality of life in self, in offspring and in fellow men; so...the conduct called good rises to the conduct conceived as best, when it fulfills all three classes of end simultaneously".²

Spencer's conception of the evolution of moral conduct was thus clearly teleological in that he presupposed an end in which all acts would be perfectly adjusted. At that point evolution would cease as no further adjustments would be necessary. Thus he felt that there was "a warrant for the belief that evolution can end only in the establishment of the great-

¹Spencer, Principles of Ethics, 1:Chs. V & VI
²Ibid., p.61.
est perfection and the most complete happiness".\textsuperscript{1} Spencer referred to this stage as the realm of "Absolute Ethics".

However, he argued, at present man has not reached the telos of this revolutionary process. Man lives in an age of transition. Consequently his acts will always be, in some sense, imperfectly adjusted; and, as a result, some pain must necessarily attend each action regardless of the extent of the pleasure promoted by that action. This explains why a man may harm the species by promoting his own individual welfare; and conversely, why, in attempting to promote the welfare of the species, an individual may injure himself. Until the final stage of evolution is reached in which all acts are perfectly adjusted to all possible ends, these contradictions will necessarily occur. Thus at present, moral conduct can only be relatively right and Spencer referred to this stage as the realm of "Relative Ethics".\textsuperscript{2}

In Social Statics (1855) Spencer had argued that the realms of Absolute Ethics and Relative Ethics were utterly distinct; and that, consequently, studying what was absolutely right could be of little use in attempting to formulate rules of conduct for the present.\textsuperscript{3} However, it appears that he had

\textsuperscript{1}Spencer, First Principles, p.448.

\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., Ch. XV.

\textsuperscript{3}Herbert Spencer, Social Statics (New York: Robert Shalkenbach Foundation, 1954), p.52.
changed his mind on this issue when he wrote Principles of Ethics (1879-93). In this work he argued that there was a connection between Relative and Absolute Ethics in that the latter supplied the ultimate standards required to make decisions regarding the present relative value of different moral choices:

Absolute Ethics, by the standard it supplies, does not greatly aid Relative Ethics, yet, as in other cases, it aids somewhat by keeping before consciousness an ideal conciliation of the various claims involved; and by suggesting the search for such compromise among them, as shall not disregard any but shall satisfy all to the greatest extent practicable.¹

The realm of Absolute Ethics thus supplies both the telos of the evolution of moral conduct and the relevant criteria for everyday moral decisions.²

According to Spencer the evolution of moral conduct was

¹Spencer, Principles of Ethics, 1:316.

²Spencer's argument at this point appears to have been somewhat irresolute and ambiguous. He could not fully admit the need for criteria according to which moral choices should be made because that would have been tantamount to admitting the possibility of actions which might not conform to the laws of evolution. At the same time, however, he felt that his system should be considered as a guide to action and therefore he had to provide some such criteria.

J.D.Y. Peel, in an attempt to justify Spencer's position, has asserted that Spencer was arguing "that the contingently desirable will necessarily come about". Herbert Spencer, The Evolution of a Sociologist (London: Heinemann, 1971), p.247. This interpretation begs the question as to whether Spencer's theory makes any provision for mere contingency.
simply one aspect of a broader process of sociological evolution. The first stage of any social development, he argued, was the formation of a homogeneous aggregate:

That under its primary aspect political development is a process of integration, is clear. By it, individuals originally separate are united into a whole. In the earliest stages the groups of men are small, they are loose, they are not unified by subordination to a centre. But with political progress comes the compounding, re-compounding, and re-re-re-compounding of groups until great nations are produced. 1

The main purpose of this progress towards unity in early militant societies was to provide defense against other societies. A society that was not sufficiently organized internally would not survive the onslaughts of its enemies.

This stage of social development is superceded as societies become increasingly heterogeneous and coherent:

With this advance from small coherent social aggregates to great coherent ones, which, while becoming integrated pass from uniformity to multiformity, there goes an advance from indefiniteness of political organization to definiteness of political organization. Save inherited ideas and usages, nothing is fixed in the primitive hords. But the differentiations above described, severally beginning vaguely, grow in their turns gradually more marked. Class divisions, absent at first and afterwards undecided, eventually acquire great distinctness. 2

The progressive differentiation of functions eventually leads to the creation of a highly industrialized society and thus


2 Ibid., p.645.
man will reach the end of his evolutionary development within the context of an industrial society.

Lastly, Spencer also claimed that religious beliefs were a product of social evolution. He argued that primitive man had to postulate the existence of ghosts in order to account for the occurrence of natural phenomena because the primitive mind could only conceive of causal relations in terms of some kind of human agency. However, as man evolved, this conception of numerous supernatural agencies was gradually replaced by the idea of a single deity. The monotheistic religions that developed in this manner reflected the different stages of man's social evolution. In militant societies the deity was conceived of as harsh and warrior-like. Industrialization created a new kind of religious consciousness:

...where militancy declines and the harsh, despotic form of government appropriate to it is gradually qualified by the form appropriate to industrialism, the foreground of the religious consciousness is increasingly filled with those ascribed traits of the divine nature which are congruous with the ethics of peace: divine love, divine mercy, are now the characteristics enlarged upon. ¹

In this sense religious consciousness reflected man's ethical evolution.

Spencer predicted that religious consciousness would continue to evolve in that man's conception of the deity would become progressively less anthropomorphic. He argued that the imputation of anthropomorphic characteristics to an osten-

¹Herbert Spencer, "Religion: A Retrospect and Prospect", Nineteenth Century, January, 1884, p.4.
sibly infinite and transcendent deity involved logical con-
tradictions that could not be tolerated by educated minds.
Thus he felt that religion would eventually arrive at a con-
ception of a completely abstract transcendent cause which he
called the "Unknowable". He argued that in this respect science
and religion would eventually coalesce for scientific en-
quiry stopped short of "that ultimate mystery which must ever
transcend human intelligence"¹ -- that is to say, the final
cause of the evolutionary process itself.

One writer has claimed that "Spencer strove to divest
religion of anthropomorphism, and science of arrogance, in
order to establish a mutual respect between them".² Actually,
it seems more likely that Spencer was attempting to strip
religion of all genuine religious content in order to dissolve
it in his conception of science. Like Mill he was hostile
to all forms of conventional Christian belief. He spoke of
the "hypocrisy of the Christian world; ceaseless in its pro-
fessions of obedience to the principles of its creed, and
daily trampling upon them in all parts of the world".³ In pri-


3Spencer to Buchanan. Duncan, The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer, p.308.
"dreadfully destructive".\textsuperscript{1} That is hardly the language of reconciliation. It seems more likely that Spencer, like Mill, hoped to see Christianity completely replaced by an ethic ostensibly based on the results of science.

IV

It has been suggested that Spencer's theory of evolution should be understood as an analogy.\textsuperscript{2} On this view the theory should be judged not so much as an explanation, but rather, in terms of its explanatory efficacy - that is to say, in terms of its value in suggesting possible explanations. No doubt Spencer's thought may be of value to contemporary sociologists if it is treated in this manner. However, that is not to say that Spencer intended this theory to be understood in this way. He himself claimed that he was synthesizing the conclusions of science:

Science means merely the family of the sciences - stands for nothing more than the sum of knowledge formed of their contributions; and ignores the knowledge constituted by the fusion of these contributions into a whole...science is partially unified knowledge; philosophy is completely unified knowledge.\textsuperscript{3}

In this sense Spencer undoubtedly believed that the System of

\textsuperscript{1}Spencer to Youmans, 12 April 1883. Ibid., p.251.

\textsuperscript{2}See J.D.Y. Peel, Herbert Spencer, The Evolution of a Sociologist, Chapter 7.

\textsuperscript{3}Spencer, First Principles, pp.111, 113.
Synthetic Philosophy constituted a unified explanation of phenomena.

Spencer's theory was determinist in that he postulated the existence of certain laws which governed all phenomena including human actions. Furthermore, the scope of the theory was virtually unlimited, for Spencer felt that he had found the key to explaining everything from the formation of galaxies in outer space to the behaviour of living organisms.

It might perhaps be thought that Spencer was arguing that freedom is realized in the process of evolution in the sense that once evolution is completed men's actions will be perfectly adjusted to all possible ends. If necessity is understood as the unavoidable and necessary ill-adjustment of acts to ends then the completion of evolution will involve the transcendence of the realm of necessity. In other words once man is perfectly evolved he will be freed from certain necessary existential conflicts. However attractive this interpretation of Spencer's theory may seen it is not really warranted. To begin with, Spencer did not assert that once the evolutionary process was completed man would cease to be subject to the laws of nature. In Spencer's language, evolution is always the deus ex machina of history. Furthermore Spencer suggested that as soon as the process of evolution is completed the complementary process of dissolution would begin and thus man would never be in a position to enjoy the fruits of the
In The Man versus the State, Spencer was concerned with prescribing the conditions under which these natural processes might act unhindered. If, as Auberon Herbert believed, Spencer was concerned with "restoring the individual to himself" then it appears that Spencer must have meant this in a strictly biological or naturalistic sense. In other words, in Spencer's view "liberty" and "individuality" were simply expressions of certain natural laws. Consequently his confidence in the alleged results of science led him to prescribe the substantive activities that men should engage in - and these included particular views of political and religious conduct. In short, he was not concerned with limiting the scope of government in order that men might pursue ends of their own choosing.
CHAPTER III

MILL, SPENCER, AND THE VICTORIAN INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY

The object of this chapter is to examine some of the arguments of the more prominent members of the Victorian intellectual community over two issues:

First, the question of the distribution of political power. The reform acts of 1832, 1867, 1884 and the ballot act of 1872 entirely altered the character of the electorate. The consequences of such changes were the subject of intense debates, in the course of which both proponents and opponents of reform made certain common assumptions about the nature of existing political arrangements.

Secondly, the question of moral authority. Many Victorians were of the opinion that they were (to use Mill's phrase) living in "an age of transition". It was felt that old moral and social allegiances were being eroded and most Victorian intellectuals expressed concern over this situation. In general the argument was between the proponents of various naturalistic systems of ethics and the defenders of Christian ethics.

These issues were a source of continual comment in the

1J.S. Mill, "The Spirit of the Age", p.3.
2Walter Houghton, at the beginning of the first chapter of his book, The Victorian Frame of Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) claims that the idea of living in "an age of transition" was "the basic and almost universal conception of the period".
great Victorian periodicals (such as the Edinburgh Review, the Quarterly Review, Fraser's Magazine, The Economist and the Westminster Review). The intellectuals who contributed to these journals in a sense formed an informal academic community. They often corresponded with one another and they were usually conversant with one another's ideas. The purpose of examining the argument of this community is to clarify the relative position of Mill's and Spencer's ideas within the context of Victorian political thought.

I

From the 1850's onwards both Whigs and Tories had committed themselves to revising the settlement of 1832. Between 1853 and 1866 seven abortive reform bills were introduced into the House of Commons. This somewhat desultory Parliamentary activity was accompanied by an extensive extra-Parliamentary debate over the question of reform. Mill, Spencer, Bright, Bagehot, Austin, Cranborne and Harrison were among some of the more prominent contributors to the periodical literature on the subject. As a result of the extent of this literature, and, owing to the intensity of the debates of 1866 and 1867, the period of the Second Reform Act may be

1For instance, among the various intellectual figures dealt with in this chapter, Mill corresponded with the following: Spencer, Carlyle, Henry Maine, James Stephen and Gladstone. Stephen was intimate with Maine and Carlyle, and he corresponded with Mill and Newman.
seen as the "locus classicus" of Victorian arguments over the nature of political arrangements (although, of course, these issues were also discussed well before and after the bill of 1867). The object of the following pages is to examine some of the assumptions underlying the arguments over "democratization".

As Mill pointed out, America provided a suitable starting point for all discussions of democracy. "America" he wrote "is usually cited by the two great parties which divide Europe as an argument for or against democracy. Democrats have sought to prove by it that we ought to be democrats; aristocrats that we ought to cleave to aristocracy, and withstand the democratic spirit". Mill, however, no doubt exaggerated the extent to which the American experience divided intellectual opinion in England. American democracy was almost universally condemned by the Victorian intellectual elite. Their criticisms were often culled second hand from de Tocqueville (Mill is the classic example of this as he wrote two lengthy reviews of de Tocqueville) and thus both the proponents and opponents of reform made the same commonplace criticisms of America. The promoters of Parliamentary reform were at pains to point out that reform would not entail American-style de-

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moncratization. Disraeli himself justified the act of 1867 by claiming that Britain could never succumb to the leveling influences of democracy:

We are warned of the example of America and against entering upon the course pursued by the United States. I say there is no similarity of position of the United Kingdom and the United States. The United States were colonies and they still are colonies... whereas the United Kingdom is entirely governed and sustained by its traditionary influences.

Conversely, those who opposed Parliamentary Reform (such as Cranborne and Lowe) simply had to argue that extending the franchise would eventually lead to democracy and Americanization in order to make their point.

One of the most common themes that emerged in discussions of American democracy was the supposed mediocrity produced by democratic institutions—a mediocrity that extended to rulers and ruled alike. In his first review of de Tocqueville Mill claimed it was a "fact that the ablest men seldom offer themselves to the peoples' suffrages". Twenty-five years later he

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1Bright was one of the few who were prepared to defend the example of America democracy. "In America" he wrote "we find law, order, property secure..." Speeches on questions of public policy by John Bright, M.P. 2 Vols., ed. James E. Thorold Rogers (London: Macmillan & Co., 1869), 2:28. Some of the contributors to Essays on Reform defended Australian and American democracy—see F.B. Smith The Making of the Second Reform Bill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp.230-231.


still found American political life: "...a school from which the ablest teachers are excluded; the first minds of the country being as effectively shut out from national representation and from political functions generally, as if they were under a formal disqualification."\(^1\) The mediocrity of the rulers was matched by the mediocrity of the population in general: "In America there is no highly instructed class; no numerous body raised sufficiently above the common level, in education, knowledge, or refinement, to inspire the rest with any reverence for distinguished mental superiority, or any salutary sense of the insufficiency of their own wishes".\(^2\)

In conventional political terms J.F. Stephen and Mill were at opposite poles of the political spectrum (Mill found Stephen "brutal", "vain" and "exceedingly ignorant" of political economy);\(^3\) yet Stephen expressed himself in an almost identical manner respecting the levelling influences of American democracy. That system, he wrote, ensured "the rapid production of an immense multitude of commonplace, self-satisfied, and essentially slight people".\(^4\) Carlyle was somewhat more virulent, linking the issues of Reform, American democracy

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\(^1\)Mill, Considerations on Representative Government, p.468.

\(^2\)Mill, "Tocqueville" I, p.208.

\(^3\)Mill to T.E. Cliffe Leslie, 8 May 1869. Mill, Later Letters, 4:1600.

and the emancipation of the slaves in the following manner; "count of heads the God appointed way in this Universe, all other ways Devil-appointed..., Quashee Nigger to Socrates or Shakespeare".¹

In addition to dwelling upon the presumed levelling influences of democracy, Victorian writers also characteristically assumed that administrative inefficiency and corruption necessarily attended democratic institutions. During the 1830's Mill believed that the people should not, themselves directly manage the affairs of the state: "If democracy should disappoint any of the expectations of its more enlightened partisans, it will be from the substitution of delegation to representation; of the crude and necessarily superficial judgment of the people themselves, for the judgment of those whom the people, having confidence in their honesty, have selected as the wisest guardians whose services they could command."² Twenty-five years later he had modified these opinions in the sense that he no longer believed that even representatives could adequately fulfil the tasks of legislation. Legislation, he wrote, could only be done "by minds trained to the task through long and laborious study" and that, consequently, elected representatives were automatically disqual-


² Mill, "Tocqueville" I, p.204.
ified from that kind of work. He believed that legislation should be left to a group of specialists.

Although Bagehot was, unlike Mill, eventually opposed to the bill of 1867, he nevertheless subscribed to many of the main tenets of Mill's philosophy. He praised Considerations on Representative Government as "an exceedingly able protest, by the only living thinker of much authority among English Liberals, against that helpless and reluctant drifting of the Liberal party into pure democracy which is so melancholy a sign of their political imbecility". It is hardly surprising, therefore, that he too, believed that professional competency was one of the most important requirements of government, and that democracy failed to live up to this requirement. He argued that the British ministerial system produced a more competent executive than the American presidential system because British ministers were chosen by a body (the Commons) which had "better education, higher social position, more first hand conversancy with public affairs" than a mass electorate could ever have.

Spencer (who admittedly had a rather different conception of

1Mill, Considerations on Representative Government, p.428.


the role of government from Mill) likewise criticized the inefficiency of democratic institutions. "Is it not manifest that a ruling body made up of many individuals, who differ in character, education and aims, who belong to classes having antagonistic ideas and feelings, and who are severally swayed by the special opinions of the districts deputing them, must be a cumberous apparatus for the management of public affairs?"¹ Stephen having perhaps learned impetuous and autocratic habits in India also depreciated the "endless discussion, continual explanation...which hamper to the last degree the process of governing".²

Besides dealing with the question of mediocrity and inefficiency, Victorian writers also liked to assume that corruption was one of the natural corollaries of American style democracy. Mill wrote: "The Demos, too, being in America the one source of power, all the selfish ambition of the country gravitates towards it, as it does in despotic countries towards the monarch: the people, like the despot, is pursued with adulation and sycophancy."³ After the act of 1867 had been passed, Cranborne, in a similar vein, warned

¹Herbert Spencer, "Representative Government - What is it good for?", Essays Scientific, Political and Speculative, 3:284.
³Mill, Considerations on Representative Government, pp.468-469.
that the "army of professional electioneers will not diminish. The example of America assures us that these industrious labourers grow in both numbers and power".\(^1\) Lowe was rather more blunt. If "you want venality" he argued, "if you want ignorance, if you want drunkenness" then democracy was the answer.\(^2\)

It is clear that, despite some minor discrepancies, there was a certain consensus of opinion among leading Victorian intellectuals respecting the presumed defects of American democracy. "Advanced liberals" such as Mill and Spencer and "reactionaries" such as Lowe and Cranborne, alike depreciated the supposed mediocrity, inefficiency and corruption of American institutions.\(^3\) A similar consensus of opinion existed respecting the question of the political qualifications of the English working classes. On the whole it was felt that many working men were completely unfit for any kind of serious political responsibility.

Mill expressed himself strongly on this subject: "None are so illiberal" he wrote "none so bigoted in their hostility to improvement, none so superstitiously attached to the stupidist and worst old forms as the uneducated. None are so

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\(^3\) Lowe obviously cannot be classified as a conservative. In financial matters he was an unimpeachable liberal and he was Chancellor of the Exchequer in Gladstone's first ministry.
unscrupulous, none so eager to clutch at whatever they have not and others have, as the uneducated in possession of power. An uneducated mind is almost incapable of clearly conceiving the rights of others."\(^1\) It followed that "no lover of improvement can desire that the predominant power should be turned over to persons in the mental and moral condition of the English working classes."\(^2\) Henry Maine, with whom Mill generally disagreed because "the conservative instinct is so strong in him"\(^3\) also feared the possible illiberal effects of universal suffrage. Universal suffrage, he wrote, "is commonly associated with Radicalism; and no doubt amid its most certain effects would be the extensive destruction of existing institutions; but the chances are that, in the long-run, it would produce a mischievous form of Conservatism, and drug society with a potion compared with which Eldonine would be a salutary draught...and arrest everything that have ever been associated with Liberalism."\(^4\) Even Bright, who was perhaps the most energetic proponent of reform, warned against enfranchising "the residuum, which there is in almost every constituency, of almost hopeless poverty and dependence".\(^5\)

\(^1\)J.S. Mill, "Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform", Essays on Culture and Politics, p.320.

\(^2\)Ibid., p.320.

\(^3\)Mill to John Elliot Cairnes, 11 January 1870. Mill, Later Letters, 4:1676.


\(^5\)Quoted in G. Himmelfarb, Victorian Minds, p.376.
Several writers felt that the activities of trades unions portended the kind of irresponsible depotism that would be exercised by the working classes if they ever gained political power. Cranborne warned against the "criminality" and "tremendous power" of the trades unions. "The result will be" he wrote of Gladstone's reform bill "that in about two-fifths of the existing boroughs of England and Wales working men will be in a majority. Considering their power of combination (by which he meant trades unions) their ignorance of economical laws, their strong taste for despotism of numbers, this result is far from reassuring, even if it went no further."¹ Spencer was subject to similar apprehensions: "Men who render up their private liberties to the despotic rulers of trades unions, seem scarcely independent enough rightly to exercise political liberties... When their notions of rectitude are so confused, that they think it a duty to obey the arbitrary commands of their union authorities, and to abandon the right of individually disposing of their labour on their own terms... we may well pause before giving them the franchise".² Although Mill's attitude towards the unions was a little less shrill he nevertheless deplored what he saw as the tendency of working men to "employ a moral policy, which occasionally becomes a physical one, to deter skilful workmen from receiving,


and employers from giving, a larger renumeration for a more useful service". ¹

It is clear, then, that not only did the opponents and proponents of reform share certain assumptions about democracy, but also that they often held similar opinions regarding the political fitness of the working classes. In other words the question as to whether the masses should exercise direct political power was simply not an issue when it came to discussing Parliamentary reform. The academic issue that divided these men was rather, whether working men should be allowed to participate in the existing political system (or in some slight modification thereof) in the sense of being given a rather more explicit opportunity of deferring to the opinions of their "betters".

Mill felt that most people should be allowed to participate within the existing political system simply because any kind of exclusion was morally indefensible. "Everyone" he wrote "has a right to feel insulted by being made a nobody and stamped as of no account at all."² However, being allowed to participate was not the same thing as exercising direct political power. The mass of the electorate, according to Mill, should defer to the opinions of their "betters" (and by this

¹Mill, On Liberty, p.287.
²Mill, Considerations on Representative Government, p.474.
Mill meant a class of intellectually superior persons - and one of the preconditions of such superiority was social ease. Lack of deference was a mark of stupidity: "No one but a fool, and only a fool of a peculiar description, feels offended by the acknowledgement that there are others whose opinion, and even whose wish [my italics], is entitled to a greater amount of consideration than his."¹ It was thus not only a question of deference to the opinions of one's betters, but also of acquiescing in the wishes of superior minds. However, what was needed, above all, was to make the working man aware of the "rational" grounds upon which such deference was based. Thus it was "necessary that this superior influence should be assigned on grounds which he the labourer can comprehend, and of which he is able to perceive the justice."²

Mill, however, did not rest his case entirely on the possibility of making the rationality of this deference intelligible. The whole purpose of Considerations on Representative Government (published in 1861) was to recommend a system of checks and securities that would prevent the political ascendency of the masses (while nevertheless allowing them to participate in the political system) and ensure the hegemony of "superior minds". Thus he recommended Hare's scheme for proportional representation in the hope that it would protect

¹Ibid.
²Ibid.
educated minorities so that Parliament would be certain "of containing the very elite of the nation".\(^1\) For similar reasons he proposed plural voting based on educational qualifications. Thus an "ordinary unskilled labourer" should have one vote; a skilled labourer, two votes, a foreman, three votes; farmers, manufacturers and merchants, three or four votes, while members of the professions and university graduates should have five votes.\(^2\) Mill hoped that proportional representation and plural voting would make it impossible for the working classes to get a Parliamentary majority.

In the 1850's Mill also opposed the ballot. Although during the 1820's and 1830's he (along with other philosophic radicals) had wanted to see the ballot introduced, he had come to believe that the original justification for the ballot was no longer valid under the changed political and social conditions of the mid-nineteenth century. The effect of the ballot was that it enabled the voter "to give full effect to his own preferences, whether selfish or disinterested, under no inducement to defer to the opinions or wishes of others".\(^3\) As Mill believed that people should defer to the opinions of the educated elite it is clear that under certain conditions the ballot might do more harm than good: "Thirty years ago"

\(^1\)Ibid., p.456.


\(^3\)Mill, pp.324-325.
he wrote in the 1850's "it was still true that in the election of members of Parliament, the main evil to be guarded against was that which the ballot would exclude - coercion by landlords, employers and customers. At present I conceive, a much greater source of evil is the selfishness, or the selfish partialities, of the voter himself".\(^1\) In other words the ballot was dangerous because it threatened to destroy appropriate forms of deference.

Spencer did not think that plural voting based on educational qualifications would substantially ameliorate the dangers of democracy. "The mass of those" he wrote to Mill "who have the mere rudiments of education, are, I believe, as profoundly ignorant of all matters bearing on legislation as those who cannot read and write."\(^2\) However, he was also convinced of the need for the "spread of sounder views among the working classes, and the moral advance which such sounder views imply".\(^3\) He found Mill's arguments against the ballot convincing: "Respecting the ballot I own to being very much shaken, if not converted [by Mill's arguments]".\(^4\) Nevertheless, although Spencer

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\(^1\)Ibid., p.326.


\(^3\)Spencer, "Parliamentary Reform: The Dangers and Safeguards", p.375.

saw the problems of democracy in almost exactly the same terms as Mill, he did not have any very clear cut answers. He simply hoped that the dangers of mass participation in politics could be offset by stringently limiting the functions of government: "As fast as government, by becoming representative, grows better fitted for maintaining the rights of citizens, [by which he meant the rule of law] it grows not only unfitted for other purposes, but dangerous for other purposes".¹

Bagehot found Mill's critique of democratic tendencies very impressive although he did not attach much importance to Mill's practical recommendations (plural voting and proportional representation) as he felt that Mill bestowed "too little attention on these practical aspects of his subject".² However, like Mill, Bagehot believed that some kind of education was a necessary qualification for the franchise. Thus he argued that the franchise should only be extended to the labour aristocracy as "agricultural labourers may have no sentiments on public affairs; but the artisan classes have".³

One of the ironies of the debates of 1867 was that Lowe and Cranborne, the most virulent opponents of reform shared


²Bagehot, "Considerations on Representative Government by John Stuart Mill", p.341.

many of the same assumptions about democracy and the masses. They also believed, like Mill and Gladstone, in deference to education and social position. Thus it is not surprising to find that Cranborne on the occasion of Mill's introduction of Hare's scheme "rebuked...[M.P.'s who had] laughed very much and [been] very inattentive".¹ Nor is it surprising to find that Mill, in 1867, voted with Cranborne in favour of Lowe's scheme for cumulative voting.²

Lowe and Cranborne, however, unlike the proponents of reform, simply did not believe that the working man's habits of deference would continue indefinitely under new political arrangements (regardless of whatever checks and securities could be provided). Lowe agreed that there were many working men who were "addicted to Conservative opinions" and consequently the deferential character of society would not be upset in the immediate future. Nevertheless the masses would eventually say; "We can do better for ourselves. Don't let us any longer be cajoled at elections. Let us shop for ourselves."³ In a similar vein Cranborne argued (after the bill had been passed): "The omnipotence of Parliament is theirs, wholly and without re-


serve. Subject to them is a minority possessed in various degrees of a vast aggregate of accumulated wealth. If he were to set all considerations of conscience aside, each member of the poor but absolute majority would naturally desire so to use this new power as to make some portion of this wealth his own". Thus, Cranborne continued, the beliefs of the proponents of reform, who in public relied upon "the virtues of the working class" while in private they drew "what consolation they could from a belief in its unbounded pliability", were purely chimerical. In this sense, Lowe, Cranborne and the liberals were not divided over the question of basic assumptions.

In conclusion: I do not mean to suggest that Mill's and Spencer's views were indistinguishable from those of their political opponents. Their criticisms of democracy and the working classes were tempered by a belief that some kind of extension of the franchise was desirable. Moreover Mill and Spencer felt that women should have the vote. Yet, these

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2 Ibid.
3 Spencer had originally defended the rights of women in Social Statics (Part II, Ch. xvi). However he subsequently changed his views on this issue. When Mill asked Spencer to contribute an article to a volume of essays on women's suffrage that Helen Taylor was editing (Mill to Spencer, May 24, 1867, Mill, Later Letters 3:1270), Spencer declined, as he had come to believe that: "The giving of political power to women would I believe restrict and indeed diminish liberty in two ways. It would strengthen the hand of authority...for women, as a mass, are habitually on the side of authority. Further it would aid and strengthen all kinds of state administrations..." (Spencer to Mill, 9 August 1867. Duncan, The life and letters of Herbert Spencer, p.138).
specific commitments do not, by themselves, amount to a politi
cal "position".

Mill's and Spencer's basic political assumptions present a rather different picture. Neither of them wished to see a society in which every individual would be given an equal voice in the affairs of the state. Mill's attitudes were very obviously elitist. He wanted the masses to defer to the better judgment of an elite of intellectual and social superiors. He was no democrat. ¹ Although the question of deference does not enter so obviously into Spencer's philosophy it is nevertheless clear that he too distrusted the political abilities and judgment of the masses. There was nothing exceptional about such judgments on the masses and democracy. They were the stock in trade of most respectable Victorian arguments over the question of Parliamentary reform.

II

The question of Victorian attitudes towards moral author-

¹J.H. Burns has convincingly argued that Mill maintained his hostility towards democracy throughout his life. He concludes that: "A consistent viewpoint unites Mill's political thought from start to finish; but it is not, in the strict sense he would himself have adopted, the viewpoint of a demo-
ity is obviously not susceptible of the same kinds of analysis as the question of attitudes towards democracy. Discussion of the latter issue centered around the practical problem of Parliamentary reform, whereas the former played a part in a whole multitude of problems ranging from the polemics of the Tractarians to the controversies over Darwin. However, despite the multiplicity and variety of these issues, they nevertheless often involved a common denominator - namely, the question of the actual, or presumed, decline of Christianity.¹ Thus the arguments of an avowed "liberal individualist" and agnostic such as Mill, on the one extreme, and those, say, of Newman, on the other extreme, may be seen as competing claims over the same disputed moral and intellectual territory.² The object of the following pages is to examine the manner in which this problem was conceived of and the kinds of solutions various thinkers proposed.

One assumption that was commonly made was that the nineteenth century was an era of transition. "The first of the

¹Throughout this chapter I have attempted to describe the ideas, feelings and reactions of a small number of intellectuals (with a view to clarifying some of Mill's and Spencer's political and ethical assumptions). The ideas described may have reflected broader currents in society. On the other hand they may simply have reflected the peculiar position of the intellectual in society. However, regardless of whatever origin is ascribed to these ideas, the point is that such speculations fall beyond the scope of the present enquiry. I am not trying to make any general comments on the "character" of the Victorian Age.

²This was also the subject discussed by the Metaphysical Society (founded by Knowles and Tennyson in 1869). Both Mill and Spencer were invited to join but they declined. See A.W. Brown, The Metaphysical Society; Victorian minds in crisis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947).
leading peculiarities of the present age" wrote Mill "is that it is an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones."¹ Mill was strongly impressed by Comte's division of history into three stages and thus he felt that while the metaphysical stage had been consummated in the French revolution, the "positive state was yet to come".² Comte's doctrines gave Mill's notion of an age of transition a "scientific shape".³ Carlyle (who had for a while, mistakenly, looked upon Mill as an intellectual ally and disciple) saw similar changes happening: "There is" he wrote "a deep-lying struggle in the whole fabric of society; a boundless grinding collision of the New with the Old."⁴ The age was, in short, "sick and out of joint".⁵ Spencer also felt that society had entered a period of transition as the "industrial" stage gradually replaced the "militant" stage. It was thus a society in transition and its main characteristics were still fluid.

One consequence of this idea of an age of transition was the feeling that traditional moral and religious convictions

¹Mill, "The Spirit of the Age", p.3.
³Ibid.
⁵Ibid.
were being eroded. The beliefs of former ages were becoming increasingly inappropriate. However, no new systems of belief had emerged with sufficient clarity and authority to command widespread assent. "The old doctrines have gone out" Mill complained "and the new ones have not yet come in;" and he condemned the "present age of loud disputes but generally weak convictions." He was also often sceptical of other peoples religious convictions. "What is boasted of at the present time as the revival of religion is always, in narrow and uncultivated minds" he wrote "at least as much the revival of bigotry." Spencer likewise felt that during an age of transition it was impossible for any clear cut moral rules to emerge. During such times "throughout a considerable part of conduct, no guiding principle, no method of estimation, enables us to say whether a proposed course is even relatively right". Thus although present moral rules were "for the time being authoritative" they did not allow for any "consistent or definite expression". As a result "the state of transition will of course be an unhappy state".

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1 Mill, "The Spirit of the Age", p.16.
4 Spencer, Principles of Ethics, 1:296.
5 Ibid.
6 Spencer, The Man versus the State, p.140.
Carlyle was characteristically rhetorical and virulent in dealing with the subject of the decline of morals and religion. In 1829 he had written: "This is not a Religious age. Only the material, the immediately practical, not the divine and spiritual, is important to us". \(^1\) The following forty years only served to confirm his prejudices and in 1867 he predicted that "in a limited time, say fifty years hence, the Church, all Churches and so-called religions, the Christian Religion itself, shall have deliquesced - into "Liberty of Conscience", Progress of Opinion, Progress of Intellect, Philanthropic Movement, and other aqueous residues, of a vapid badly-scented character". \(^2\)

The feeling that morals and religion (the traditional repository of moral authority) were either declining, or in danger of declining, was not limited to those who, for one reason or another, were committed to an explicit conception of a "society in transition". Thus Newman wrote: "People say to me, that it is but a dream to suppose that Christianity should regain the organic power in human society which once it possessed. I cannot help that; I never said it could". \(^3\)

\(^1\) Carlyle, "Signs of the Times", p.74.

\(^2\) Carlyle, "Shooting Niagara: and after?", p.2.

In a somewhat different vein, Stephen condemned what he saw as the lack of moral fibre of his contemporaries. For him "progress" was simply "progress from strength to weakness". ¹

These assumptions about the decline of convictions, morals and religion were thus the common property of a number of leading intellectuals. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that these men should have deplored what they saw as the caprice of private moral judgments. Mill, Spencer, Carlyle, Newman and Stephen alike condemned the notion that individuals should be left free to judge the validity of various moral doctrines for themselves. The spread of such individual caprice could only exacerbate an already confused situation.

According to Newman, "private judgement" (by which he meant the right to choose one's own beliefs) was a source of serious error. Acts of private judgement could not themselves be right, he argued, if they led to beliefs that were diametrically opposed. ² Furthermore, most people had neither the time nor the ability to engage in the kinds of investigation needed in order to arrive at a consistent set of beliefs (that is, if one were to grant the assumption that beliefs could be arrived at through process of inference). ³

¹Stephen, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, p.199.
³Ibid., p.152.
However, people did have a right of private judgement in choosing between teachers. The choice of a teacher transcended the normal processes of logic and inference. Such choices reflected a kind of inward spiritual development: "There is something in the sight of persons or bodies of men which speak to us for approval of disapprobation with a distinctness to which pen and ink are not equal".\(^1\) In short, while men were able to choose between teachers, they could not choose between the doctrines proposed by different teachers. Once a teacher had been chosen one had to defer to his authority.

Ironically Mill condemned private judgment in much the same way as Newman. Admittedly, the doctrines Mill was discussing were moral and political, rather than religious, and the teachers he advocated would be members of a "secular clerisy" rather than clergymen. Yet despite these differences, Mill's arguments ran almost exactly parallel to Newman's and in this respect Mill's conception of an instructed elite may be understood as a kind of secular clerisy. Private judgment was, according to Mill, an evil that had developed unavoidably during a period of transition. One of the characteristics of the age of transition was that various "authorities" were "divided among themselves, or against each other" and consequently

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\(^1\)Ibid., p.150.
"a violent conflict raged among opposing doctrines". Under such conditions it was "no wonder that mankind should attach themselves to private judgment, as the ultimate refuge, the last and only resource of humanity". The majority of mankind, however, had neither the ability nor the opportunity of arriving at the underlying principles of moral and political conduct. "I do not believe" he wrote "that...they (the mass of humanity) will ever have sufficient opportunities of study and experience, to become themselves familiarly conversant with all the enquiries which lead to the truths by which it is good that they should regulate their conduct." Thus the private judgment which was unfortunately exercised during the age of transition was a source of serious error. This error would only be overcome when "the first men of the age will...join hands and be agreed: and then there will be no power in itself, on earth or in hell, capable of withstanding them". In other words, once the instructed will arrive at a consensus, then the mass of humanity will be able to revert to a position of deference, and the errors attending private judgment will cease.

This condemnation of private judgment was not simply

2 Ibid., pp.9-10.
3 Ibid., p.12.
4 Ibid., p.16.
a peculiarity of Mill's early writings (that is to say, at the time he was reacting against Benthamism and radicalism). His mature ethical theory contains an oblique, yet nevertheless equally decisive, criticism of private judgment. In *Utilitarianism* Mill argued that utility included both some of the "animal appetites" and the higher pleasures of mental cultivation; and that the latter, were the most valuable forms of pleasure. This could be demonstrated by the "unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating both do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties".\(^1\) Thus only "a being of higher faculties" could decide what constituted pleasure, and hence the proper substantive nature of the rules moral conduct.\(^2\) "From this verdict" wrote Mill "of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal".\(^3\) In other words, when it came to deciding upon the rules of human conduct, there was no room for private judgment as the uninstructed masses would have to defer to the authority of the instructed. There is an obvious connection between this notion and Mill's demand for plural voting based on educational qualifications. In both politics and ethics Mill hoped that the authority of the instructed would

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2. Ibid., p.212.
3. Ibid., p.213.
be sufficient to counteract the capricious whims of the masses.

Although Spencer did not deal explicitly with the subject of private judgments, the whole drift of his ethical theory tended to exclude the possibility of such acts. For Spencer, conduct was either good or bad insofar as it tended to promote or hinder the processes of evolution. In other words "the conduct to which we apply the name good, is the relatively more evolved conduct; and bad is the name we apply to conduct which is relatively less evolved". As moral conduct displayed the same characteristics as biological development, so acts of private judgment (as reflective and deliberate choices) could not play any part in man's moral life.

The evils attending private judgment and the presumed decline of moral convictions were thus commonplace assumptions. The arguments between "liberals" and "conservatives" can only be understood within the context of these shared assumptions. No one (not even "advanced liberals" like Mill) wished to see men emancipated from the influence of authority. Emancipation could only lead to further decline and confusion. In other words neither "liberals" nor "conservatives" argued over authority and liberty in the abstract. Rather, contention arose over the question as to what constituted the proper repository of moral authority. Many thinkers of a liberal

1Spencer, Principles of Ethics, 1:61.
disposition were, on the whole, of the opinion that the traditional repositories had outgrown their usefulness. For them it was a question of creating a new structure of authority and deference that would replace tradition. By contrast, conservatives felt that if traditional authority was not fulfilling its purpose, that was simply because it was being undermined by the doctrines of liberalism.

Fourteen years after Mill published On Liberty, J.F. Stephen published a work entitled Liberty, Equality, Fraternity in which he attacked the main tenets of Mill's doctrines. Stephen argued that coercion was the basic quality of all social and political relations. Law, public opinion and morality all depended, in varying degrees, upon coercion. Consequently, popular notions about "liberty" could only serve to weaken the coercive ties that held society together: ¹ "Practically, the effect of the popularity of the commonplaces about liberty has been to raise in the minds of ordinary people a strong presumption against obeying anybody, and by a natural rebound to induce minds of another class to obey the first person who claims their obedience with sufficient emphasis and self-confidence. It has shattered to pieces most of the old forms in which discipline was a recognized and admitted good, and certainly it has not produced many new ones." ²

¹Stephen was strongly influenced by Hobbes. According to his brother Leslie, Hobbes was his "favourite philosopher". Leslie Stephen, The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, p.220.

Likewise, for Newman, the doctrines of liberalism were all subversive of all proper authority and could only lead men into the caprice and confusion of their own private judgment.\(^1\) Describing his experiences during the twenties and thirties he wrote: "It was the success of the liberal cause which fretted me inwardly. I became fierce against its instruments and manifestations."\(^2\) The spirit of liberalism was nothing less than "the characteristic of the destined Antichrist."\(^3\) Whereas Stephen had argued, in a Hobbesian manner, that traditional authority had to be maintained coercively simply in order to prevent the collapse of society, Newman was more concerned with the psychological aspects of authority. To put it some-

\(^1\) Although both Newman and Stephen objected to some of the more obvious shibboleths of liberalism, their own intellectual positions were very different. Unlike Newman, Stephen was a liberal of sorts and an agnostic. When he wrote a review of Newman's *Apologia* for Fraser's Magazine Newman complained that the article contained "many misconceptions of (his) meaning". (Newman to Mrs. Froude, 9 October 1864. *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vols. IX-XXI, ed. C.S. Dessain (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd. 1961-1970. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973-1977) 31:255). Although Newman and Stephen had met and corresponded on a number of occasions, relations between the two men eventually became somewhat strained. Newman felt that Stephen visited him in order to "ferret out" his ideas so that he could subsequently misrepresent them in public (Newman to W.S. Lilly, 17 February 1881. *Newman, Letters and Diaries*, 29:337). Differences of temperament and assumptions between the two were so great that eventually Newman put Stephen in the same intellectual category as Mill. He complained that their "arrogance in assumptions, and superciliousness towards anyone who will not admit them, is in the most provoking degree; and they ought to be brought to book" (Newman to Lord Blackford, 22 February 1877. *Newman, Letters and Diaries*, 27:170).


\(^3\) Ibid., p.174.
what crudely, if Stephen's concern was with the possible disintegration of society, then Newman's concern was with the possible disintegration of the individual. For Newman, adherence to dogma and acquiescence in authority were psychological "facts" that could not be dismissed any more easily than any other psychological traits: "Certitude (by which he meant unconditional acquiescence in some dogmatic truth) is a natural and normal state of mind, and not (as is sometimes objected) one of its extravagences or infirmities".¹ In other words "certitude" existed side by side with "doubt" and "knowledge" as one of the normal constituents of one's disposition. However, the balance between these constituents could be upset if questioning became too prevalent: "Questioning, when encouraged on any subject-matter, readily becomes a habit, and leads the mind to substitute exercises of inference for assent.... Reasons for assenting suggest reasons for not assenting..... Objections and difficulties tell upon the mind; it may lose its elasticity and be unable to throw them off".² In this manner the habit of questioning was psychologically destructive. Questioning threatened precisely that disposition (certitude) upon which moral convictions rested. It followed that those who questioned traditional authority were responsible for creating moral confusion.

²Ibid., p.217.
The doctrines of liberalism were thus both morally and psychologically destructive.

Mill and Spencer, by contrast, were of the opinion that traditional authority was itself responsible for whatever moral confusion existed in society. Mill's complaint against the traditional repositories of moral authority was not so much that they exercised any kind of tyranny over men, but rather, that their influence was weak and confused. He felt that tradition was justified through the theory of "intuition" in ethics, in that the object of the idea of an intuitive moral sense was to prevent people from questioning moral values. Thus tradition was justified by "a philosophy which discourages the explanation of feelings and moral facts by circumstances and association, and prefers to treat them as ultimate elements of human nature; a philosophy which is addicted to holding up favourite doctrines as intuitive truths, and deems intuition to be voice of Nature and of God, speaking with an authority higher than that of reason".  

However this strategy (of appealing to intuition) was self-defeating because in practice, the appeal to intuition usually meant no more than an appeal to mere passion; and passion led to complete moral confusion. Consequently men's opinions "on what is laudable or blamable are affected by all the multifarious causes which influence their wishes in regard to the conduct

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of others, and which are as numerous as those which determine their wishes on any subject. Sometimes their reason; at other times their prejudices or superstitions; often their social affections, not seldom their antisocial ones, their envy or jealousy, their arrogance or contemptuousness.\textsuperscript{1} Intuition led directly to chaos in that the intuitive voice of mankind "so often appealed to is universal only in its discordance."\textsuperscript{2} Thus, traditional authority was responsible for creating an age of "loud disputes but generally weak convictions."\textsuperscript{3}

In his early writings Mill had suggested that this "mere chaos" would continue "until a moral and social revolution (or it may be, a series of such) has replaced worldly power and moral influence in the hands of the most competent."\textsuperscript{4} The assumption that traditional authority would have to be replaced by the authority of the "instructed" underlay the claims he made in his later political and ethical writings, in that he believed that in both moral and political conduct, the un instructed masses would have to defer to the superior judgment of the "instructed". Once this revolution had been accomplished, Mill hoped to see the establishment of a creed (by which he meant something akin to Comte's Religion of Hu-

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{1}Mill, \textit{On Liberty}, p.221.
\textsuperscript{2}Mill, "Whewell on Moral Philosophy", p.194.
\textsuperscript{3}Mill, \textit{Autobiography}, p.166.
\textsuperscript{4}Mill, "The Spirit of the Age", p.18.
\end{quote}
manity) which would be so "deeply engraven on the feelings by early education and general unanimity of sentiment, and so firmly grounded in reason and the true exigencies of life" that it would not "like all former and present creeds, religions, ethical and political, require to be periodically thrown off and replaced by others".¹ Thus Mill wished to see the partialities and weaknesses of traditional authority replaced by an authority that would no longer be subject to the vicissitudes of history.

Spencer was also of the opinion that traditional authority led to moral confusion. He argued that in an aristocratic, or "militant" society, there existed two conflicting sets of moral rules; "the individual man has to carry on his life with due regard to the lives of others belonging to the same society; while he is sometimes called on to be regardless of the lives of those belonging to other societies.... Hate and destroy your fellow man is now the command; and then the command is, love and aid your fellow man".² It followed that there could not be any consistent system of moral rules until the last vestiges of traditional aristocratic influence had been eliminated. Furthermore, tradition led to weakness as well as confusion. Convention and custom were often arbitrary and unnecessary, and consequently they would dissolve in the

¹Mill, Autobiography, p.166.
²Spencer, Principles of Ethics, pp.167-168.
face of conduct that was properly adjusted to the necessities of biological survival; thus, "conventional feelings will give way before necessary circumstances, and conventional circumstances before necessary feelings".¹

A universally consistent and authoritative system of ethics would only arise once conformity to the laws of evolution replaced the outworn authority of tradition. The source of the inexorable laws of evolution was the "unknowable", "that ultimate mystery which must ever transcend human intelligence".² In this way Spencer's substitute for existing moral authority was clothed in quasi-religious dressing.

In conclusion - the presumed decline of moral convictions and the dangers attending private judgment were the common assumptions of both liberal and conservative arguments. Thus liberals like Mill and Spencer proposed authorities that would, they hoped, supply the deficiencies of traditional authority and effectively put an end to moral confusion and private judgment. By contrast, thinkers of a conservative disposition felt that the doctrines of liberalism portended the erosion of all authority; and that the possibility of replacing existing authority with the substitutes proposed by liberals was purely chimerical. Newman found the concepts of "Humanity" and the

¹Spencer, Social Statics, p.78.

"Unknowable", "hollow" and "absurd";\(^1\) while Stephen complained that they were mere "shadowy figments".\(^2\) To this extent the argument between "liberals" and "conservatives" was not over the extent and limits of authority, but rather, over the substantive nature of the authority to be exercised.

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CONCLUSION

Spencer and Mill were not libertarians. Neither were they democrats. Their conceptions of liberty were largely intended as vehicles of prescription and the various ends they prescribed often had little to do with freedom and individuality. Mill's determinist account of human nature and his insistence upon the need for deference to an elite of instructed persons represented, among other things, an attempt to confute the various ethical notions of freedom and individuality developed by Christian thinkers and idealist philosophers. Likewise, Spencer's scheme of a transcendental evolutionary process cannot be understood as a plea for freedom and individuality.

In Victorian England there was no generally accepted liberal ideology. Different thinkers proposed different panaceas to what they conceived of as the most pressing problems of the era. For Arnold, salvation lay in breaking the ostensibly philistine habits of the middle classes. Bright was largely concerned with the evils of aristocratic privilege. Acton held rather obscure notions about the autonomy of conscience and the role that liberalism played in bringing this about. The positivist schemes of Mill and Spencer represented

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yet another set of prescriptions for the presumed ills of the age.

There was little positive agreement between these men. Mill had a low opinion of Bright and the Manchester school. He regarded them as "inferior men". The distrust was reciprocated and Bright could not agree with one "who voted for the minority clause, against the Ballot, and spoke in favour of hanging. I do not believe in the philosophy so much boasted of." Arnold regarded Mill and Bright as philistines; and Acton criticized Mill's political thought as "a ready-made system that has been thought out like higher mathematics beyond the need or chance of application".

What these thinkers did agree upon was often entirely negative and consisted of hostility towards aristocratic privilege, Toryism and Beaconsfieldism. Arnold condemned the aristocracy as barbarians who were no better than their middle-class counterparts, the philistines. Acton developed an almost pathological dislike of Toryism and he wrote of Disraeli; "the good was absent, but...the bad, the injurious, the immoral, the disgraceful was present on a large scale".

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4 Ibid., p.98.
pointed out that Mill's professions of many sidedness never led him to believe that the Tories might have the better case, and, that in Parliament he was a good party man.\(^1\) Bright's speeches were filled with criticisms of the aristocracy and his attitude towards spiritual peers was especially virulent: "there is another kind of Peer which I am afraid to touch upon - that creature of - what shall I say? - of monstrous, nay, even of adulterous birth - the spiritual Peer".\(^2\) In short, besides these kinds of hostility, liberal apologists often had little in common.

There is a parallel between the Liberal intelligentsia and the Liberal Party in that the latter was essentially an alliance of convenience between various Parliamentary groups whose aims were very different.\(^3\) These groups found common ground in a number of measures designed to reduce the influence of the aristocracy and make the machinery of government more efficient. That is why after Gladstone's first ministry the


\(^3\)The composition of the party is discussed in Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party* and Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone, and Rosebery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). Briefly, the Liberal Party was composed of the following sections: the great regional interests, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales; occupational, class and religious interests which included Whigs, Labour and Nonconformity; and lastly various pressure groups including the United Kingdom Alliance, the Liberation Society and the Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts.
Liberal Party achieved very little in the way of substantial reforms. It is arguable that the party was only held together by Gladstone's personal magnetism and great "moral issues" such as Turkish atrocities and Home Rule.

Liberal political thought, like liberal political practice, had no coherent overall aim, and, in both cases, the rhetoric of liberty often served as a vehicle of persuasion and perscription. Liberals might agree over the rhetoric and it's purely negative implications but they could not agree on what substantive ends to prescribe. Perhaps, as in the case of Mill's intellectual elite and Spencer's evolutionary scheme, the ends proposed were a little too abstract to have any political relevance. The House of Commons is reported to have laughed at Mill when he introduced Hare's scheme for proportional representation. However, regardless of what the historian may think of the adequacy or relevance of these schemes it is clear that the schemes themselves had little to do with freedom and individuality. Viewed within the context of Victorian liberalism, what Mill and Spencer had to offer was, essentially, a positivist panacea for the presumed problems of the age.
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