Hellenism and Hebraism

The Moral and Social Implications of the Quarrel Between Science and Religion in the Thought of John Stuart Mill

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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The dissertation explores the moral and social implications of the quarrel between science and religion, through a close inquiry into the treatment of this issue by John Stuart Mill. There are several reasons for choosing Mill; one is that he investigated that issue as comprehensively and rigorously as did any of his contemporaries or immediate predecessors, another, that his treatment has the merit of being informed by a vivid, first-hand experience of what was subsequently labeled by historians the "Victorian crisis of faith." The thesis of the dissertation can be stated as follows. In Mill's view the ineluctable progress of science promises humankind complete freedom from the trammels of the old religion, but in seeking to make good it threatens to create a spiritual void which could not easily be filled; granted that Mill was an atheist or a complete skeptic, because he saw clearly this central dilemma of modernity, his was a case of ambivalent if not "reluctant skepticism." The body of the dissertation is divided into three parts. In the first part Mill's view of the usefulness of religion is expounded. The second part delves into his argument concerning the scientific support for theism, with a view to illuminating the nature and extent of the quarrel between science and religion as he construed it. The third part is a more detailed investigation of his teaching about the main moral and social implications of that conflict. The dissertation closes with a brief, tentative exploration of certain outstanding issues arising from his overall teaching about religion in the age of science. The textual focus of the dissertation is Mill's posthumously published Three Essays on Religion, especially "Utility of Religion"
and "Theism," but reference is frequently made to other works by Mill as well as to works by other authors. All references and supplementary discussions are given in footnotes. A complete list of works cited is provided.
To my mother and father
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INTRODUCTION I: WHY MILL ON RELIGION?

"The playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it - the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with."

- Eugene O'Neill

The problem of modern science

More than three and half centuries ago, Francis Bacon, the first great philosophical proponent of the modern scientific-technological project, wrote a remarkable work called The New Atlantis. In this philosophical fable he purports to show that scientific knowledge can be put to ill use as well as good, and therewith to reveal the morally neutral nature of modern science and technology.²

His great successor, Rene Descartes, appears to have either overlooked or chosen to remain silent about the potential harmfulness of (modern) science, for he confined himself merely to trumpeting the benefits of the scientific-technical mastery of nature.³ Evidently, during the next two centuries Descartes' approach prevailed, though lone voices like Rousseau's and Swift's could be heard which refused to allow us to fall into a dogmatic Cartesian slumber.⁴

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In the nineteenth century, however, as the more repellent effects of the scientific-technological project—"satanic mills", tall stacks belching clouds of smoke and soot, huge, sprawling cities with their deracinated and dehumanized masses, etc.—began to make themselves felt, the chorus of skeptical voices steadily swelled. This latter trend, fed by a lengthening list of complaints—about the abuse of science by tyranny; the harmful environmental impact of various scientific technologies; the oligarchic thrust of the increasing reliance on scientific expertise in the formation of public policy; the homogenizing effect of technology; the tendency of science, with its dependence on the 'fact-value' distinction, to undercut morality, etc.—has continued into the twentieth century, so that by now the notion that science and technology are morally neutral has come to seem the most charitable view one can have of them. There is a growing sense, which today finds expression in the neo-Romanticist "deep ecology" movement, that the project of the scientific-technical mastery of nature was, or could prove to be, a colossal error.5

Hebraism and Hellenism

Nevertheless, as important as the above issues surrounding (modern) science are, we shall not here concern ourselves with any of them. Rather, our sights are set on the relation between science and religion, or between Hellenism and Hebraism (to adapt the phrase made famous by Matthew Arnold). The question of greatest interest to us now is whether that relation is one of necessary, fundamental and irreconcilable conflict, and if so, what the moral and social ramifications of that conflict are.

If the quotation from one of his letters given in the epigraph is any indication, Eugene O'Neill answered the first part of the question in the affirmative. He was certainly not alone in holding that view. Many leading philosophers, poets, novelists,

5 Or the great modern tragedy, as is intimated in the epigraph.
critics, historians, psychologists and sociologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (though by no means only in these centuries) held it, including Joseph de Maistre, Arthur Schopenhauer, Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, John Stuart Mill, George Eliot, David Strauss, Matthew Arnold, Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Tolstoy, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, I. A. Richards and Leo Strauss as well as, after a fashion, Thomas Carlyle and D. H. Lawrence. The majority of these brilliant individuals, moreover, supposed that victory would eventually go to science.

Nevertheless, that view has not gone unchallenged. The dissenters have tended either to deny that science and religion have ever really quarrelled, or to concede that they (or at least various of their champions) have, while insisting that the two are not irreconcilable. Such in barest outline is the view embraced by Novalis, Cardinal Newman, Leszek Kolakowski, C. S. Lewis, Jacques Maritain and Charles Hartshorne—individuals on the whole no less impressive than those named above.

Clearly the relation between Hellenism and Hebraism is an important issue, if only because, as the epigraph suggests, a sound understanding of the spiritual predicament of modern humanity, including our susceptibility to nihilism and despair, depends upon its correct resolution.


Regarding the moral and social significance of the quarrel between science and religion, one can expect to find broad differences between progressives and non-progressives, that is, between those well disposed and those ill disposed to the progress and diffusion of science. Progressives like George Grote, Leslie Stephen, Sigmund Freud and Bertrand Russell, for instance, welcomed the quarrel insofar as it was a factor in the decline of religion, which they regarded as a form of superstition or neurosis impeding the betterment of the intellectual, moral and material aspects of human life. Non-progressives like Novalis, Maistre, Tolstoy, Pobedonostsev and Lawrence, inasmuch as they too held that religion (which, admittedly, each conceived differently) was being steadily weakened by the progress and popularization of science, can also be said to have recognized the existence of such a conflict. But since in their view its chief effect was to erode the foundations of morality or all that is high and noble in human life, they could only deplore it.

What is interesting, however, is that there were progressives who had mixed ideas and feelings about the corrosive effect of the scientific-technical project on religion. Up to a point these shared the non-progressive's anxiety over the potential morally and socially harmful consequences of the decline of religion. One such progressive, we maintain, was John Stuart Mill.


To this day Mill's moral, social and political thought continues to receive a generous share of scholarly attention. On the whole less attention has been given to what he had to say about religion--alas, probably to our not inconsiderable disadvantage. For in our estimation Mill's religious thought is roughly on a level with that of Locke and Hume before him and William James after. Aside perhaps from William James, Mill may well have been the last of the great liberal-progressive philosophers to approach the problem of religion with a relatively open mind and take it seriously. He promised--and probably made good his promise--to treat from the skeptical standpoint the question of religion's usefulness more systematically and philosophically than had so far been done. And we are not aware of any predecessor or contemporary of his who had investigated the scientific support for theistic belief as comprehensively and rigorously as he did. (For that matter, it is quite likely that he intended his final major work to be the most exhaustive such inquiry to date.) What is more, he treated the entire issue of the truth and utility of religion with a degree of directness and explicitness rarely if ever matched by anyone in the English-speaking progressive tradition before him. So at any rate he himself seems to have believed. Finally, his treatment has the added advantage of being informed by a vivid, first-hand experience of what was subsequently labelled by historians the "Victorian crisis of faith." For all these reasons the hope seems justified that his teaching concerning the problem of religion in the age of science will repay close study.

The main argument

The overall argument of this dissertation can be summarized as follows: Mill, following Comte, believed that a necessary, irresolvable conflict exists between science

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and the belief in God, and that the inexorable march of science was bringing about the
demise of religion in the conventional sense. As did so many progressives, he saw the
latter development as a cause for celebration, because it meant freedom from priestly
tyreany and superstition and permitted the further material and moral improvement of
human life.

But for him the decline of religious belief was also a cause for deep concern if not
lament. Mill recognized that although traditional forms of the belief in God had their
harmful individual and social effects, they had their benefits too. One of these benefits,
regarded by him as vital, was the satisfaction of the human craving for something higher
to look up to and venerate. Another was a sense of larger meaning and higher purpose
without which life was bound to seem paltry and insignificant, especially to the more
sensitive and thoughtful among us. According to Mill, these beneficial influences of
religion on the individual could not but redound to the advantage of society as well.

Mill thus sought to find a religion which would not fall victim to scientific
progress, and which would provide those benefits but without the costs associated with
traditional religion. The only religion that could satisfy these requirements and stood a
good chance of taking hold was the Religion of Humanity, as Mill, following Comte,
called it. This was to be a purely human religion, a religion without God.

Mill believed or at least hoped that the Religion of Humanity would eventually
become the governing creed of humankind, but he was also persuaded that it could be a
long time before this eventuality came to pass. Meanwhile care had to be taken not to
deprive humankind of the only religion in its possession, however tenuous that religion's
hold was fast becoming. In its current state humankind was much better off with even the
mere husk or hollow shell of the old religion than it would have been with no religion
whatever. Therefore it was necessary to "improve" the received religion--to render it
unobjectionable on both moral and scientific grounds--so as to give it new life. That
improvement was to proceed along the lines of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination articulated by Mill in the *Three Essays on Religion*.

Mill, then, believed that there was a definite social purpose to be served by a Christianity thus improved, if not for the indefinite future, then at least until such time as the Religion of Humanity could take hold. Yet he also showed that the former would be unlikely to acquire or retain the influence over humankind it would need to have to serve that purpose effectively.

Hence the central dilemma, as Mill understood it, of modernity. The seemingly ineluctable progress of science promises humankind complete freedom from the trammels of the old religion, but in seeking to make good it threatens to create a spiritual void which could not easily be filled. Mill may have been an atheist or a complete skeptic, but his was a case of ambivalent if not "reluctant skepticism."

Our place in the tradition of Mill scholarship

Where, the reader will ask, do we stand in relation to the tradition of Mill scholarship, especially that part of it which deals with his social and political philosophy? Before venturing an answer to this question, however, we would do well to identify the main competing tendencies within that tradition.

Ever since the publication in 1840 of his essay "Coleridge" Mill has been charged by sympathetic and hostile critics alike with unresolved fundamental tensions or inconsistencies. Speaking of his moral and social philosophy, some have contended that his brand of utilitarianism is incoherent because it purports to recognize a qualitative distinction between higher and lower pleasures, which nevertheless (they maintain) it

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11 That Mill was a reluctant skeptic—reluctant out of concern not so much for himself as for others—is persuasively argued in Robert Carr, "The Religious Thought of John Stuart Mill: A Study in Reluctant Skepticism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 23 (1962), 475-95. For a brief assessment of his argument, see 289, n. 34 below.

cannot do without contradicting itself by invoking non-utilitarian standards. Others would have it that Mill's endeavour to ground liberalism in utilitarianism can be likened to the proverbial attempt to fill a round hole with a square peg. For every individual right recognized by liberalism there are many possible violations of it which, they argue, clear-headed and tough-minded utilitarians would demand but which true liberals could seldom if ever countenance.

A final basic contradiction (or disharmony or disconnection) frequently imputed to Mill's moral and social philosophy worth noting here is that between its Benthamite and its Germano-Coleridgean-Carlylean aspects. In one version or another, this criticism of Mill goes back at least as far as R. H. Hutton, and included in the roster of illustrious names of those who have advanced it are Basil Willey, Dorothea Krook, Raymond Williams, Isaiah Berlin and Noel Annan.

But the version of that criticism of special interest to us is the one put forward by Gertrude Himmelfarb in the famous introduction to her collection of essays by the "other Mill." It runs as follows: Contrary to received wisdom, there are in truth "two Mills"--

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the "earlier", "conservative", "Coleridgean" Mill on the one hand, and the "later", "liberal", semi-Benthamite Mill on the other--and the "drama of Mill's life was the alternation of these two Mills." This claim is confirmed by the fact, hitherto imperfectly grasped, that "the 'periods' of [Mill's] work are as well defined as those of Picasso." He was raised by his father in the tradition of rationalist, Benthamite radicalism, and was in every way faithful to that tradition until age twenty. However, after the months-long despondency brought on by the crisis of faith he experienced when still only twenty years old--which despondency reading Wordsworth's poetry helped him get over--Mill came under the influence of Comte, Carlyle and Coleridge. Here is how Himmelfarb describes the impact these men had on Mill's thought then:

Comte impressed upon Mill the idea of the necessary development of social systems and the historical relativity of social institutions, thus condemning to futility the efforts of the philosophic radicals to reform society according to a preconceived plan. Carlyle undermined the utilitarian faith in mechanical progress and laissez-faire liberalism. And Coleridge taught Mill a respect for history and tradition, for an organic society in which religion and authority were at least as essential as reason and liberty.19

He was now a very different Mill, as shown by such writings of his as "Spirit of the Age", "Civilization", "Bentham" and "Coleridge." So he remained, at least in private if not always in public, until after the publication of his review of the second volume of Tocqueville's Democracy in 1840. At this time his thinking, but especially the public expression of his thought, began to be dominated by Harriet Taylor, a married woman.

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18 Ibid., vii.

19 Ibid., xi.
with whom he had been carrying on an "intimate and confidential" (though Platonic) relationship for more than a decade. Accordingly, 1841 saw the emergence of the "later" Mill, which development was in many ways tantamount to a return to the "aboriginal", Benthamite Mill that had preceded the mental crisis of 1826. One of the highlights of the "later" stage of Mill's intellectual life was the publication of perhaps his most influential radical work, On Liberty, but during this period he also wrote "Nature" and "Utility of Religion" (the first and second of his posthumously published Three Essays on Religion). The "later" Mill was phased out, though, in 1859, Harriet Taylor having passed away in November 1858, after approximately seven years of married life and further intellectual collaboration with him. Soon afterwards the "earlier" Mill reasserted himself, and he held sway until the end in May 1873. The final period of Mill's life witnessed the publication or writing of such notable "conservative" works of his as the Tocquevillean Considerations on Representative Government as well as "Theism", the last of the Three Essays.

It is hoped that the preceding summary gives some impression of how fascinating we find Himmelfarb's narrative. What interests us the most, however, is the disagreement between Himmelfarb, on the one hand, and Willey and others, on the other, over the bearing on Mill's religious writings of the Benthamite-Coleridgean tension in his thought. According to Willey, in each of Mill's essays on religion the Benthamite rationalistic tendency is dominant, and there is no basic change in spirit and direction from one essay to the next. Krook, we believe, would agree with Willey on the latter point, although she appears to ascribe to the "non-Benthamite" and "anti-Benthamite" tendencies in Mill's moral and political thought a more substantial influence on his religious writings than does Willey. Himmelfarb, nevertheless, separates "Nature" and "Utility of Religion" from "Theism." To the first two essays she attributes a distinctly atheistic, Benthamite bent. Of the second essay in particular she says that it "[denigrates] the idea of the social

20 Cf. Willey, 186-96; and Krook, 1-9, 181-201.
utility of religion as 'moral bribery or subornation of the understanding.' That "Utility" is militantly anti-religious should not, she implies, surprise us, since both the outline of its argument and the impetus for its writing were supplied by Harriet Taylor, the "more belligerent disbeliever of the two." The third essay, by contrast, she sees as cast in a conservative, pro-religious, Coleridgean mould. "Theism" is, in her view, "entirely sympathetic" to the idea that religion is socially useful. In it "the existence of God and the traditional faith of Christianity [are] elevated to the logical status of a 'possibility' and to the moral status of an inspiring and edifying belief."21

There are others, for example, Richard Holt Hutton, John Morley, Alexander Bain and, more recently, Karl Britton, not all of whom would have agreed with Himmelfarb's argument as a whole, who nevertheless, like her, have taken "Theism" to mark a substantial retreat from the atheism of "Utility."22

In recent decades, another, "revisionary" tendency in Mill scholarship has been gaining strength. As J. B. Schneewind points out, further research into the Mill corpus, prompted in part by the greater availability especially of Mill's "minor writings", has forced scholars to reassess the orthodox view of Mill as a fundamentally incoherent and relatively shallow thinker.23 One can now discern a growing openness to the possibility of finding in his writings at the very least valuable clues to the resolution of many of the basic contradictions or tensions traditionally ascribed to his moral and social thought.

21 Himmelfarb, xxiv.


23 J. B. Schneewind, editor's Introd. to Mill: A Collection of Critical Essays, xiv-xv. Among those brave few who at roughly that time called for, and have themselves contributed to, such a reassessment are Edward Alexander and John M. Robson. For their calls, see Alexander, Arnold and Mill, 25; and John. M. Robson, The Improvement of Humankind: The Social and Political Thought of John Stuart Mill (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), viii-ix.
It is, we are tempted to say, high time. Ironically, while engaged in reconstructing his own Benthamite thought so as to accommodate in it what to him seemed true in Coleridge, Carlyle and others, Mill apparently anticipated and strove to protect against the very inconsistencies later imputed to him. In the *Autobiography* he says, "I found the fabric of my old and taught opinions giving way in many fresh places, but was incessantly occupied with weaving it anew." Thus Oxford philosopher John Gray rightly admonishes us, "Mill claims that the fabric of his thought is all of a piece; we owe it to him to take the claim seriously."

So the same John Gray, for instance, building on the findings especially of Alan Ryan and John Rees, has sought to demonstrate that Mill makes a coherent and powerful case for liberalism on utilitarian grounds. We cannot here delve into the details of Gray's technically difficult yet highly interesting argument, but must limit ourselves to providing a summary of it.

The argument appears to turn on the claim that what Mill, in contradistinction to Bentham, offers us is a version not of act- or rule-utilitarianism, but of indirect utilitarianism. The latter, says Gray, can be traced back to David Hume, and following Mill it is taken up and further elaborated by Henry Sidgwick and Richard Hare.

According to Gray's Mill, although it tells us that "pleasure or happiness, and that alone, has intrinsic value", the Principle of Utility, contrary to what act-utilitarians say, is unable to function as a prescriptive, action-guiding principle. One reason for this inability is that "we have no reliable means of identifying the act that has best

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27 Ibid., 126.
consequences.\textsuperscript{28} Recourse must be had at the practical level to secondary principles or \textit{axiomata media}, that is, the rules of conduct recognized by ordinary moral consciousness (for example, the rule that promises must be kept). Properly understood, these \textit{axiomata media} are such that the benefits of treating them as mere rules of thumb--which is what an act-utilitarian (someone who tries to justify every action by a direct appeal to the Principle of Utility) would do--would be vastly more than offset by the cost to society of the erosion of those principles to result from such treatment.\textsuperscript{29}

Thus, the general welfare requires that by and large we abide by those principles or rules "even where our calculations seem to suggest that we are sacrificing some available welfare thereby."\textsuperscript{30} For them to serve their purpose, they must be regarded as more than rules of thumb (although not as absolutely inviolable imperatives). Paradoxical though this may sound, it is precisely as more than rules of thumb, nay, as rules or principles that in the normal course of affairs preempt direct appeal to the Principle of Utility that they are justified by the Principle of Utility. If each of us should instead endeavour on every occasion to determine how to act (for example, whether or not to keep a promise) by comparing the potential consequences of different possible actions for the general happiness, to wit, by directly appealing to the Principle of Utility, confusion and anarchy would be the inevitable result.\textsuperscript{31}

Simply put, then, according to Mill direct appeal in practice to the Principle of Utility is on the whole self-defeating. The proper \textit{modus operandi} of that principle, therefore, is indirect, which is to say that the happiness of all can generally be pursued only indirectly. The Principle of Utility can for the most part be safely appealed to only at

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 132.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 125, 126-27, 129-30.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 132.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 130-31.
the theoretical or critical level, as the source of justification for those rules, principles, customs and individual dispositions to which direct appeal is to be made in practice.  

Hence the appellation "indirect utilitarianism."  

Furthermore, Gray's argument continues, it turns out that in Mill's view one of those *axiomata media* derivable from the Principle of Utility is the Principle of Liberty. Society's long-term advantage dictates that, so long as no one's vital interests, namely, personal security and autonomy, are endangered by its exercise, individual liberty not be infringed upon, even when infringements of it might momentarily make society a little happier.  

(However, Gray claims, Mill does not assert the converse--that individual liberty must be curbed whenever its exercise threatens harm to anyone's vital interests, even if not curbing it might be productive of an immediate, momentary increase in general happiness.)

\[\text{\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 125.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{33} A key distinction in Gray's view between rule-utilitarianism and indirect utilitarianism is that the latter "applies not only to social rules, but to entire codes of conduct, with all their attendant motives, dispositions, attitudes and sentiments." By putting the emphasis on the cultivation of "dispositions and virtues... in respect to the application of social rules" rather than on ensuring simple obedience of those rules, indirect utilitarianism allows for a much needed flexibility in their application which seems inadmissible on rule-utilitarian grounds. For a virtuous person is led by his or her virtue (hence not by considerations of utility) to breach social rules in situations where doing so conduces to the general happiness, whereas a person taught merely to obey rules has not that capacity for discrimination. "The indirect view," says Gray, implicitly contrasting it with rule-utilitarianism, "inasmuch as its net is cast much wider than the scope of social rules, can consistently treat social rules as more than rules of thumb and less than absolutist requirements": ibid., 130-131.\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 125-26, 133.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{35} John Gray, "Mill's and other liberalisms," Liberalisms, 220-21.}\]
There are for Mill at least two compelling utilitarian reasons for granting to the Principle of Liberty this "more-than-a-rule-of-thumb" status. The first is our interest in autonomy as a major ingredient of individual happiness. The second is the necessity of liberty (particularly of thought and speech) to the growth of human knowledge, which growth is ultimately beneficial to humankind.36

Nevertheless—and this is the most important point to be made here—it would not have been possible so to reconcile the Principle of Utility with the Principle of Liberty had it not been for the discovery and elaboration of indirect utilitarianism. For that development, Gray maintains, much of the credit must go to John Stuart Mill.37

Two other revisionists worth mentioning here, even if only in passing, are Fred Berger and Maurice Cowling. Berger in his formidable study contends that Mill's moral and political thought is not only substantially more coherent than it has generally been credited with being, but also "a basis for a more defensible form of utilitarianism, and of political liberalism, than has often been previously supposed possible."38 Cowling, by contrast, is hostile to Mill. He thinks Mill a good deal less libertarian and more intolerant (especially towards Christianity) than one might have expected the "godfather of English liberalism" to be. He goes so far as to say that Mill "emerges [from his book] considerably more radical, and, without straining words unduly, may be accused of more than a touch of something resembling moral totalitarianism."39 He charges him with having fashioned the misleading language of liberalism still in vogue even among conservatives; and with having propagated a pernicious "political manner" also still in

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36 Gray, "Indirect utility and fundamental rights," 133-34.

37 However, some of Gray's later writings betray a dramatic increase in skepticism regarding the success of that reconciliation. See, for instance, Gray, "Mill's and other liberalisms," 220-24; and John Gray and G. W. Smith, editors’ intro. to J. S. Mill: On Liberty in focus (New York: Routledge, 1991), 10-12.


vogue, a manner in which "general reasoning" is unduly prominent, which therefore gives undue prominence in political life to the "intelligentsia." Yet, though he believes Mill's social and political teaching to be wrong in many respects, he too rejects the traditional view of Mill as incoherent at a more superficial level. He tries to convince especially conservatives that they cannot afford to misunderstand Mill (as they often have), precisely because, owing to his high intelligence and persuasiveness, he remains a dangerous influence.40

We number ourselves, at least provisionally, among the revisionists. For we tend to agree with them that the traditional view of Mill overestimates the degree of incoherence in his thought. Where we part company with revisionists like Gray, Berger and others is in regard to the nature of and motives behind Mill's rhetoric. One aspect of his rhetoric to which in our opinion they give insufficient attention is its "political" or politic character. In our view, Mill deliberately mutes or withholds certain parts or implications of his teaching and trumpets others. He does so largely out of consideration for the metaphysical or nonmaterial needs of individuals and society in the immediate and also for the foreseeable future. We reserve, however, for the second part of our Introduction a more complete analysis of the political nature of Mill's rhetoric and its implications for how he must at times be read to be fully understood.

40 Ibid., xii, xliii-xliv, xlvii-liii.

The game plan

To establish, as Gray and Berger and even Cowling in his own highly unsympathetic way have sought to do, the inner coherence and unity of Mill's social and political thought would be important not so much because of the voluminous scholarly controversy surrounding Mill which it would help to settle (though this would surely be a desirable outcome). Rather, its chief import would be to make us take Mill himself so much more seriously. We would be forced to consider whether his understanding of the problems of liberal democracy in the modern age is not a good deal deeper and subtler than we initially expected, particularly if we have hitherto been convinced of the incoherence of his political philosophy. And we would be still more open to the possibility of learning something truly worthwhile from him about those problems and their solutions.

At present, however, our objectives are a good deal more modest. We will not attempt here to refute Himmelfarb's "two Mills" argument as a whole. We do not even claim to be capable of explaining all the apparent ambiguities and contradictions in Mill's religious essays. But we believe that applying to these texts the hermeneutical method adumbrated above (and elaborated below) has enabled us to resolve most of the important contradictions, such as those which Himmelfarb and others allege exist between "Utility" and "Theism." Equally significant, that it has disclosed hitherto unprobed depths and complexities in Mill's teaching about religion. If we are right in so believing, then we shall have made a significant contribution to the revisionary project. We shall also have grounds for suspecting that our hermeneutical approach will be fruitful in other areas of the study of Mill, that with it many other contradictions Himmelfarb and others claim to have discovered in his thought can be resolved or explained away. Perhaps it would then not be too much to hope that a new, considerably nobler and, especially to the liberals

41 For an ingenious attempt to substitute "two worlds of Mill's liberalism" for Himmelfarb's "two Mills", see Eisenach, Two Worlds of Liberalism, 163-215.
among us, far more useful John Stuart Mill will eventually rise phoenix-like from the ashes of orthodox scholarship.

The textual focus of the dissertation is, of course, the collection of Mill's religious writings published posthumously under the title Three Essays on Religion. The essay to which the lion's share of our attention is devoted is the "Utility of Religion": here Mill articulates the problem of religion in the age of science in all of its complexity more completely than he does in either of the other two essays. "Theism" too is similarly closely analyzed, since it is the chief source of our understanding of Mill's teaching regarding the conflict between science and religion. The first essay, "Nature", is referred to from time to time only, since it is deemed to be at best marginally concerned with the main question of this dissertation. For the purpose of illuminating his teaching concerning that question, reference is frequently made to other works by Mill, as well as to works by other authors.

The body of the dissertation is divided into three parts. In the first part we expound Mill's view of the usefulness of religion. Over the course of the dissertation it will become evident that such an exposition is necessary if we are to grasp fully and clearly the moral and social consequences Mill saw flowing from the quarrel between science and religion. In the second part we delve into Mill's argument concerning the scientific support for theism, with a view to comprehending more fully nature and extent of the quarrel between science and religion as Mill construed it. The third part is a more detailed investigation of Mill's teaching about the main moral and social implications of that conflict. We proceed by analyzing his treatment of two basic issues, the Religion of Humanity's adequacy as the religion of the future, and the reasonableness and feasibility of a Platonic-Christian theism of hope and imagination.

Upon completion of the third part we draw the dissertation to a close with a brief, tentative exploration of certain outstanding issues arising from Mill's teaching about
religion in the age of science, coupled with a few suggestions for further research and reflection.

Before launching into the first part of the dissertation, however, we must investigate the political nature of Mill's rhetoric in the *Three Essays*. Unless we grasp clearly their manner of communication, we cannot be certain of having correctly interpreted their matter.
MENTAL PEMMICAN

While discussing, in a letter to Harriet Taylor Mill, a collection of essays intended to include "Nature" and "Utility of Religion" and to be published posthumously, John Stuart Mill says the following:

Two years, well employed, would enable us I think to get the most of [this collection of essays] into a state fit for printing—if not in the best form for popular effect, yet in the state of concentrated thought—a sort of mental pemmican [sic; emphasis added—BK], which thinkers, when there are any after us, may nourish themselves with and then dilute for other people. The Logic & Pol. Ec. may perhaps keep their buoyancy long enough to hold these other things above water till there are people capable of taking up the thread of thought & continuing it. I fancy I see one large or two small posthumous volumes of Essays, with the Life at their head, & my heart is set on having these in a state fit for publication quelconque, if we live so long, by Christmas 1955; though not then to be published if we are still alive to improve & enlarge them.¹

There is a good deal of interesting matter in the above passage, including a clear indication that, notwithstanding Helen Taylor's claim to the contrary,² Mill intended the Autobiography, "Nature" and "Utility of Religion" to be published posthumously. But more important for us is the fact that it sheds considerable light on how the latter two essays were written and, concomitantly, on how they were meant to be read.

Pemmican is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as:

A preparation made by certain North American Indians, consisting of lean meat, dried, pounded, and mixed with melted fat, so as to form a paste,

¹ John Mill to Harriet Taylor Mill, 29 Jan. 1954, CW, XIV, 141-42. For evidence of Mill's intention to include "Nature" and "Utility of Religion" in that collection of essays, see John Mill to Harriet Mill, 30 Aug. 1853, ibid., 111-12, and 29 Jan. 1854, ibid., 142, in which he mentions the first essay; and 20 Feb. 1854, ibid., 165, and 20 Mar. 1854, ibid., 190, in which the second is mentioned.

² Helen Taylor, "Introductory Notice" to Three Essays on Religion, CW, X, 374.
and pressed into cakes; hence, beef similarly treated, and usually flavoured with currants or the like, for the use of arctic explorers, travellers, and soldiers, as containing much nutriment in little bulk, and keeping for a long time [emphases added--BK].

As a metaphor for a specific literary style, "mental pemican" calls to mind a highly condensed, concentrated work. Such a work is dense with meaning. It conforms to "logographic necessity" in that each sentence or phrase in it, indeed each word, performs a definite and indispensable function within the work as a whole. Consequently, the meaning of a work of this kind is not readily accessible. To pursue the metaphor, to make it yield its "essence" or meaning, one must "chew" on the work strenuously; in other words, the reader must move slowly and methodically, paying close attention to each statement exactly as it is made (and where it appears) and carefully thinking through all its ramifications, before going on to the next statement.

Only a few--Mill identifies them as "thinkers"--have the mental power, self-discipline and stamina required to master completely the teaching of such a work. That is why Mill suggests that "Nature" and "Utility" are unlikely to be widely read. Thinkers must appear who, once they have fully understood the teachings of these essays, would "dilute" them, that is to say, take each essential aspect of each teaching separately and explicate it at greater length while simplifying or ignoring the others. Only if diluted in this way could those teachings ever be made accessible to the person of average intelligence and literacy.

As clearly indicated above, the claim that "Nature" and "Utility_of Religion" are examples of what Mill calls "mental pemican" has definite implications for how one should go about analyzing and interpreting these writings. But there is another factor which we must also take into account in attempting to settle the hermeneutical issue here--the role of reticence or reserve in the Three Essays.

The necessity of reserve

In Utilitarianism Mill, while clarifying the distinction between utility and mere expediency, says that "it would often be expedient, for the purpose of getting over some momentary embarrassment, or attaining some object immediately useful to ourselves or others, to tell a lie. But," he adds,


inasmuch as the cultivation in ourselves of a sensitive feeling on the subject of veracity, is one of the useful, and the enfeeblement of that feeling one of the most hurtful, things to which our conduct can be instrumental; and inasmuch as any, even unintentional, deviation from truth, does that much towards weakening the trustworthiness of human assertion, which is not only the principal support of all present social well-being, but the insufficiency of which does more than any one thing that can be named to keep back civilization, virtue, everything on which human happiness on the largest scale depends; we feel that the violation, for a present advantage, of a rule of such transcendant [sic] expediency, is not expedient, and that he who, for the sake of a convenience to himself or to some other individual, does what depends on him to deprive mankind of the good, and inflict upon them the evil, involved in the greater or less reliance which they can place in each other's word, acts the part of one of their worst enemies.

The preceding is without a doubt a strong statement, one which seems to make of truth-telling almost an inviolable rule. Nevertheless, we then find the following:

Yet that even this rule, sacred as it is, admits of possible exceptions, is acknowledged by all moralists; the chief of which is when the withholding of some fact (as of information from a malefactor, or of bad news from a person dangerously ill) would preserve some one (especially a person other than oneself) from great and unmerited evil, and when the withholding can only be effected by denial.4

We can see here that in Mill's view, as useful and necessary as truthfulness generally is to society, there are matters about which one is in certain circumstances justified in being less than wholly truthful.

One such matter is religion.

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4 CW, X, 223.
Self-regarding reasons for reserve

Throughout his writings Mill provides essentially two different types of reasons unbelievers are right to conceal their opinions about religion. The first type is self-regarding: we are justified in withholding our heterodox religious opinions when disclosing them could bring us harm. In the Autobiography, while speaking of the religious aspect of his early education, Mill says that his father advised him prudently to refrain from avowing his unbelief. As he indicates shortly afterwards, his father's justification was that "frankness on these subjects" could lead either to the "loss of the means of subsistence" or to "exclusion from some sphere of usefulness peculiarly suitable to the capacities of the individual." (The first consideration is clearly primarily self-regarding, whereas the second is at best only partly so.) Although here Mill does not affirm the validity of his father's advice, neither does he deny it.

Indeed, a number of his letters indicate that he had eventually taken his father's lesson to heart. In several of his letters to Auguste Comte Mill justifies his unwillingness publicly to express his sympathy for Comte's anti-religious and anti-Christian views on the grounds that he could not do so at this time in England without alienating the vast majority of his readers. And in a letter to Sarah Austin dating from the same time period, Mill expresses misgivings about Comte's own lack of reserve; by continually speaking out "without compromises and reserves" against religion, apart from "giving offence", Comte has been, Mill implies, imprudently "compromising his means of livelihood." Nevertheless, by 1870 circumstances have, he suggests in a letter to a fellow-progressive, changed so much that it would be useful for thoughtful and knowledgeable persons to state publicly, with full candour, their opinions on the most

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5 CW, I, 45-47.


7 Mill to Sarah Austin, 28 Jan. 1845, ibid., 653-54.
vital moral and social issues. Yet even then he feels compelled to add, "I do not, however, blame a person who stops short of the complete public expression of unpopular opinions, when it would involve serious danger of the loss of his means of subsistence. . . ."8

Other-regarding reasons for reserve

The second, and for Mill even more extenuating, type of reason for reticence is other-regarding--when frankness could have an adverse effect on other individuals or on society as a whole. In the Autobiography Mill recalls two occasions during his boyhood on which he debated religion with a boy older than himself. Both times he neglected his father's advice and confessed and defended his unbelief. One boy, Mill says, "I certainly staggered at the time, but the subject was never renewed between us." The effect on the other boy was, according to Mill's description, less extreme; even so, he was "surprised and somewhat shocked."9 The outcomes were in both cases unhappy.

That the foregoing two incidents confirmed for Mill the validity of his father's advice is shown by a letter he wrote to Thomas Carlyle when still only in his late twenties. In that letter he says he is aware of the "unspeakable good" denied him by his lack of faith, and "[contents himself] with doing no ill, by never propagating [his] uncertainties."10

To give another example, while sympathetically discussing in one of his letters to John Sterling (a disciple of Coleridge) the optimal constitution of the national clerisy proposed by Coleridge, Mill suggests that membership not be limited to Christians. In his view, intellectually advanced "infidels" should be included as well. But the latter must

8 CW, I, 45-47.
10 Mill to Carlyle, 12 Jan. 1834, CW, XII, 206.
meet one condition which is "essential... in the present stage of human progressiveness."

They must

abstain from either directly attacking, or indirectly undermining Christianity, & even adopt (as far as without hypocrisy they can) those means of addressing the feelings & the conscience, to which a connexion with Christianity has given potency. An infidel who attempts to subvert or weaken the belief of mankind in Christianity, ought not in my opinion to form a part of the national clerisy; not because he may not be performing a conscientious duty in so doing, but because it is to me a proof that he misunderstands the wants & tendencies of his age, & that the effect of his exertions would probably be to make men worse instead of better by shaking the only firm convictions & feelings of duty which they have, without having even a remote chance of furnishing them with any effectual substitute.¹¹

According to Mill, therefore, reticence about religious issues is not only warranted but also obligatory to the extent that freely disclosing one's unbelief threatens to be harmful morally and socially.

It is thinking of this kind that later prompts Mill, in his essay "Coleridge", to criticize the eighteenth century philosophs for their unqualified and unreserved assault on the old order. They were, Mill concedes, right to think that the old customs, institutions and beliefs, including traditional religion, had become "effete." But these "institutions and creeds... had rendered essential services to civilization, and still filled a place in the human mind, and in the arrangements of society, which could not without great peril, be left vacant."¹² Until such time as it can be replaced by a creed more congruent with emerging needs and conditions—which time was not yet at hand—traditional Christianity, Mill implies, for all its defects, will be necessary both as a teacher of morality and as a common focus of "loyalty." Hence its continuing crucial importance to the existence of society. Had the philosophs been adequately apprised of this truth,

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¹¹ Mill to Sterling, 22 Oct. 1831, CW, XII, 76. However, as we shall see, Mill's position on this question eventually changes.

¹² CW, X, 138.
they would have been more nuanced and guarded in their criticisms of the *ancien régime*, and of Christianity in particular, so as not to "[throw] away the shell without preserving the kernel."\textsuperscript{13} In that they were not, they contributed not a little to the chaos which plagued France during the French Revolution and its aftermath.\textsuperscript{14}

Accordingly, later in the essay, in the context of a brief discussion of Coleridge's attempt to harmonize the relationship between religion and philosophy, but probably also with the French experience in mind, Mill says,

> Whatever some religious people may think, philosophy will and must go on, ever seeking to understand whatever can be made understandable; and, whatever some philosophers may think, there is little prospect at present that philosophy will take the place of religion, or that any philosophy will be speedily received in this country [England], unless supposed not only to be consistent with, but even to yield collateral support to, Christianity.\textsuperscript{15}

Noting especially Mill's use of the word *supposed*, we can explicate the latter part of this passage as follows: Any philosophical teaching must, at least for some time to come, appear, without necessarily always being, supportive of Christianity if it is to gain popular acceptance. Therefore the proponents of the given philosophy must express themselves on religious questions in the most politic manner possible. That means muting or blunting somewhat, and in certain instances perhaps even withholding, their disagreements with various elements of Christianity while trumpeting those aspects of Christianity with which they agree.

The soundness of the above explication is borne out by the immediate sequel. "What is the use, then," Mill asks, "of treating with contempt the idea of a religious philosophy?"\textsuperscript{16} We note that the question Mill raises here is about usefulness, not truth.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} See ibid., 131-38.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 160.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
He leaves open the possibility that from the standpoint of the truth simply the idea of a religious philosophy is indefensible. But since a religious philosophy is what the times seem to be calling for in England, "our main hope ought to be", says Mill, that it is one which "[fulfils] the conditions of a philosophy--the very foremost of which is, unrestricted freedom of thought." Not surprisingly to us, Mill fails to mention unrestricted freedom of expression, presumably because this is not as critical to the philosopher as unrestricted freedom of thought. Indeed, for the sake of the latter, the philosopher is, Mill seems to suggest, willing to pay the price of restricted freedom of expression. That this is Mill's suggestion is indicated by the ensuing passage, in which he identifies a number of impediments to philosophy (defined by him as the "love of truth") associated with traditional religion.

There is no philosophy possible where fear of consequences is a stronger principle than love of truth; where speculation is paralyzed, either by the belief that conclusions honestly arrived at will be punished by a just and good Being with eternal damnation, or by seeing in every text of Scripture a foregone conclusion, with which the results of inquiry must, at any expense of sophistry and self-deception, be made to quadrate.18

The examples provided here of the kind of constraint which he would have removed all operate inwardly: they act directly on one's thinking, preventing one from thinking certain thoughts well before giving public expression to those thoughts could ever be considered. Constraints on the expression of anti-religious views, such as fear of adverse public opinion or of the stake, are not mentioned.19

All of this shows how sensitive Mill believes philosophers must be to dominant opinion and how necessary he thinks it is for them as far as possible to accommodate

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 As late as 1845, in letters to Comte, for instance, Mill is still advising against open public attacks "contre la theologie, meme christienne" in England, his principal reason being that at present such attacks could precipitate a religious reaction which might further retard the progress of opinion there: Mill to Comte, 3 Apr. 1844, CW, XIII, 625-26; see also Mill to Comte, 27 Jan. 1845, ibid., 657.
themselves to that opinion while at the same time maintaining the integrity of their teachings.

**Mill's reserve and *On Liberty***

Nevertheless, a question arises here. In *On Liberty* Mill argues for the removal of all social and political constraints on thought and speech, as well as for complete frankness and openness in discussion, even of religious matters. How are we to resolve the apparent contradiction between this fact and our interpretation of Mill's position on the discussion of religious issues in "Coleridge" and elsewhere?

The answer to this question can be gleaned from the *Autobiography*.

By the early 1850s, Mill informs us in the Early Draft, he has become convinced that although significant reforms have taken place in the realm both of institutions and of opinions, the benefits accruing to humankind from them have not been nearly as great as expected. The reason for this disappointing outcome is that they have not been accompanied by a corresponding change in humankind's "intellectual and moral state", on which change "all real amelioration" of human life depends. The old religious, moral and political beliefs having been "so much discredited" among the more enlightened as to have lost most of their usefulness, as long as they are in place, no substantial progress will be possible.

Hence what is needed is a complete "renovation... in the bases of belief", and all thought and writing of enduring value must contribute directly to that renovation.20 Accordingly, Mill finds it far less justifiable now than he did at the "height of [his] reaction [against Benthamism]" to be "indulgent to the common opinions of the world".

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20 Early Draft, *CW*, I, 244, 246.
to rest satisfied with the "superficial progress" they had begun to undergo, and to "put in abeyance" his most "heretical" views.  

Nevertheless, those old beliefs are still strong enough to impede the rise of better ones. Some way, Mill implies, must be found to break down that barrier. Mill does not in the Early Draft of the Autobiography tell us what that way is, but a clue is provided in the following passage, which was added in the final draft (completed in 1870):

More recently a spirit of free speculation has sprung up, giving a more encouraging prospect of the gradual mental emancipation of England; and, concurring with the renewal, under better auspices, of the movement for political freedom in the rest of Europe, has given to the present condition of human affairs a more hopeful aspect.

This passage clearly suggests that in Mill's view what was needed at mid-century to help break the hold of the old opinions was greater freedom of thought; ergo On Liberty. As Joseph Hamburger argues, Mill hoped that by legitimizing complete freedom of thought and discussion even of religious matters, On Liberty would encourage the open, critical discussion needed to accomplish the renovation in the foundations of our beliefs.

Yet as Hamburger also points out, to advocate candour and openness is one thing, but actually to practise it is another. Mill well nigh admits as much in the ensuing passage:

It is, however, obvious that law and authority have no business with restraining [offensive attacks] either [on infidelity or on religion], while opinion ought, in every instance, to determine its verdict by the circumstances of the individual case; condemning every one, on whichever

21 Ibid., 236, 238.
22 Ibid., 246.
23 Autobiography, CW, I, 247. For more on the differences between the Early Draft and the final version of the Autobiography, see 39-50 below.
24 For the substance of the preceding argument, see Hamburger, "Religion and On Liberty," 157-60.
25 Ibid., 151, 152.
side of the argument he places himself, in whose mode of advocacy either want of candour, or malignity, bigotry, or intolerance of feeling manifest themselves; but not inferring these vices from the side which a person takes, though it be the contrary side of the question to our own: and giving merited honour to every one, whatever opinion he may hold, who has calmness to see and honesty to state what his opponents and their opinions really are, exaggerating nothing to their discredit, keeping nothing back which tells, or can be supposed to tell, in their favour. This is the real morality of public discussion: and if often violated, I am happy to think that there are many controversialists who to a great extent observe it, and a still greater number who conscientiously strive towards it.26

The last sentence in particular suggests that at present, and perhaps for some time to come, the "morality of public discussion" enunciated here, of which "candour" regarding one's own opinions forms an integral part,27 cannot be fully realized. The controversialist, at least for now it seems, can do no better than conform to it "to a great extent", or "conscientiously strive towards it."

Mill is one of those controversialists who can do no better, especially in the area of religion. The reason for this inability is adumbrated in a letter Mill wrote to Alexander Bain shortly after the publication of On Liberty, which letter includes the following revealing passage:

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, & hold that we ought to convert all we can. We must be satisfied with keeping alive the sacred fire in a few minds when we are unable to do more--but the notion of an intellectual aristocracy of lumieres while the rest of the world remains in darkness fulfills none of my aspirations--& the effect I aim at by the book is, on the contrary, to make the many more accessible to all truth by making them more open minded. 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 & characters to the whole of my own opinions--in the case of all others I would much rather, as things now are, try to improve their religion than to destroy it.28

26 CW. XVIII, 259.

27 See also ibid., 241-43, 260.
Upon reading the preceding passage, one finds it difficult to escape the suspicion that there are some issues or topics about which Mill is far from completely frank in On Liberty. For instance—and this is of capital importance to us here—Mill makes it clear that he had no intention of fully disclosing in On Liberty his "own opinions" on religion (which, to recall, are those of an unbeliever, as the Autobiography shows). The reason he gives bears considerable resemblance to that given in earlier writings: At present it would be a mistake to try to "bring over" to his views any but the "really superior intellects and characters". The best that can be done for society under the circumstances is to "improve" rather than "destroy" the religion of the many. But no one can contribute to such an improvement who argues openly and publicly what he once claimed privately in a letter to Carlyle—that Christianity "is gone."

Presumably, then, On Liberty, by promoting freedom of discussion and therewith greater open-mindedness and freedom of thought among the many, will also indirectly contribute to the gradual "improvement" of popular religion. But it can do this only because it refrains from openly attacking Christianity at its core. Although it is possible, even necessary, for "controversialists" to be more candid about the deficiencies of the old beliefs now than they were earlier, a modicum of reserve, caution or restraint is evidently still needed.

**Mill's reserve and the "improvement" of Christianity**

Further clarification regarding Mill's view of the appropriate way of handling the religious question at the time can be obtained from a brief examination of: a) what he

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29 For an explanation of what Mill means by *improving* the received religion, see 32 below.
means by improving the received religion; and b) his own contribution to that improvement.

In Auguste Comte and Positivism Mill says that "all other religions are made better in proportion as, in their practical result, they are brought to coincide with that which [Comte] aimed at constructing,"\(^\text{30}\) namely, the Religion of Humanity. As we shall see later in our discussions of the Three Essays on Religion, Mill prefers this purely human religion to all the existing supernatural ones for two main reasons: first, it would have none but the most beneficial moral effects; and, second, believing in or subscribing to it would not in any way clash with the requirements of reason and science. From this it follows that by improving received religion Mill means rendering it more and more conformable to the requirements of rational morality and natural science. The net result of such improvement would be a Christianity with the Platonic theism of hope and imagination articulated in the Three Essays as its theological core. Its main theological tenets would thus be: first, that the existence of God can be scientifically neither denied

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\(^{30}\) CW, X, 335.
nor confirmed and is a matter of hope instead of either belief or denial; and second, that (assuming He exists) God may be perfectly good, but He is certainly not omnipotent.

It is this "improved" form of Christianity which Mill proposes and defends in his correspondence with various individuals, including Florence Nightingale, in the last twelve years or so of his life. To the degree that he is persuasive, he is privately contributing to the improvement of their religious belief.

Mill finds a vehicle for his endeavour to improve the received religion in some of his published works too. In A System of Logic Mill begins the process of harmonizing religion with natural science by calling into question the belief in miracles as proof of special and direct divine providence. He argues that far from miracles providing support for the belief in God, it is the belief in a supernatural agency, moreover one which intervenes directly in the natural course of events, that is the source of whatever credence is given to so-called miracles. There is another way of looking at miracles of which unbelievers or Deists can always avail themselves, which is that any alleged miracle may turn out to have been the effect of some as yet unknown natural cause. At the very least, Mill points out, science has progressed to the point where, "with the knowledge which we now possess of the general uniformity of the course of nature", religion "has been compelled" to relinquish the belief in any kind of divine providence not normally "operating through general laws" of nature.

Nevertheless, even here, in the most radical version of his argument concerning miracles to be found in the various editions of the Logic Mill does not explicitly draw


33 A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive, CW, VII, 625-26.

34 Cf. the version of the concluding remarks in Mill's examination of Hume's argument concerning miracles which appears in the third and all later editions of the Logic (ibid., 625-26)—the version referred to here and in the preceding note—with those which appear in the Press-copy Manuscript (MS) and the first and second editions (1842, 1843 and 1846 respectively), (ibid., 625, q-p826). For information about the
any atheistic or anti-Christian conclusions. Instead he appears merely to be assisting the modification of existing religious belief so that it better meets the requirements of science. To that extent he can be said to be contributing to the improvement of received religion. And by implicitly asserting the authority of reason and science in deciding religious issues, he is preparing the reader for the fuller scientific treatment of them to come, hence paving the way for more such improvements.

On Liberty contributes not only indirectly but also directly to the improvement of Christianity. Towards the end of the second chapter Mill distinguishes between established Christianity, which he claims is morally deeply flawed, from the teachings of Christ, of which the former is said to be an inauthentic expression. He then argues that the moral teaching of authentic Christianity, though sound, is incomplete and must be supplemented by rational or "secular" morality.35

In Utilitarianism Mill takes a further step by arguing that the rational morality in question is in fact utilitarianism. That Mill thinks the way to improve Christianity morally is by bringing it into line with utilitarian morality can be seen from this passage: "In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbour as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality."36 But as Mill also makes clear in a letter to Alexander Bain in which he talks about Utilitarianism, the implication is that much of the traditional baggage of Christianity will require to be discarded for the improvement to take place. It is precisely this discarding that Utilitarianism is intended to promote.

How? Indirectly and without confrontation, by fully articulating "positive truths" about

35 CW, XVIII, 254-57.
36 CW, X, 218.
morality and leaving Christianity "to reconcile itself with them the best way it can." The essay, says Mill, was "not written in any hostile spirit towards [Christianity]."37

In *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* Mill for the first time publicly calls into question the traditional conception of God as both omnipotent and perfectly good and just (which conception Hamilton's disciple Mansel sought to defend against attacks by certain unnamed "vulgar rationalists"). He seeks to demonstrate that it is incompatible with justice and goodness as understood from a purely human, rational standpoint--the only kind of "justice" and "goodness" of which we have any knowledge--and is therefore logically untenable as well as morally perverse.38 In so doing he lays the foundation for his later advocacy of the Platonic modification of Christian theology, yet another potential moral improvement of Christianity. Much later in the book he adds that Christian theologians should not "part company with the Design argument" for the existence of God, since of all such theological arguments it is the "best" and "by far the most persuasive." Presumably, if taken, this advice too would help make received religion scientifically more tenable.

In *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, taking up again the endeavour to harmonize religion with science begun in the *Logic* and resumed briefly in *An Examination of William Hamilton's Philosophy*, Mill argues that the "positive mode of thought is not necessarily a denial of the supernatural." At the same time he implies that natural science is incompatible with the idea of special providence. He also says that the value of the evidence for the belief in the existence of God--the "analogies" of nature "which are called marks of design"--is "indeed a question for Positive Philosophy", leaving open the

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38 *CW*, IX, 89-108.
possibility that this value may be little more than nil. All of this prepares the public to receive the scientifically sustainable theism of hope and imagination propounded in his posthumously published *Three Essays*.

What conclusions, then, can we draw about the way of handling religious questions thought by Mill to be appropriate for the times, and about his reasons for so thinking? To begin with, one cannot suddenly, without any advance warning, fire all of one's cannon-shot at Christianity at once and hope to obtain a fair hearing. Doing so would likely get people's backs up. Negative criticism of traditional religion is best done piecemeal. For then people can by degrees become accustomed to hearing it subjected to critical scrutiny and gradually come to terms with the necessity of renouncing much of it. As well, criticisms must be delivered not in a hostile, destructive spirit, but in a friendly, constructive one, as though out of concern to save Christianity by freeing it from all of its false and harmful or useless accretions. In addition, the approach must where possible be indirect or oblique, certainly non-confrontational, and the language used moderate. Direct collisions, where the language used could easily become offensive, must be shunned like the plague. For these only serve to inflame the passions, which circumstance almost invariably plays into the hands of parties interested in maintaining the status quo. Furthermore, when making negative criticisms, it is best not to dot every i and cross every t, but rather to allow readers to deduce the most painful consequences for themselves. People are, *ceteris paribus*, generally more likely to accept conclusions they have arrived at by themselves than they are conclusions merely spelled out for them by somebody else.

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39 *CW*, X, 270.

40 Mill to Thomas Dyke Acland, 1 Dec. 1868, *CW*, XVI, 1499-501. In *On Liberty* too Mill states that "studied moderation of language, and the most cautious avoidance of unnecessary offence" are required when expressing unorthodox opinions, in order to "obtain a hearing" for them: *CW*, XVIII, 259. Presumably, in Mill's view this requirement will remain a part of the "morality of public discussion" even when perfect candour in public has become possible (if it ever does): *ibid*. As is shown by the passage from his work on Hamilton quoted below (211, n. 51), Mill sees Hume's sceptical disguise as an illustration of what he means by the *avoidance of unnecessary offence*. 
Above all, we learn that one must keep silent about one's disbelief in Christianity. Otherwise, one's attempts to improve it will hardly be well received by those still attached to it. This last consideration is perhaps the chief reason Mill does not anywhere in his writings published in his lifetime explicitly say that Christianity "is gone", even though he is convinced as early as 1833 that it is.

While explaining in the Autobiography the "more advanced stage" of education which he entered into at only twelve years of age, Mill says:

During this time, the Latin and Greek books which I continued to read with my father were chiefly such as were worth studying not for the language merely, but also for the thoughts. This included much of the orators, and especially Demosthenes, some of whose principal orations I read several times over, and wrote out, by way of exercise, a full analysis of them. My father's comments on these orations when I read them to him were very instructive to me. He not only drew my attention to the insight they afforded into Athenian institutions, and the principles of legislation and government which they often illustrated, but pointed out the skill and art of the orator—how everything important to his purpose was said at the exact moment when he had brought the minds of his audience into the state most fitted to receive it; how he made steal into their minds, gradually and by insinuation, thoughts which if expressed in a more direct manner would have roused their opposition [emphasis added--BK]. Most of these reflections were beyond my capacity of full comprehension at the time; but they left seed behind, which germinated in due season.41

By now it should be clear that Mill's manner of improving Christianity, inasmuch as it is marked by a degree of reserve, indirectness, gradualism and insinuation, aptly illustrates what he had learned from Demosthenes about rhetoric.42

The Demosthenian flavour of Mill's handling of the religious question is also evident in the reserve, gradualism and indirectness which characterize his way of promulgating the Religion of Humanity. The first time the Religion of Humanity comes

41 CW, I, 23-24.

42 As noted earlier, Edward Alexander, quoting the highlighted portion of the passage cited above, argues that Mill admired Demosthenes "because [he] had the rhetorical wiles with which to prepare his audience for the sympathetic reception of normally unwelcome ideas. . . .": Alexander, Arnold and Mill, 16.
up explicitly in his published works is when Mill clearly alludes to the possibility of it in Utilitarianism, published in 1861. (We say "alludes" because here Mill foregoes identifying the Religion of Humanity by name, although he comes very close to doing so.) Otherwise he is silent about that idea in his published writings until the publication of Auguste Comte in 1865, and he mentions it only once in his correspondence with anyone other than Comte himself—even though he is persuaded perhaps as early as 1848 that the Religion of Humanity is the religion of the future. Moreover, when he finally, in Auguste Comte, undertakes to discuss the nature and possibility of the Religion of Humanity explicitly, Mill introduces it not in his own name but as one of Comte's noteworthy ideas. As well, he speaks of it not as the religion of the future, but merely as a plausible religious alternative which "may be, even to Christians, an instructive and profitable object of contemplation." One gets the distinct impression that Mill, hoping to minimize the shocking and scandalizing effect of such a novel idea on his English-speaking readers, tries to accustom them to it slowly and gradually, thus preparing them for the rather lengthy and frank advocacy of it to come in the Three Essays.

But how, one might ask, does all of the preceding relate to what Mill says earlier about the much needed "renovation in the bases of belief?" Mill's implicit answer to this question is three-fold. First, the "renovation in the bases of belief", particularly in the religious sphere, must proceed by way of improving rather than destroying Christianity. Second, the ultimate goal of that renovation as it affects religion is the establishment of

\[\text{CW, X, 232.} \] Hamburger argues that the Religion of Humanity is "present", albeit "barely visible", in On Liberty: see On Liberty, CW, XVIII, 224, 256-57, 278-79; and Hamburger, "Religion and On Liberty," 167-68. Intimations of the Religion of Humanity can also be found in: Inaugural Address, CW, XXI, 254 ("[W]e learn... to sustain ourselves by the ideal sympathy of the great characters in history, or even in fiction, and by the contemplation of an idealized posterity. . ."); Early Draft, CW, I, 46, 48; and Autobiography, CW, I, 47, 49. For a discussion of those contained in the Early Draft and the final version of the Autobiography, see 43, 48 below. To ascertain that it is very probably to the Religion of Humanity that the foregoing quotation from the Inaugural Address alludes, compare that quotation with Mill's discussion of the various elements of this religion in Auguste Comte, CW, X, 332-34.

\[\text{CW, X, 332.} \]
the Religion of Humanity, possibly in conjunction with an improved Christian theology.\footnote{We agree with Cowling and Hamburger that the ultimate goal of the renovating process is the establishment of the Religion of Humanity: see Cowling, Mill and Liberalism, 77-93; and Hamburger, "Religion and On Liberty," 158-164, and "Individuality and Moral Reform," passim. Persuasive as they frequently are, neither of them delves into the significance of the fact that Mill ostensibly saw the endeavour to "improve" (rather than simply destroy) Christianity, and the rhetoric called for by this endeavour, as integral aspects of the process. Nevertheless, paradoxically, both they acknowledge that Mill recognized the usefulness of Christianity, even if in a modified form, at least for the duration of the age of transition: Cowling, 80; Hamburger, "Mill and Tocqueville on Liberty," 115, n. 9. Eldon Eisenach, especially in his earlier work, Robert Devigne, Allan Megill and Richard Vernon too recognize the centrality of the Religion of Humanity to Mill's overall scheme: Two Worlds of Liberalism, 202-15; Robert Devigne, "Mill on Liberty and Religion: An Unfinished Dialectic," Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism, ed. Eisenach, 242-46; Allan D. Megill, "J. S. Mill's Religion of Humanity and the Second Justification for the Writing of On Liberty," Journal of Politics, 34 (1972), 612-29; rpt. in Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism, ed. Eisenach, 301-16; and Richard Vernon, "J. S. Mill and the religion of humanity," 167-82. Like Cowling and Hamburger, Eisenach seldom mentions the last of Mill's Three Essays on Religion, "Theism." Apart from a couple of brief remarks of limited interest, one in the earliest of his publications, the other in the latest, he is silent about Mill's teaching concerning the Platonic theism of hope and imagination: Two Worlds of Liberalism, 255-56, n. 39, and "Mill and Liberal Christianity," Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism, ed. Eisenach, 218. In any event he does not consider that it is by quietly merging the Platonic theism of hope and imagination with Christianity that Mill seeks in "Theism" to "improve" the latter. How ironic, given the emphasis which his latest writings put, with justice, on Mill's endeavour to improve—or as he puts it, "reform" or "restore"—rather than simply destroy Christianity: see "Mill's Reform Liberalism as Tradition and Culture," passim, and "Mill and Liberal Christianity," passim. Of the six scholars discussed here, Devigne has the most to say about, and comes closest to our own interpretation of, the theism advocated by Mill in the final part of "Theism." He divines (245-46) that it somehow blends Platonic and Christian themes, but does not go on to clarify the precise nature of the blend. This lack of clarity may help to explain why the thought apparently has not occurred to him that Mill "proposes" not only, as he claims (245), "reconciling the Religion of Humanity with aspects of Christianity", but also, as we shall see, "improving" Christianity by Platonizing it. Yet only if one grasps the latter aspect of Mill's intention can one hope to understand fully his teaching about the place of an improved Christianity in the "moral education that will structure modern individuality" (Devigne's own words for his main concern), especially for the rest of the transition period. Megill says nothing about that theism and Vernon hardly goes beyond briefly outlining its key features (167), but that may well be because their chief concerns lie elsewhere. Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that the theistic dimension of Mill's thought, hence the complexity of his treatment of the whole religious question, has still not been adequately understood and appreciated—very probably because on the whole too little attention has been paid to the last of the Three Essays, "Theism."}
Mill discusses the religious aspects of his early education—citing as his reason a change in the "moralties of the [religious] question" caused by the "great advance in liberty of discussion" since his childhood, Mill says the following:

On religion in particular the time appears to me to have come, when it is the duty of all who being qualified in point of knowledge, have on mature consideration satisfied themselves that the current opinions are not only false but hurtful, to make their dissent known; at least, if they are among those whose station, or reputation, gives their opinion a chance of being attended to. Such an avowal would put an end, at once and for ever, to the vulgar prejudice, that what is called, very improperly, unbelief, is connected with any bad qualities either of mind or heart. The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments—of those most distinguished even in popular estimation for wisdom and virtue—are complete sceptics in religion; many of them refraining from avowal, less from personal considerations, than from a conscientious, though now in my opinion a most mistaken apprehension lest by speaking out what would tend to weaken existing beliefs, and by consequence (as they suppose) existing restraints, they should do harm instead of good.

This passage could be seen as providing additional support for our argument insofar as it shows that in Mill's view reserve or reticence about religious matters may have been necessary until now. But does it not also suggest that for Mill such postures or tactics have on balance ceased to be beneficial, and that the time has come at least for the leading minds of society to express their religious opinions freely and openly, however close to atheism these opinions may be?

That may be so. All the same it is by no means clear that Mill here advocates throwing all caution and reserve to the wind. Mill does not dot the i by explicitly stating that he is a convinced atheist. He says, rather, that he "has...never had [religious belief]", and that he "grew up in a negative state with regard to it." This statement could be interpreted as a tacit admission of atheism. Yet there is reason to conjecture that when making it he had in mind "religious belief, in the ordinary acceptation of the term." To

47 CW, I, 47.
48 Ibid., 45.
begin with, Mill uses the words just quoted when he remarks for the first time upon his having been brought up without any religious belief only a few pages earlier.\footnote{49}

Further evidence for the foregoing conjecture can be found in Mill's explanation of the irreligious or non-religious character of his upbringing. His explanation in brief is that James Mill, having pondered the matter and finally concluded that received religion as well as such revisions of it as Deism are indefensible, decided it would be unconscionable for him to allow his children to imbibe any of these beliefs. At one point, however, John Stuart explicitly says that his father's "aversion" was to "religion, in the sense usually attached to the term", not to religion \textit{per se}.\footnote{50}

Indeed, nowhere does he state unequivocally that his father was simply closed, and had attempted to close his children, to all possible forms of religiosity. On the contrary, the elder Mill is said to have looked upon "dogmatic atheism" as "absurd",\footnote{51} the implication being that he was something far more respectable--a mere undogmatic atheist or, to use the younger Mill's own phrase, "complete sceptic", meaning a person who contends no more than that concerning God and "the origin of things nothing whatever can be known."\footnote{52}

As if in anticipation of the question "What really is the difference?", Mill insists, though without adequate explanation, that sceptics, including "complete sceptics", should not be confused with dogmatic atheists or "unbelievers" properly so-called. In fact, he goes so far as to give the impression that that distinction is somehow more fundamental than the distinction between complete sceptics and (conventional) believers. He certainly does not admit here what he is prepared to admit elsewhere--that in their bearing especially on practice, complete scepticism and dogmatic atheism (in

\footnote{49} Ibid., 41.

\footnote{50} Ibid., 41, 43, 45.

\footnote{51} Ibid., 41.

\footnote{52} See ibid., 41 and 47.
"Theism" Mill refers to these stances as "negative" and "positive atheism" respectively) are essentially the same.53

Most important, he informs us that James Mill regarded the "Sabæan, or Manichaean theory of a Good, and an Evil Principle, struggling with each other for the government of the universe," as a possible, potentially socially useful hypothesis which he was surprised "no one revived... in our time".54

Concomitantly, at no time does Mill unequivocally state that he himself is completely closed to all forms of supernaturalism. When he calls upon the "unbelievers (so-called)"--in Mill's opinion "very improperly" so called55--to be more frank about their views on religious matters, Mill does not say that they should openly assert and defend their "unbelief", if by unbelief is meant atheism. He says only that they should make known their dissent from the "current opinions" about religion. He thus leaves open the possibility of a form of religion which is not subject to their (or his) criticisms of conventional religion. He certainly does not dispute his father's view of dogmatic atheism as absurd. For that matter, although he does not explicitly endorse this view, he does give it a small measure of credence with the observation that it has always been held by "most of those, whom the world has considered atheists."56

Nor does he dispute his father's view that the Manichaean notion of God is a possible hypothesis. In fact, while talking about the different forms of true or genuine religiosity evinced by men improperly called unbelievers, he says,

The liberality of the age... has caused it to be very commonly admitted that a Deist may be truly religious: but if religion stands for any graces of character and not for mere dogma, the assertion may equally be made of many whose belief is far short of Deism. Though they may think the proof

53 Concerning the distinction Mill makes in "Theism" between positive and negative atheism, and then between atheism (whether positive or negative) and skepticism, see 216-18 below.
54 Ibid., 43.
55 Ibid., 47.
56 Ibid., 41.
incomplete that the universe is a work of design, and though they
assuredly disbelieve that it can have an Author and Governor who is
absolute in power as well as perfect in goodness, they have that which
constitutes the principal worth of all religions whatever, an ideal
conception of a Perfect Being, to which they habitually refer as the guide
of their conscience; and this ideal of Good is usually far nearer to
perfection than the objective Deity of those, who think themselves obliged
to find absolute goodness in the author of a world so crowded with
suffering and so deformed by injustice as ours.57

Because in the preceding passage Mill does not offer a more concrete, more complete
explanation of "Perfect Being", it is not immediately clear what the phrase signifies for
him. One strong possibility is God as conceived in the Platonic theism which he later
advocates in the Three Essays. Another, less likely possibility is the perfected humankind
held up as both goal and object of veneration in the Religion of Humanity. There are two
reasons for choosing the former. The first is that he capitalizes Perfect Being, and it is
customary to capitalize a word when using it with reference to God. The second is that
the "Perfect Being" is somewhat obliquely contrasted--and made to compare favourably--
as an "ideal of Good" with the "objective Deity" of such conventional religions as
traditional Christianity. (The problem with orthodox Christianity, Mill implies, is that it
erroneously and perversely envisages God as both omnipotent and perfectly good. As we
shall see, like the Manichaeanism or Sabaeanism spoken of by his father, Platonic theism
is in Mill's view superior to traditional Christianity in that it conceives God as good but
not omnipotent.) Consequently, if by Perfect Being Mill does indeed mean a Divine
Being, then what we are given here is at least a hint of a more affirmative way of
conceiving God--the Platonic way--to which Mill is well disposed.

True, Mill gives no indication that he actually believes in the finite God of
Platonic theism. On the other hand, neither does he profess incredulity. He indirectly
raises the question whether the proof upon which the argument from design is based

57 Ibid., 47, 49.
(which argument, as we shall see, is in Mill's view the best available rational support for theism) is complete. Yet by contrast with what he does in the Three Essays, Mill here does not say, does not even appear to imply, that that proof is weak or lacks cogency: in this instance too he shows restraint or reserve.

Further indications of caution and reserve in Mill's handling of the religious question in the Autobiography can be found in the following statement (which he makes while discussing his father's views on religion):

The time, I believe, is drawing near when this dreadful conception of an object of worship [the traditional Christian conception of God as both absolutely good and omnipotent] will be no longer identified with Christianity [emphasis added—BK]; and when all persons, with any sense of moral good and evil, will look upon it with the same indignation with which my father regarded it.58

The preceding statement suggests that in the Autobiography Mill stays with the approach, or at least the rhetoric, of "improving" Christianity instead of unambiguously aiding and abetting its destruction.59 Again, it may well be because of his evident concern with the improvement of Christianity that in the Autobiography too Mill refrains from explicitly pronouncing Christianity as such dead or dying (although much later in the book he comes close to doing just that60). It may also be for the same reason that in his rather oblique comparison of the Platonic conception of God to conventional Christianity's Mill does not refer to the former by name. For as we shall see, identifying it thus would

58 Ibid., 43.

59 Our point, we believe, holds despite the fact that the following passage, which appears much later in the Autobiography, suggests that what Mill really means by the improvement of Christianity is not quite so easy to distinguish from the destruction of it as those words taken by themselves would imply: "The old opinions in religion, morals, and politics, are so much discredited in the more intellectual minds as to have lost the greater part of their efficacy for good, while they have still life enough in them to be a powerful obstacle to the growing up of any better opinions on those subjects. When the philosophic minds of the world can no longer believe its religion, or can only believe it with modifications amounting to an essential change of its character, a transitional period commences, of weak convictions, paralysed intellects, and growing laxity of principle, which cannot terminate until a renovation has been effected in the basis of their belief, leading to the evolution of some faith, whether religious or merely human, which they can really believe. . . .": CW, I, 245, 247. Clearly, the improvement of Christianity will entail at a minimum some very radical changes.

60 See the passage quoted in the preceding note.
preempt any attempt, such as the one Mill makes in "Theism", to incorporate it into Christianity for the purpose of improving the latter. 61

There is, thus, plenty to suggest that even in the Autobiography Mill's handling of the religious question is to a degree reserved and cautious. The picture we get is of a person who comes very close to admitting unequivocally that he is an atheist, but who then hedges his near-admission all around with statements reflecting more positively on religion and even on Christianity--statements which blunt the force of that near-admission and make him seem less anti-religious than other sources suggest he is.

A discrepancy

How, then, do we explain the fact that in a letter to Harriet Mill written early in February 1854 Mill says that the Autobiography is "even now an unreserved proclamation of our opinions" on a whole range of subjects, among them religion? 62

It should be noted that the Autobiography referred to in the letter is an earlier version which, according to Robson and Stillinger, Mill finished working on some time between June 1854 and June 1855. 63 Hence the appellation Early Draft. Approximately seven years later, "two or three years after the death of his wife", Mill began substantially to revise and expand the Early Draft. 64 That process of revision and expansion, which did not end until early 1870, culminated in the final version, known as the Columbia MS. 65 It is, again, to the Early Draft that the above statement by Mill applies, whereas our argument that Mill exercises a degree of reserve even in the Autobiography is based on

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61 275-81 below.


63 John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, editors' Introd. to Autobiography and LiteraryEssays, CW, I, xxiv.

64 Ibid., xxv.

65 Ibid., xxvii.
the Columbia MS. An analysis of the key differences between the two versions in their treatment of the religious aspects of Mill's education and related issues, as tediously pedantic as it might seem, will serve to strengthen our case.

First, in the Early Draft Mill begins his account of his religious education almost exactly as he does in the final version—with the statement that he "was brought up from the first without any religious belief, in the ordinary meaning of the term." The only difference is that in the Columbus MS we find the stiff, stodgy sounding acceptance in place of *meaning*.66

What Mill says about his father's religious beliefs, however, changes substantially from the earlier to the later version. Contrary to what he does in the latter, in the former he gives a clear impression of the elder Mill as an atheist: He speaks there of his "rejection of all religious belief" rather than his "rejection of all that is called religious belief", and of his "aversion to religion" rather than his "aversion to religion, in the sense usually attached to the term."67 He also leaves out the points made in the final draft about his father's view of dogmatic atheism as absurd and of Manichaean theism as at least a possible "hypothesis" capable of "no depraving influence."

Furthermore, unlike the final version, the Early Draft does not give the impression that his father may have been open to the possibility of "improving" Christianity. Indeed, here the younger Mill has him ascribe the perfectly "wicked" conception of God as both a perfectly good being and the (omnipotent) maker of the entire universe to Christianity *per se* rather than, as indicated in the Columbia MS, to "what is commonly presented to mankind as the creed of Christianity."68 Accordingly, he implies that James Mill looked

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66 For a brief discussion of Robson and Stillinger on the more "formal" character of the final version, see 50 below.
67 *CW*, I, 42.
68 Cf. ibid., 42 and 43.
forward to the time, "not very far distant", when Christianity would be repudiated by "all persons with any sense of moral good and evil."69

It should therefore not surprise us if, having just read in the Early Draft Mill's account of his father's views on religion and then coming upon Mill's assertion (identical in both drafts) that he "has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it", the reader immediately interprets that assertion as an admission of atheism. And indeed, in contrast with the final version, the Early Draft contains little if anything to discourage that kind of interpretation. Here he does not distinguish, as he does in the final draft, between the "Christian creed" per se and what most people "are accustomed to consider as the Christian creed."70 Unlike the latter, the former offers not even a hint of openness on his part to the possibility of "improving" rather than of destroying Christianity. As is shown by the ensuing quotation, Mill does not suggest in the Early Draft as he does in the final version that the "wicked" conception of God as both perfectly good and omnipotent need "no longer be identified with Christianity."71

The time, I too believe, is not very far distant when all persons with any sense of moral good and evil will regard this horrible conception of an object of worship with the same indignation with which my father regarded it. That they have not done so hitherto, is owing to the infantine state of the general intellect of mankind, under the wretched cultivation which it has received.72

In fact he shows himself as implacable an enemy of Christianity as he reveals his father to have been.

True, in his discussion of the religiosity of certain "unbelievers (so-called)" in the Early Draft, Mill shows that he is not completely closed to all forms of religion. Yet in

69 Ibid., 42.
70 Cf. ibid., 44 and 45.
71 Ibid., 43.
72 Ibid., 42.
the following passage from it he makes no allusion, as he does in its counterpart from the final version, to a form of theism—be it Platonic or Manichaean—which is exempt from the criticisms his father levelled at Christianity.

[The] best among the [unbelievers (so-called)]... are more genuinely religious, in the best sense of the word religion, than those who exclusively arrogate to themselves the title. Though they may think the proofs insufficient that the universe is a work of design, and assuredly believe that it cannot have a Creator and Governor who is perfect both in power and in goodness, they have that which constitutes the principal worth of all religions whatever, an ideal conception of a perfect character which they take as the guide of their conscience; and this ideal of good is usually far nearer to perfection than the objective Deity of those, who think themselves obliged to find perfection in the author of a world so crowded with suffering and so deformed by injustice.\textsuperscript{73}

Here he identifies the entity which these so-called "unbelievers" have an "ideal conception of" (and "take as the guide of their conscience") as a "perfect character" rather than as a "Perfect Being." Furthermore, as is done with the "Perfect Being" in the final draft, in the above passage that "perfect character" is made to compare favourably with the "objective Deity" of Christianity as an "ideal of good." Accordingly, the phrase \textit{ideal of good} appears in the Early Draft, just as it does in the Columbus MS. Yet in the former \textit{good} is not capitalized whereas in the latter it is. All of this strongly suggests that whatever religion Mill has in mind in the above passage, it is a religion without God, an atheistic religion—very probably the Religion of Humanity he speaks of elsewhere, but not complemented by any form of theism.

For that matter, later in the Early Draft, while discussing the influence on himself of certain books, among them Beauchamp’s work on the utility of religion, Mill says, "[If] the world has a ruler, and but one ruler, that one is certainly far less deserving of worship than the author of the Sermon on the Mount."\textsuperscript{74} Evidently there is no form of

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 46, 48.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 72.
theism to which the Mill of the Early Draft would be well disposed. The preceding quotation, we note, is omitted from the corresponding passage in the Columbia MS.

Thus, we see in the Early Draft a different Mill from the Mill of the final version, the latter appearing more open than the former to theism, even if only to a radically attenuated form of it. It might seem to follow that some time between the completion of the Early Draft and the start of the final version Mill became a theist of sorts. However, given everything else we have said until now too, a more reasonable conclusion to draw here is that in the later version he is somewhat more ambiguous and less forthright in the profession of his father's, hence of his own, atheistic views than he is in the earlier one.

To see once again why the latter conclusion is more reasonable, let us restate a point made earlier. In what he himself considered the final version of the Autobiography, Mill does not unequivocally say, "I am an atheist." He says, rather, "I am... one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it." This statement by itself can indeed be interpreted as an admission of atheism, even if only of the negative or undogmatic kind. Yet Mill surrounds it with other statements which reflect more positively on religion even of the theistic sort, including Christianity. To be sure, strictly understood, these other statements do not contradict the first one. But they do seem to blur the overall picture somewhat. They make him appear less unambiguously atheistic than he reveals himself to be in the Early Draft and than the statement quoted above alone would suggest.75 That apparent slight

75 In an essay by Leslie Stephen entitled "The Religion of All Sensible Men", we find the following: "A man of sense is well aware that he can say what he pleases without shocking the most delicate orthodoxy. He requires no cryptographic art to hide his meaning, for plain letters are ciphers to all who are not men of sense. The average reader is frightened by the use of certain counters, not by the ideas which they symbolize for the understanding. Refrain from dotting your i's and crossing your t's, and your utterance will be for him an insoluble mystery. He would be shocked if you said in plain terms 'there is not God'; but it is easy to give quite an orthodox and edifying turn to the sentiment [emphasis added--BK]. We have all read defences of Agnosticism, which pass for assaults upon the wicked 'deist,' and elaborate expositions of downright materialism intended to support Christianity": Sir Leslie Stephen, "An Agnostic's Apology" and other essays, 325. Whether or not Stephen had Mill in mind when he wrote this passage is of course an open question. Nevertheless, much of it, especially the part highlighted, seems apposite as a description of Mill's treatment of religion in the final version of the Autobiography.
ambiguity, we contend, can only be explained by the need, felt by Mill more strongly while preparing the final version of the Autobiography than during the composition of the Early Draft, to exercise a measure of restraint or reserve when treating of the question of religion.76

The foregoing argument puts us in mind of Robson and Stillinger's characterization of the Columbia MS as "toned down" and "more formal" compared to the equally polished but in their view more colourful Early Draft.77 In support of that characterization they make one point in particular which is of interest to us here. In a letter to George Grote dated November 26, 1865, where "he thanks Grote for 'doing justice to my father' in an article in the Westminster Review", Mill, they claim, tacitly indicates that his own portrait of his father in the final version of the Autobiography is somewhat "eulogistic."78 If they are right so to interpret what he says in the letter—and we believe they are—then we have here one more solid reason to suspect that his portrait of himself, particularly his opinions on religion, is "eulogistic" too.

Furthermore, it is our contention—which we hope will be amply corroborated over the course of the dissertation—that a degree of Demosthenean restraint and reserve is

76 Interestingly enough, in place of the words good and perfect character which appear in the passage on pages 46 and 48 of the Early Draft discussed above (48), a still earlier version has God and perfect Being respectively. The substitutions of good for God and of perfect character for perfect Being in the Early Draft were apparently recommended by Harriet Mill: see CW I, 46, n-n and o-o. These textual variations suggest that had it not been for his wife, even in the Early Draft Mill might have been a little less frank in expressing his views on religion than he actually was. They may also help to explain why following her death Mill makes changes to the treatment of religion in the Autobiography which amount to a partial reinstatement of his earlier Demosthenean reserve and caution. Quite possibly, at some point after becoming a widower Mill began to experience anew the strong misgivings about the candid expression of his religious views in the “Life” which he had had before, but which Harriet Mill had helped him, evidently only temporarily, to overcome—or to suppress.

By the end of the dissertation it should be clear, however, if it is not already, just how atheistic Mill remains to the end of his life.

77 Robson and Stillinger, xxvi-xxvii.

78 Ibid., xxvii and n. 48. Robson and Stillinger's claim is based on the following passage (quoted by them in n. 48) from the letter: "My own contribution to his memory is already written in a MS designed for posthumous publication [i.e., the Autobiography]; though if I live more than a few years longer, I shall very likely publish it while I am alive": Mill to Grote, 26 Nov, 1865, CW XVI, 1121.
present even in the *Three Essays on Religion*. This, despite the fact that Mill is at least as frank about religion in these essays as he is in any of his other published writings. We shall see that in the *Three Essays* Mill apparently persists in taking the "improving" approach to dealing with Christianity instead of the "destructive" one adopted by the eighteenth century *philosophes* (although this persistence is most evident in "Theism"); that he holds out a certain form of theism to those who need it even as he indirectly indicates that he personally does not subscribe to it and that its future is highly doubtful; that he never says explicitly but only implies that he is an "unbeliever"; that he tries to make the most of all possible links and continuities between Christianity and the religion of the future; and that in an attempt to make the best of a precarious situation, he understates or treats somewhat indirectly certain potential risks and dangers associated with the decline (which he takes to be irreversible) of traditional theism.

**A note on method**

What, then, can we infer from the two aspects of Mill's essays on religion dealt with above--their pemmican-like density and compactness, and the Demosthenean quality of their rhetoric--about how to read and interpret them?

First, it is necessary to read everything Mill says in these essays (and elsewhere, especially when it is about religion) with the utmost thoughtfulness and open-mindedness. One should refrain from quickly dismissing anything in the text as a careless, unintended error or the product of a certain obtuseness on his part. One must be open to the possibility that (to adapt what Collingwood says about Whitehead's manner of writing79) Mill often teaches "by implication", or that he deliberately leaves some of his i's undotted or i's uncrossed. Perhaps he hoped that the unstated parts or implications of

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his argument, especially the more important and disturbing ones, would be thought through and assigned their due weight by his careful, reflective readers.

Furthermore, one must allow for the possibility that each ambiguity, each apparent contradiction one encounters in the text is there not by accident but by design. The author may have intended it to convey in some discernible way an important aspect of his teaching about which he believed it necessary to be more oblique. This is not to say that there is an explanation in terms of authorial intention for each and every seeming anomaly or defect in the argument. Yet one cannot reasonably insist a priori that such explanations should always be eschewed. Each anomaly must be treated individually, and every effort must be made to find some way of interpreting it in terms of the author's purpose that is consistent with or called for by what he says or implies elsewhere. Only when one has considered all plausible interpretations of this kind and has come up short every time is one in a position to say that for the anomaly in question there may well be no such interpretation.

It should be readily apparent that the method of interpretation adumbrated above is markedly influenced by the approach to the reading of past philosophers taken by Leo

80 While commenting on Hamilton’s strengths and weaknesses as an interpreter of past philosophers, Mill implicitly lays down several rules for the reading of their works: First, one must seek to know not only the “what [of a philosopher’s doctrine]”, but also the “wherefore.” Second, one must “look at any opinion of a philosopher in connexion with the same philosopher’s other opinions”; doing so enables one to recognize the “mutual relations of philosophical doctrines” and also to “draw” unstated “corollaries from a thinker’s opinions”: An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy, and of the Principal Philosophical Question Discussed in his Writings, CW, IX, 498-99. Moreover, in a lengthy footnote to the first rule (ibid.), Mill criticizes Hamilton for misinterpreting “the general scope and purpose, the pervading spirit, of Hume’s speculations”, and for misunderstanding “the essential character of Hume’s mind.” The gist of his supporting argument turns out to be that Hamilton failed to take into account the degree to which Hume might have “disguised” his opinions in order to “avoid offence.” It is difficult to believe that Mill would not have intended for the thoughtful reader to “draw” from these “opinions” (as well as others given elsewhere) certain unstated “corollaries” concerning how he wished his own works to be read. For a generous quotation from Mill’s note in Hamilton which contains his elucidation of the right way to read and interpret Hume, see 211, n. 51 below.
We believe that Strauss's way of interpreting texts is in principle at least as defensible as any other of which we are aware.

Nevertheless one ought not infer that we are absolutely certain of the validity of using the above method to interpret Mill. In fact, when we commenced our study of Mill for this dissertation, we expected to have little if any need for it. Only after further reading and rereading did we feel compelled to reconsider the matter. Evidence of caution and reserve in Mill's handling of the topic of religion in his published writings mounted. Meanwhile, we became more and more convinced that some way had to be found, using the indications and clues given in his writings, of reconciling the apparent gross contradictions which we had discovered in his essays on religion. Otherwise, we could hardly continue to respect Mill as a superior thinker, let alone admire him as a great one. Yet we had seen too many indications of extraordinary intelligence and penetration on his part, the vast range of his thought had impressed us too much, and interest in his philosophy was evidently still too strong and widespread, for us to be able easily to write him off as a muddled, mediocre idea-monger. Thus we rather tentatively drew the conclusion that only by applying to his works some such method as the one outlined above could we possibly find a way out of our dilemma. In any event we had, we thought, nothing to lose by trying. If err we must, let it be on the side of overinterpretation rather than underinterpretation; for then, if nothing else, the likelihood of missing certain "beautiful and useful thoughts" would be minimized. Although we cannot yet be certain we drew the right conclusion, we hope to show that it has so far been a fruitful one.

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81 For an explanation of that approach, see Leo Strauss, "Persecution and the Art of Writing," Social Research, 8, No. 4 (November 1941), 488-504; rpt. in Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (1952; rpt. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 22-37.

As surprising as it might be to the reader, we are not alone in this respect. Probably the best example of someone who shares our understanding of the political character of Mill's rhetoric, and therefore of how Mill must at times be read to be fully understood, is Joseph Hamburger. In one of his more recent writings on Mill, Hamburger argues that even in On Liberty Mill has recourse to a more reserved, indirect form of communication. Although Mill seeks there to provide a utilitarian defence of liberty of thought, speech, action, etc., according to Hamburger his chief, though hidden, objective is to clear the way for as well as to commence a fundamental, comprehensive criticism of Christianity. Hamburger contends that Mill's ultimate goal, only tacitly indicated in his writings published in his lifetime, is the eventual replacement of Christianity by the Religion of Humanity.83

Others have recognized the political aspect of Mill's rhetoric as well. Cowling, for instance, argues that although Mill was profoundly contemptuous of the "religion of the churches", his "contempt was [not] always expressed." "There is," he says, "about Mill's treatment of Christianity a caution more suitable to tactical proselytizing than to earnest propagation of truth." He allows that Mill's attempt to distinguish between the authentic teachings of Christ and "later theological accretions", his alleged disclosure of a real continuity between utilitarian morality and the moral teaching of Christianity, etc., might have been made in perfect sincerity. "Yet," he rejoins, "it is difficult to avoid the feeling that the strength of contemporary Christian feeling, and the damage Mill feared from attacking it openly, increased the ambiguity of his public statements." He admits that Mill's Three Essays, published posthumously, "go

83 Hamburger, "Religion and On Liberty," 139-81. Drawing on a wealth of documentary evidence, Hamburger shows that the need to conceal their true views on religion was strongly felt by many agnostics and atheists in nineteenth-century England up to and even beyond the 1870s. The "decade of the 1870s," he says, "appears to have been in this respect transitional", although even then not "all restraints were lifted." "The restrictive atmosphere," he adds, "changed substantially only late in the century—well after Mill's death" (149). Additional evidence of "circumlocution, and more or less of manoeuvre" in On Liberty is brought forward by Hamburger in "Individuality and Moral Reform," 51-54. (As he points out [69, n. 143], the phrase *circumlocution, and more or less of manoeuvre* is George Grote's, quoted in ibid., 52.)
a long way to expose" his true views on religion. At the same time he points out that if
these writings are "more hostile" to Christianity than "anything he published in his
lifetime", they are also less hostile "than Mill's friends had expected." He finds in them
"no unambiguous statement of [Mill's] willingness (in certain circumstances) to see
Christianity rejected altogether", at any rate "nothing to match" certain claims made in his
correspondence.84 One plausible reason for his "[unwillingness] openly to reject
Christianity", Cowling suggests, is that, aware of how strong Christian feeling was in
England, and not seeing any possibility of replacing Christianity then with another creed,
Mill was reluctant to contribute to its destruction.85 "It is, however, possible, at least,"
Cowling concludes,

that genuine reluctance was strengthened by tactical awareness that
moralists who wanted to propagate his general injunction would do well to
take pains to "adopt (as far as without hypocrisy they can) those means of
addressing the feelings and the conscience to which a connection with
Christianity has given potency."86

F. E. L. Priestley too displays an acute sense of Mill's rhetorical "tactics" (to use
his own word).87 He even ascribes to one of Mill's earlier writings--the essay "Sedgwick"
(published in 1935), where Mill's defends utilitarianism against criticisms from a well
known opponent--a "degree of disingenuousness."88 Aided by careful textual analysis, he
shows that in that essay Mill "directs nominally against Paley the same arguments he
directed in 1833 [in his essay "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy"] against Bentham." It

84 To illustrate his point, Cowling cites the following passage from one of Mill's earlier letters: "[In]
France, where Christianity has lost its hold on men's minds. . . a Christian would be positively less fit than a
St. Simonian (for example) to form part of a national church": Mill to John Sterling, 20-22 Oct. 1931, CW,
XII, 76.

85 Cowling, Mill and Liberalism, 79-80.

86 Ibid., 80-81. Cowling mistakenly cites the Three Essays as the source of the quotation from Mill
included in this passage. That quotation is in fact from Mill's letter to Sterling (76) cited in n. 84 above.

87 F. E. L. Priestley, Introd. to Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society, CW, X, xxxiv ff.

88 Ibid., xvi.
follows, Priestley suggests, that "Sedgwick" is, albeit "by implication", at least as much a criticism of Bentham as it is of Paley. Priestley's explanation of Mill's disingenuousness in "Sedgwick"--which was, he reminds us, a "public and avowed performance"--is that his "relation to his father... made it impossible, as he says, to speak out his whole mind" on Bentham's philosophy there. Mill could do so freely in "Remarks" because he "wrote [this] anonymously." 89

Finally, mention should also be made of Edward Alexander. In his comparative study of Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill as the two "representative men" of the Victorian Age, Alexander observes that "Mill was a warm admirer of Demosthenes." The chief cause of Mill's admiration, he says, was Demosthenes' "rhetorical wiles", which enabled him to insinuate into the minds and favour of his audience "normally unwelcome ideas." Alexander also notes parenthetically that Mill "once was likened" to Demosthenes. 90

There is, thus, ample precedent in the tradition of Mill scholarship for ascribing to Mill's rhetoric a certain politic or political character. 91 Our aim here is to build on that precedent.

In keeping with the preceding considerations, much of the dissertation consists of a close, almost line-by-line exegesis of the relevant texts, especially "Utility of Religion" and "Theism." It is, we believe, in this way that the manner of an argument's unfolding, the various strands of the argument, how they are interwoven and what their bearing is on each other, how various problems are raised and solved or left unsolved, can best be illuminated. To help the reader not lose sight of the forest for the trees, chapter introductions and summations are provided.

89 Ibid., xi, xv-xvii.

90 Alexander, Arnold and Mill, 16.

91 A very recent attempt to build on this precedent is made in Robert Devigne, "Mill on Liberty and Religion: An Unfinished Dialectic," Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism, ed. Eisenach, 253-54.
We turn, now, to the first part of the dissertation, our examination of Mill's teaching about the utility of religion in the modern age.
Part I

The Usefulness of Religion in the Modern Age
1/ MILL'S INTRODUCTION TO THE "UTILITY OF RELIGION"

As mentioned earlier, the first part of the dissertation (comprising the first four chapters) consists in an exposition of Mill's teaching about the usefulness of religion. Aspects of his teaching expounded here include: Mill's formulation of the problem of the utility of religion (first chapter); his critique of the view that religion is directly useful to society both as a means of enforcing common morality and as a teacher of that morality (second chapter); his qualified agreement with the view that religion directly benefits the individual (for instance, by satisfying our longing for the noble) and therewith indirectly benefits society (third chapter); and his assessment of the ability of both the Religion of Humanity and Platonic theism to perform adequately the indispensable offices of religion without overstepping the bounds of intellectual integrity (fourth chapter). Nevertheless, we also pause from time to time to consider whatever light is shed along the way on other related matters, such as the nature and significance of the distinction between the few and the many, and the current weak state of religious belief as well as the causes of that state, especially the quarrel between science and religion.

Mill begins the "Utility of Religion" with some introductory remarks in which he states the main problem of the essay, sets the problem in a historical context, and probes

1 Some of the issues dealt with in the first part of the dissertation, in the fourth chapter especially, are explored in greater depth in the third part.

2 According to Gertrude Himmelfarb, "it was Harriet . . . the more belligerent disbeliever of the two . . . who had prodded [Mill] into writing the essay on 'Utility' when he was preparing to take up another subject, and it was she who had first formulated its theme, although in terms so strident that Mill managed to tone them down even while adopting some of her expressions and arguments": editor's Introd. to Mill, Essays on Politics and Culture, xxiv; cf. On Liberty and Liberalism, 244-46. Harriet's "formulation" reads as follows: "About the Essays, dear, would not religion, the Utility of Religion, be one of the subjects you would have most to say on—there is to account for the existence nearly universal of some religion (superstition) by the instincts of fear hope and mystery etc., and throwing over all doctrines and theories, called religion, as devices for power, to show how religion & poetry fill the same want, the craving after higher objects, the consolation of suffering, by hopes of heaven for the selfish, love of God for the tender & grateful—how all this must be superseded by morality deriving its power from sympathies and benevolence and its reward
its meaning and ramifications. He also comments on such matters as the method of inquiry and the sources and structure of his argument. In the course of these brief but dense remarks a number of other important aspects of his treatment of the issue come to light as well, for example, its basic character or tendency.

Clearly, Mill packed a great deal into the introductory portion of "Utility." Let us proceed to a close analysis of this introduction.

**Truth and utility**

"It has sometimes been remarked," observes Mill, "how much has been written, both by friends and enemies, concerning the truth of religion, and how little, at least in the way of discussion or controversy, concerning its usefulness." This, he says, should perhaps not be surprising, "for the truth, in matters which so deeply affect us, is our first concernment."\(^3\) We must, he seems to imply, be certain of the truth of a religious teaching for us to conform ourselves to its prescriptions willingly. If this is all Mill means when he makes the claim that the truth is "our first concernment", then his claim is unobjectionable. One will not seek to convert from Christianity to Islam unless one is first convinced that Islam is the way to God and not Christianity.

Yet Mill's claim appears to go further, to suggest that we all want the fundamental truth about human existence unconditionally. But do we? Or do most of us want it only if it is flattering or reassuring or consoling? Surely George Steiner, considering Bertrand Russell's statement that the "second law of thermodynamics makes it scarcely possible to doubt that the universe... is going to crawl by... pitiful stages to the condition of universal death", is right to wonder whether knowledge of this order may not in the end

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3 Three Essays, CW, X, 403.
"destroy us." If the ultimate truth is indeed so "terrifying", as Steiner puts it, how many of us would be capable of deriving moral sustenance from the knowledge of it, hence would truly want that knowledge?

Mill seems, at least for the moment, to ignore this question. He instead asserts that if a form of religious belief is true, then it is ipso facto useful. To be sure, if a form of religious belief such as Christianity or Islam were true, then it would be useful for everyone of us to know this. But would it be useful for everyone of us to know or to believe that atheism is true if it could be proven true?

The ensuing passage suggests that Mill's answer to that question would be in the affirmative.

If to know authentically in what order of things, under what government of the universe it is our destiny to live, were not useful, it is difficult to imagine what could be considered so. Whether a person is in a pleasant or in an unpleasant place, a palace or a prison, it cannot be otherwise than useful to him to know where he is.

Mill seems to say here that the truth about the cosmos and the place in it of humankind is useful for each of us to know regardless of how appealing or repugnant it might turn out to be.

In light of some of what modern science and philosophy have said about these matters, we can hardly be faulted for having our doubts. As Joseph Wood Krutch notes, modern social science tends towards the view that individual human beings are in all respects, even in their thoughts and deeds, entirely determined by or products of the play of external, supra-individual forces and conditions. One implication of this view is that such notions as free will and responsibility, however comforting or ennobling they may

5 Ibid., 60.
6 Three Essays, CW, X, 403.
7 Ibid.
be, are at bottom illusory. Should this view one day be proven true, of what use would such a truth be to society? According to Krutch, of no use at all. Were it to attempt to enlighten its individual members about the truth of determinism, society would find it increasingly difficult to hold them responsible and therefore liable for anything they did. In that case, clearly, it could not survive for very long.\(^8\)

Instead of attempting to justify the claim that the truth is always useful, Mill draws the conclusion that "[so] long as men accepted the teachings of their religion as positive facts, no more a matter of doubt than their own existence or the existence of the objects around them, to ask the use of believing it could not possibly occur to them."\(^9\) A closer reading of this statement, however, suggests an interpretation of Mill's view of the link between truth and utility quite different from the foregoing one: It is not so much that the truth is useful simply as that any teaching which men accept as true they necessarily also regard as useful, though they may be wrong on either or both counts. But this latter point is perfectly compatible with the possibility that only a small minority of men have ever needed and actively sought the unqualified truth, or that the truth as such is not necessarily useful.

That Mill would not rule out these possibilities is further confirmed by his very next statement, which is that the need to defend traditional religion on grounds of its utility could have arisen only after its truth had been seriously called into question. For this statement implicitly raises the possibility that the established religious beliefs are useful even though they may not be true. It implies too that since people cannot deem useful to themselves any teaching which they take to be false, any religious teaching which they deem true they perhaps do so not on the strength of evidence but because they desire or need it to be true, in other words, because the belief in its truth is somehow

\(^{8}\) The Measure of Man (1953; rpt. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1954), 51-54.

\(^{9}\) Three Essays, CW, X, 403.
useful or needful to them. We believe that a providential God exists who rewards the just and punishes the unjust not because we have sufficient grounds for belief but because we "wish to believe" (to use a phrase employed by Mill a little later) that such a God exists. (Of course, the assumption is that we are not aware that the primary cause of our belief is the wish or will to believe. Were we ever to become aware of that fact, we would soon stop believing altogether.) Does not all of this cast doubt on Mill's earlier assertion that the truth is our "first concernment", or at least make us wonder what exactly he means by it, and what exactly is his conception of the relation between truth and utility?

Another question arises here as well: How would one go about trying to defend a particular religion on grounds of its utility rather than its truth, especially if its truth were "a matter of doubt"? How is such a defence even possible? Mill's answer to this question can be gleaned from the following passage:

An argument for the utility of religion is an appeal to unbelievers, to induce them to practise a well meant hypocrisy, or to semi-believers to make them avert their eyes from what might possibly shake their unstable belief, or finally to persons in general to abstain from expressing any doubts they may feel, since a fabric of immense importance to mankind is so insecure at its foundations, that men must hold their breath in its neighborhood for fear of blowing it down.10

An example of this politic way of treating the question of religion is the one provided by Tocqueville. In his seminal study of the nature, causes and effects of modern democracy Tocqueville has much to say about the utility of religion (especially for democracy). For instance, he speaks of its usefulness in satisfying that ineradicable longing of humankind for immortality, in moderating men's opinions and desires, and in strengthening their regard for and sense of duty to others. But he is silent on the question of its truth. To be sure, he strikes the reader as being utterly hostile to philosophical materialism. Yet the reasons he gives for his hostility seem purely moral and practical: he focuses exclusively on the potentially demoralizing, brutalizing and enervating consequences of its denial of

10 Ibid.
life after death. If he has any strictly logical or scientific grounds for doubting philosophical materialism, nowhere to our knowledge does he explicitly state that these amount to anything like a refutation. Indeed, some of his earlier intimations of the radically skeptical tendency of philosophy imply that it would be extremely difficult if not impossible conclusively either to refute the materialist doctrine or to prove the immortality of the soul. Thus he may have decided that the most prudent way to handle the matter would be to avoid open public discussion of it altogether. By limiting himself to defending religion and denouncing philosophical materialism on moral, practical grounds, he hoped to strengthen the desire of "semi-believers" to believe while providing them with no theoretical reasons, and no incentive to pursue any possible theoretical reasons, to question their beliefs. That he thought it might not be possible to do more for religion is tacitly suggested by his recommendation concerning piety to the leaders of society: he says not that they should believe because belief is intellectually supportable, but that they should always act and speak in public as though they believed—even, he implies, if they do not.  

Mill must surely have been well acquainted with Tocqueville's utilitarian defence of religion, for as his lengthy and respectful reviews of the Democracy attest, he had read that work with much interest. It is thus highly probable that he had Tocqueville's treatment of religion in mind when he penned the above explanation.  

Be that as it may, according to Mill, then, a defence of religion on utilitarian grounds would have a chance of succeeding only if it could somehow—presumably indirectly—first, induce all atheists and skeptics to practise dissimulation or reserve with

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12 This is not to say that his reading was always accurate. For a critical analysis of Mill's reading of Tocqueville, see Joseph Hamburger, "Mill and Tocqueville on Liberty," James and John Stuart Mill, ed. Robson and Laine, 118-25.
respect to questions of truth in religion; and second, discourage all semi-believers from giving thought to any evidence contrary to their beliefs.

It should be obvious by now that this kind of defence of religion assumes that people are capable of regarding as true a teaching which is false or at least incapable of being proven true but which it is pleasing and so possibly useful for them to regard as true. Whatever he may think of the morality of such a defence, nowhere does Mill dispute either its feasibility or the psychology underpinning it. We thus have here one more reason for calling into question or wondering about the precise meaning of Mill's earlier pronouncement that truth is our "first concernment", and about his apparent suggestion that the truth is always useful.

At any rate, Mill then makes the observation that "in the present period of history" this utilitarian manner of defending religion has an importance, especially relative to other kinds of defence, which it never had before. That, he says, is because "we are in an age of weak beliefs, and in which such belief as men have is much more determined by their wish to believe than by any mental appreciation of evidence." The way in which this "wish to believe" works is explained in the following manner:

The wish to believe does not arise only from selfish but often from the most disinterested feelings; and though it cannot produce the unavering and perfect reliance which once existed, it fences round all that remains of the impressions of early education; it often causes direct misgivings to fade away by disuse; and above all, it induces people to continue laying out their lives according to doctrines which have lost part of their hold on the mind, and to maintain towards the world the same, or a rather more demonstrative attitude of belief, than they thought it necessary to exhibit when their personal conviction was more complete.\(^{13}\)

Because of this "wish to believe", people are capable of believing, albeit less firmly, a given religious teaching even while harboring misgivings about the solidity of the evidence supporting it. How? By forgetting these misgivings or, as it were, shutting them out of their minds; to put it somewhat differently, by somehow partially blocking, in

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\(^{13}\) Three Essays, CW, X, 403-04.
a semi-conscious or unconscious manner, the corroding action of all such doubts on the cherished belief.

Mill's suggestion, then, is that arguments for the utility of religion can be effective in so far as they are able to tap this "wish to believe": people can be induced to believe what it is useful for them to believe if it is also what they for some reason deeply want to believe. He also indicates that the utilitarian argument may well be the one remaining effective method of bolstering a received religion when there is little more than the wish to believe left for it to stand on. But again, all of this clearly assumes that people can be made to regard as true teachings which are not or might not be true--simply because of some powerful wish to believe.

We are now in a position better to understand Mill's earlier statement that "the truth, in matters which so deeply affect us, is our first concernment." Yes, we care about the truth, but we, or at least many of us, do not care about the truth per se as much as we care that the truth possess certain characteristics, such as simplicity, or the power to dignify and console. We can be induced to accept as true many a teaching which, like the geocentric theory of the cosmos, is false but which, because of its potential for satisfying some powerful need or want, we want to believe is true. And we can be induced to reject as false many a teaching which, like the theory of evolution, is very probably true but which, because of its inability to satisfy some powerful need or want, we want to believe is false.

One issue which Mill does not now address is the causes of the weakness of religious belief in the present age. We shall take up this issue in due course.14

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The disadvantages of religion

Perhaps it is true that humankind needs some kind of religion, but, Mill points out, there is a price to be paid for the satisfaction of that need, especially now. As his brief explanation of the utilitarian defense of religion earlier suggests, the ability of a received religion to retain its influence when its "intellectual grounds" have been found wanting by its most thoughtful adherents depends upon what he calls "the moral bribery or subornation of the understanding." In other words, intelligent, probing minds must be induced to conceal or suppress all evidence contrary to religion for the sake of its alleged temporal, moral benefits. A situation emerges in which skeptics and atheists feel compelled to dissemble out of fear that being truthful would "aid in doing an irreparable injury to mankind." The "conscientious and cultivated" among them who are capable of contributing substantially to the "two noblest of all objects of pursuit, truth, and the general good", find themselves torn between the two, because, Mill implies, they have become convinced that an irresolvable conflict exists between them. "Such a conflict," he adds, "must inevitably produce a growing indifference to one or other of these objects, most probably to both."  

The latter assertion suggests that in Mill's view if a genuine conflict does in fact exist between these two pursuits, there is no way to reconcile them. One therefore wonders if he is aware of the possibility of reconciling them with the aid of the esoteric or "acroamatic method" of writing, whereby one truly communicates one's unorthodox beliefs to those seeking and able to understand while maintaining the appearance of upholding orthodox beliefs so as to avoid upsetting or harming the rest. The esoteric method of writing was evidently well understood and effectively employed by a number of Mill's illustrious predecessors—including someone philosophically in many ways akin to him, Francis Bacon.  

15 Three Essays, CW, X, 404.
Mill then states that "many" of those more gifted individuals, if they are not "totally paralyzed" by it, resolve the conflict by giving priority to the "general good." Accordingly, some of them confine their philosophizing to politically correct or safe matters. Others turn against philosophy, attacking it because of its alleged tendency to "dry up the fountain" of all "elevated feelings." Mill himself does not identify any such foes of philosophy, but one example might be a poet like William Blake, or John Keats. Still others become zealous proponents of intuitionism, a form of philosophy "in which intuition usurps the place of evidence, and internal feeling is made the test of objective truth", which therefore, according to Mill, must sooner or later prostrate itself before religion. Although he does not say so, Mill here probably has in mind Henry Mansel, disciple of the intuitionist Sir William Hamilton who used some of the latter's doctrines to develop an apology for the traditional belief in God as both perfectly good and omnipotent (which belief, as we know, Mill finds abhorrent).

But "many" is not the same as "all." In saying "many" Mill appears to leave open the possibility that a few choose the truth over the common good, or even that some of those few have found ways of reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable pursuits. Perhaps Mill is aware of esotericism after all.

Yet whether or not he is aware of it, and if he is, how he views it—all this has no bearing on his observation that the result of the perceived conflict between truth and the general good in this century has been a huge and deplorable "waste" of the talent and

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17 For a brief discussion of the animosity to philosophy expressed by Keats in Lamia, see 233 below. That Mill read Keats is shown by a letter to Florence May, where he outlines for her a "course of reading that would be a good preparation for historical and social philosophy", one which includes Keats' poetical works: [before ? Nov. 1868] CW, XVI, 1475.

18 Three Essays, CW, X, 404.

19 See Autobiography, CW, I, 268-70; and Hamilton, CW, IX, 89-108.
effort even of some of the strongest intellects. For much of that talent and effort has been expended on the elaboration of a metaphysic whose defining feature is, Mill contends, its systematic neglect and distortion of evidence prejudicial to religion. (Remarks elsewhere lead us to believe that he has the proponents of "intuitionism" in mind here.20) Given that "the whole of the prevalent metaphysics of the present century" has been of this kind, it is, Mill suggests, a wonder that humankind has recently experienced any intellectual progress at all.21

The prodigious waste of human talent and energy and the relatively meagre progress of the intellect which together mark the present century to date are, then, the price humankind has had to pay for attempting to preserve traditional religion because of its alleged temporal utility. "It is time," says Mill, to ask whether the price has not been too high, given "the return in human well-being" yielded thus.22

Clearly the suggestion here is that that "return" may not be large enough to justify the "expense." This possible diseconomy may have something to do with the fact that, as Mill indicates earlier, religious belief is already weak. Perhaps it is irremediably weak, so that persisting in the "moral bribery and subornation of the understanding" in order to strengthen it would be tantamount to chasing bad money with good.

In any event we should, Mill says, consider whether it would not be better to admit openly that there is no solid rational basis for any of our traditional religious beliefs, and to apply ourselves to the "strengthening and enlargement" of less expensive and strictly natural "sources of virtue and happiness."23

20 See, for example, Autobiography, CW, I, 269-70.
21 Three Essays, CW, X, 404.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 405.
The main issue of"Utility of Religion"

Yet, Mill warns implicitly, the mere fact that a price has had to be paid is not a sufficient reason for jettisoning all traditional religious beliefs. We should certainly not assume, as have some skeptical philosophers, that no belief, religious or otherwise, can be useful if it is false, and that only the truth can ever be useful. Take for instance "negative truths." According to Mill, a "negative truth" is a claim which correctly asserts that a given matter is unknowable. If the claim that the immortality of the soul cannot be proved either true or false were itself a true claim, it would be a "negative truth" in Mill's sense. Such truths, he says, are harmful inasmuch as they deprive us of beliefs which, though groundless, have guided our actions in a surer manner than our own best lights unassisted by them could have.24

Religion, thus, could prove to be "morally useful without being intellectually sustainable", so useful that, Mill tacitly indicates, even a very high intellectual price is worth paying to preserve it. Indeed, Mill insists, one cannot reasonably "deny that there have been ages and that there are still both nations and individuals" for whom some form of religious belief was or is beneficial.25 This fact alone should make us more receptive to the possibility that religion is useful "generally", hence that even future generations of humankind stand to benefit from it.26

Therefore, Mill implies, we should not rush to do away with all traditional religious beliefs. Apart from "the question of its truth", which he implies will not be dealt with at this time, the question "whether the belief in religion... is really indispensable to

24 Ibid.

25 In one of his letters Mill asserts that "Islamism is a fortunate thing for the Africans", and laments the fact that the Amerindians were exposed to Christian-European civilization rather than to it: Mill to Gustave d'Eichthal, 25 Dec. 1840, CW, XIII, 456.

26 Three Essays, CW, X, 405.
the temporal welfare of mankind" remains to be answered before the role of religion in the future can be fruitfully decided.27

Mill then explains more fully what is involved in a thorough, comprehensive investigation of this the main issue of the essay. We should, he suggests, inquire

... whether the usefulness of the belief [in religion] is intrinsic and universal, or local, temporary and, in some sense, accidental; and whether the benefits which it yields might not be obtained otherwise, without the very large alloy of evil, by which, even in the best form of the belief, those benefits are qualified.28

We take Mill to be saying here that to show that "the belief in religion" is "really indispensable to the temporal welfare of humankind" is to prove that its "usefulness is intrinsic and universal" rather than "local, temporary, and, in some sense, accidental." This in turn is to demonstrate that "the benefits which it yields" cannot be "obtained otherwise." It is, we surmise, for this reason that shortly afterwards Mill boils the main issue of the essay down to the question "whether [religion's] useful properties are exclusively inherent in it, or their benefits can be obtained without it."29

What is interesting about Mill's way of formulating the issue of the usefulness of religion is that compared with Tocqueville's, for example, it appears more complex. Mill explicitly distinguishes between "intrinsic and universal" usefulness on the one hand and "local, temporary, and, in some sense, accidental" usefulness on the other, whereas Tocqueville seems to recognize only the former kind of usefulness. Unlike Tocqueville's formulation of the question, therefore, Mill's explicitly raises the possibility that if religious belief has been useful to humankind thus far, nevertheless of late its utility has begun to decrease, and at some point in the future--however distant that point--it will altogether stop being useful. To put the point somewhat differently, Mill forces us to

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 406.
consider whether religion is necessary to humankind only in its "nonage", and whether we are destined, as Freud would say, "[to] grow out of" it.\(^{30}\) We have, of course, ample reason to wonder, for to repeat, a chief characteristic of the times is the weakness of religious belief.

Another, more troubling possibility arises here. It may be that for some reason we are fast growing incapable of religious belief even though we are still a long way from outgrowing it (in the sense of no longer needing it to be happy), if we can ever truly outgrow it. Mill does not raise this possibility explicitly, but it is at the very least consistent with his formulation of the main issue.

In fact we are inclined to think that Mill is very much alive to this possibility. Here it may be instructive to recall an argument he makes earlier: the "return in human well-being" we are now earning on the "subornation" of the understanding for the sake of preserving religion is far from "sufficient"; this circumstance may have resulted from the current weakness of religious belief; but however we explain that insufficiency, "it is time [seriously] to consider" whether we should openly acknowledge the intellectual untenability of all religious belief and instead use our best "mental powers" to find other, non-religious sources of the moral benefits hitherto yielded by religion. This argument--especially if seen in light of the immediately following passage,\(^{31}\) which shows a Mill not yet convinced that religion will become dispensable soon, if ever--can be restated as follows: time may be running out on religion, but it could conceivably run out sooner than we would want; that is why we had better begin now to look hard for an adequate alternative to it. One catches here a whiff of quiet but grave concern if not exactly of desperation.

\(^{30}\) The Future of an Illusion, 87.

\(^{31}\) Three Essays, CW, X, 404-05.
In any case, as careful readers (which is, again, what Mill requires us to be if we are to grasp his full meaning), we shall have to be on the lookout for anything in the unfolding inquiry that might further confirm Mill's awareness of that disquieting possibility.

Before he can begin his inquiry, however, several other preliminary matters remain for Mill to clarify. The first is an important aspect of Mill's philosophical method in the essay—"fairness."

"Fairness" in philosophy.

It would be easy, Mill suggests, to dismiss religion *per se* as useless or even harmful because of the "evil" people have done to one another in its name. That "evil" is perhaps best illustrated by Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia to appease Artemis—an ancient, pagan example—and the persecution of the Protestants under Louis XIV after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes—a modern, Christian example.

Nevertheless, Mill says, "the worst of these evils are already in great measure extirpated from the more improved forms of religion", largely as a result of the intellectual and affective development which humankind has undergone over the centuries. The continuing extirpation of such evils proves that they are not inherent in all religions. Consequently, the fact that particular forms of religion did at one time give rise to them cannot be used as an argument against the utility of religion as such.

To be sure, that fact shows that religion, far from being at all times the beneficial influence we are taught to believe it was, was itself in need of "improvement" by "other good influences" working completely independently of it. Even so, because it has improved markedly, for the purpose of this inquiry we ought to assume that the improvement of religion is "complete." That assumption, says Mill, is required by "fairness"—which in the present context seems roughly to mean a willingness to contend
with nothing less than the strongest possible version of the opposing side in any controversy.

Accordingly, we must presuppose that religion has adopted the best possible "human morality which reason and goodness could work out from philosophical, Christian, or any other elements", and has thus been purged of all evil effects springing from its "identification with any bad moral doctrine." In this way only, Mill suggests, can we hope to arrive at an adequate answer to the question "whether [religion's] useful properties are exclusively inherent in it, or their benefits can be obtained without it."\(^{32}\)

**Mill's atheism and his manner of revealing it**

It is worth noting that Mill here makes "acceptance of the best human morality" the criterion of religion's excellence or perfection and that for him reason and not revelation is the source of the "best human morality." He appears thereby to subordinate religion to rational, human morality and indeed to make of religion a purely human affair.

We should have expected nothing else, as this reductionist, anthropological conception of religion is a necessary presupposition of any serious inquiry into the utility of religion apart from its truth. This much should be clear from the present context (if it is not already clear from Mill's formulation of the main issue of the essay): For that kind of inquiry to have any point at all, the question of the utility of religion must be construed in such a way that the affirmative answer to it could conceivably be true even should religious belief prove altogether false. This would not be possible unless the potential utility of religion, hence religion itself, were understood in strictly temporal terms. Islam, for example, would have to be conceived merely as a feature of human societies, for instance, the Arab world, and its usefulness would have to be defined in relation to the proper mundane ends perhaps of those societies above all. Maybe it would not be going

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 405-06.
too far to say that for Mill the question "Is Christian, Islamic or any other religious belief useful regardless of whether it is true or false?" is and must be in substance indistinguishable from the question "Is any form of religious belief useful even though it is false, or at least cannot be proven true?"

It follows that Mill's approach to the issue of religion reveals him to be at the very least closed to the possibility of proving religion's truth, occasional suggestions to the contrary notwithstanding. In other words, far from actually having set aside the question of religion's truth as he purports to have done, Mill, by the very nature of the inquiry which he undertakes, shows his support for the position that religion is either untrue or incapable of being proven true.33

Equally noteworthy, however, is that even in this perhaps the frankest of all discussions of religion in his published writings Mill chooses to reveal his own atheism indirectly rather than to proclaim it openly.

The sources and character of Mill's argument

The next set of clarifying remarks is ostensibly primarily about the thinkers on which Mill intends to draw in the course of his inquiry. But the main reason for our interest in these remarks is that they give us an early insight into the basic character of Mill's own argument.

Mill begins with the observation that the "essential portion of the inquiry" spoken of above has not been dealt with much by "skeptical writers" (meaning writers who are skeptical about the usefulness of religion). The only "direct" sceptical treatment of this issue with which he says he is acquainted is a "short treatise" which he tells us is "understood to have been partly compiled from manuscripts of Mr. Bentham", but whose author and title he does not here divulge.34 We learn from the Autobiography that this

treatise is entitled *Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind* and that it was "published under the pseudonyme of Philip Beauchamp." But even there Mill does not tell us what the author's real name is.

This reticence together with the fact that Mill himself never had his own essay published during his lifetime makes us realize how charged such men still felt the whole question of religion to be despite—or perhaps because of—the current weakness of belief. We now appreciate better some of the precautions they believed it necessary to take in connection with the publication of their skeptical views on the subject. And we are that much more alert to possible instances of restraint and reserve in "Utility."

Mill goes on (in "Utility") to say that Beauchamp's treatise contains much that is "just and profound" but that in his view it "presses many parts of the argument too hard." In the *Autobiography* he expands on this point, saying that it has both the strengths and the weaknesses of the "Benthamic" way of thinking, and that, though it contains "many weak arguments", there is in it an abundance of "good material for a more completely philosophic and conclusive treatment of the subject." We can thus expect Mill's "Utility" to be, or at least to constitute the core of, that "more philosophic and conclusive treatment of the subject." We can also expect it to be free of the defects, including those of Benthamic origin, which characterize Beauchamp's analysis.

Mill then says (again, in "Utility") that "the incidental remarks" dispersed throughout the works of Auguste Comte are the only other source known to him of good material for the skeptical position on this issue. He tells us that he will draw "freely" from both these and Beauchamp's work in his own discussion. He thus indicates that he

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34 Ibid., 406.

35 *CW*, I, 73. The work referred to here is George Grote [pseud. Philip Beauchamp], *Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind*.


37 *CW*, I, 73.
leans toward the skeptical side of this debate, though we are left wondering whether he is as much a skeptic as Beauchamp and Beauchamp's mentor Bentham were.\(^{38}\)

**The distinction between the few and the many**

The inquiry, Mill says, is divided into two parts. The first deals with what religion does for society, or with its contribution to the social interest. The second part focuses on what it does for the individual, or on the influence it has "in improving and ennobling individual human nature."\(^{39}\)

Mill then states that the first part is of interest to everybody and the second is of interest only to the "best", though to them the latter is likely to be of greater interest than the former.\(^{40}\)

Together the above points have two implications worth noting. First, for Mill the "best" are those who have the greatest desire and capacity for "improving and ennobling" themselves. Second, the essay as a whole is concerned primarily with the "best."

The latter implication is especially interesting. For it suggests that despite powerful democratic proclivities in his thought, like so many of his philosophical predecessors Mill distinguishes between the few and the many, and that this distinction figures importantly in his thought. We shall have to watch carefully for clues regarding the nature and place of that distinction in his thought.

**Concluding Remarks**

Let us summarize what we have learned thus far.

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38 Three Essays, CW, X, 406.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 406-07.
Mill, we have learned, is open to the possibility that the truth is not always or necessarily useful. He is thus, unlike other skeptics, quite prepared seriously to consider whether religion has been and may continue to be, at least for a long time to come, morally and socially useful even if it is intellectually unsustainable. So useful, in fact, that even a large price in terms of the shackling and "subornation" of the understanding might justifiably be paid for its preservation. He implies that only if the benefits hitherto yielded by religion could be obtained from some other source would it be reasonable to contemplate relinquishing religion altogether.

Of course, this last consideration assumes that the choice between abandoning and retaining religion is still ours to make. But we have reason to suspect that in Mill's view that assumption might soon prove erroneous--perhaps too soon for our own good, because traditional religion is weak and may collapse before an adequate alternative can be put in its place.

We also have further evidence of Mill's atheism--and of his continuing unwillingness to disclose his atheism directly and explicitly.

All of this adds up to a highly intriguing picture of a man who, though a radical and an atheist, took very seriously the problem of the future role and place of religion in human life.

On the other hand, although we are told that religious belief is at present weak, we are still in the dark as to the causes of that weakness.

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41 We do well to recall Mill's earlier point that religion was generally useful until now and "that there are still both nations and individuals" for whom it remains useful. For that point (as well as those just reviewed) appears to imply something of great interest to us--that in Mill's view in certain societies or in certain kinds of company philosophers should even now, for solidly utilitarian reasons, be somewhat reserved and indirect in their handling of the question of religion. What consequences this has for the current scholarly debate about Mill's brand of utilitarianism remains of course to be considered. One possibility which Mill scholars may be compelled to investigate further, but which we can here do no more than raise, is that Mill's utilitarianism is not only, as Gray argues, indirect, but also at least partially esoteric, perhaps even in the way Sidgwick intended utilitarianism to be.
Moreover, we have learned that Mill recognizes some form of the distinction between the few and the many; but the significance of this distinction to him remains to be determined.

We turn now to the first part of Mill's inquiry.
2/ THE UTILITY OF RELIGION: SOME MISTAKEN VIEWS

The focus of this chapter is on Mill's attempt to refute two views of the usefulness of religion—that which casts it in the role of "auxiliary to the thief-catcher and the hangman," and that which assigns to it the office of teacher of morality. As mentioned earlier, we also pause occasionally to consider whatever Mill has to say, whether explicitly or by implication, concerning such important related matters as the distinction between the few and the many, and the causes of the present weakness of religious belief.

Religion as "auxiliary to the thief-catcher and the hangman"

In the past, observes Mill, the usual way to teach a moral code was by promulgating it as part of religion. This fact, he says, has given rise to the tendency to suppose that its religious grounding is the primary if not sole source of any given morality's hold on the human mind, and that without a grounding of this kind no moral code would have much influence on human conduct.1 Something like this view is expressed in Tocqueville's Democracy in America, as is shown by the following passage.

In the United States the influence of religion is not confined to the manners, but it extends to the intelligence of the people. Among the Anglo-Americans some profess the doctrines of Christianity from a sincere belief in them, and others do the same because they fear to be suspected of unbelief. Christianity, therefore, reigns without obstacle, by universal consent; the consequence is, as I have before observed, that every principle of the moral world is fixed and determinate, although the political world is abandoned to the debates and the experiments of men. Thus the human mind is never left to wander over a boundless field; and whatever may be its pretensions, it is checked from time to time by the barriers that it cannot surmount. . . Thus, while the law permits the Americans to do what

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1 Three Essays, CW, X, 407.
they please, religion prevents them from conceiving, and forbids them to commit, what is rash or unjust [emphasis added--BK].²

It can also be found in Locke, Hume and Voltaire, among others.³

According to Mill, in its crudest form this view represents religion as an "auxiliary to the thief-catcher and the hangman."⁴ He claims that all explanations of the utility of religion along these lines are false on the grounds that such factors as authority, education and public opinion are much more important determinants of a moral code's efficacy than religion.

Authority

Turning first to authority, Mill says that it has "an enormous influence... on the human mind." Even the wisest defer to it in those areas of science beyond the reach of their expertise. The most powerful form of authority is, he suggests, the "general concurrence of mankind." It is so powerful that any rule of conduct capable of gaining "universal assent", even if it were not grounded in religion, would obtain "a hold on the belief of every individual, stronger than it would have even if he had arrived at it by the inherent force of his own understanding."⁵

² Tocqueville, 315-16.


⁴ Three Essays, CW, X, 415. It should be pointed out that Tocqueville's view of the utility of religion extends far beyond the "auxiliary to the thief-catcher and the hangman" conception which certain passages, such as the one just quoted, suggest. For a brief but illuminating treatment of other important offices Tocqueville hoped religion would perform in democratic societies, among them combating individualism and materialism and their various ill effects, see Thomas L. Pangle, "The Accommodation of Religion: A Tocquevillian Perspective," The Canadian and American Constitutions in Comparative Perspective, ed. Marian C. McKenna (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1993), 10-18.

⁵ Three Essays, CW, X, 407.
One could counter, as Mill is aware, that since no set of morals enjoys "universal assent", the latter cannot be the source of whatever power it has. His reply is that this objection is in fact grist for his mill. As the number of people calling into question traditional moral beliefs grows, and as awareness of this trend increases, the hold which these beliefs have on the human mind weakens and their ability to influence human conduct declines, regardless of the religious sanctions connected with them.6

But, Mill implies, it can be further objected that most of those who have repudiated a received morality must also have repudiated the religion which grounds it, and that this double repudiation shows the centrality of religion to their earlier moral belief and conduct. His rejoinder appears to be that as dissent from an established religion grows and awareness of this trend spreads, that religion's power over humankind declines, no matter what the sanctions. The steady weakening of Christianity's hold on Europe since the Protestant Reformation, he suggests, is a case in point. All of this again proves that authority has a greater bearing on any given moral teaching's influence than does religion with all its sanctions.7

Education

The power of education, Mill intimates, is even greater, for education shapes sentiments as well as beliefs. So great is its power that were one to shed any of the moral beliefs one was brought up with--itself no easy matter--one would nevertheless retain for a long time afterwards the feelings or sentiments associated with those beliefs. If humankind were to adopt a set of morals devoid of religious foundation and have it methodically inculcated in every new generation from early childhood on, these moral beliefs would soon gain an almost unbreakable hold on our feelings and conduct. At any

6 Ibid., 408.

7 Ibid.
rate their influence would be just as strong as it would be if they were grounded in
religion, because, says Mill, "it cannot be imagined that the commands of God are to
young children anything more than the commands of their parents." It would appear to
follow that the religious dimension is of little if any direct consequence in the shaping of
sentiment and belief.

Indeed, Mill goes on to say, "[the] power of education is almost boundless: there
is not one natural inclination which it is not strong enough to coerce, and, if needful, to
destroy by disuse." This, he argues, is amply illustrated by the experience of ancient
Greece, especially Sparta. Sparta was able to maintain essentially unchanged the
institutions devised for it by Lycurgus for a long time. Yet its gods were the same as
those of other Greek city-states with their very different institutions. Moreover, Mill
observes, these institutions, though believed to be of divine origin, frequently underwent
change for which their citizenries had no difficulty obtaining divine approval. Mill's
point here seems to be that if one and the same religion could be used to sanction widely
differing and in some cases radically changing sets of institutions, then that religion could
not have been the cause of the strength which any of them might have possessed. The
"root of the [Spartan] system was," he adds, "[not religion but] devotion. . . to the ideal of
the country or State."

For the Greeks generally, Mill appears to argue, piety (what he calls "worship of
the Gods"), rather than comprehending, was itself comprehended by, justice or patriotism.
Instead of holding that obeying the laws of one's city was obligatory because the gods
wished it, they seemed to believe that worshipping the gods was obligatory because it was

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8 Ibid., 408-09.
9 Ibid., 409.
10 Ibid.
in the city's interest that this be done: they feared that if citizens failed to give the gods their due, divine vengeance would be visited upon the city.

Another way of putting the point as Mill sees it is this. Instead of using piety to strengthen public morality (for which purpose, Mill maintains, "secular inducements were almost exclusively relied on"), the Greeks used public morality to strengthen piety, even if only for the sake of the city. In fact, Mill tells us, "[such] moral teaching as existed in Greece had very little to do with religion." Not surprisingly, for--the claims of various philosophers, sophists and orators to the contrary notwithstanding--"[the] Gods were not supposed to concern themselves much with men's conduct to one another."\(^{11}\)

All of the above, concludes Mill, compels us to attribute the strength of ancient Greek moral beliefs and practices much more to education than to religion. Furthermore, it gives us reason to believe that in other societies where moral teachings were more closely linked to religious beliefs, the hold of the latter on the human mind depended on the power of education more than on their religious character.\(^{12}\)

**Public Opinion**

Equally influential according to Mill is what he calls "public opinion." Its mode of operation differs from that of authority and education. The latter two influence conduct indirectly, through their effect on beliefs, desires and sentiments. The former, on the other hand, affects conduct directly, though at times it conflicts with a person's beliefs and sentiments.\(^{13}\) For instance, as Mill suggests in *On Liberty*, timid unbelievers, out of


\(^{12}\) *Three Essays, CW*, X, 409-10.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 410.
fear of adverse public opinion and its consequences, often behave in a manner indistinguishable from that of believers.14

One indication of the great power of public opinion is that when it does come into conflict with individual conscience, rarely does the latter prevail. However, Mill argues, when it coincides with conscience and "social morality" (as is usually the case, since morality consists in those rules of conduct we generally want others to observe towards us, even though we are often quite prepared to set them aside in our behaviour towards others), public opinion is, "of all motives which operate on the bulk of mankind, the most overpowering." What makes it so irresistible in such cases is the ease with which one can delude oneself into believing that one's actions are determined by the "motive of conscience" when they are in fact determined only by the inferior "motive of public opinion."15

Except for the animal ones, all the strongest passions natural to humankind are, says Mill, manifestations or parts of the "motive derived from what I here call public opinion." These include: love of glory, love of admiration, love of sympathy and vanity, which are forms of its "attractive power", or power to attract or draw one to certain kinds of action; as well as fear of shame, or of being disliked or hated, which are forms of its "deterring power."16 To be sure, public opinion is important to us because of other things we stand to gain or lose by it, for instance, wealth, position and friends. Nevertheless, we often seek those other things not for their own sake but for the sake of honour, respect

14 CW, XVIII, 241-42.

15 Three Essays, CW, X, 410.

16 Ibid. Mill here takes no cognizance of Rousseau's distinction between l'amour de soi-meme and amour-propre. (In Rousseau's view the latter, unlike the former, is a product of reason and is therefore unnatural or artificial.) Mill also ignores Rousseau's related argument that such passions as the love of honour and glory, being manifestations of amour-propre, are by no means wholly natural. One wonders why Mill was not more radical in his attempt to separate the purely natural from the historical or cultural—all the more so when one considers how lively his historical sense was otherwise. For an account of amour-propre by Rousseau, see his Discourse on the Origins and Foundation of Inequality Among Men, The First and Second Discourses, ed. Masters, trans. Masters and Masters, 130; 221-22, n. (o); and 236, editor's n. 31.
and the like, which they can help us obtain. How we see ourselves is so completely bound up with the opinions others seem to have of us that very few of us have the strength to think well or ill of ourselves when it contradicts those opinions.

In sum, concern with the opinions of others pervades "all departments of human affairs." Once our basic material needs have been taken care of, most of what we do is motivated by public opinion. The more sensitive one is, the more one cares about the opinion and esteem of others.17

Mill then states that an impartial examination of the matter will give one "reason to believe" that most of the effects on human conduct commonly attributed to piety are in fact the direct result of the operation of public opinion. Religion has been influential not because of some intrinsic power, but only to the extent that it has been able to mould and direct public opinion in accordance with its own ends. When unsupported by public opinion, the sanctions of religion have generally been ineffective. They became especially ineffective after humankind stopped believing in the habitual employment by gods of temporal rewards and punishments. For example, the prophets' frequent warnings of severe punishments to be visited by God if not on the current generation of the people of Israel then on a future one seemed unable to prevent this people from frequently relapsing into paganism.18

The lack of any discernible pattern and consistency in such punishments eventually caused the downfall of the old religions. They were at length replaced by religions promising divine rewards and punishments primarily of an other-worldly kind. Nevertheless, Mill suggests, this change has been of little practical significance. Because of their remoteness and invisibility, the threat these other-worldly punishments pose is

17 Three Essays, CW, X, 411.
18 Ibid., 411-12.
unlikely to have a substantial effect on the actions of anyone seeking some illicit but immediate and tangible gain in this world.19

A further reason identified by Mill for the ineffectiveness of such sanctions is their uncertainty. Whether or not a Cesare Borgia or an Al Capone, for example, should be punished after death would, Mill suggests, have to be decided on the basis not of any one of his actions but of his whole life. Yet assuming that such a man is a believer, however sinful he perceives his life to be, he would probably not think himself so thoroughly evil as to be beyond all hope of salvation. His hopes would be bolstered by a number of other teachings of the established religion, such as those concerning the possibility of redemption through prayer and penance, the tempering of divine justice with mercy, and the severity of certain punishments. The unfathomable harshness of eternal damnation, for example, would make him want to believe that God, who is just, would never seriously contemplate consigning his soul to the inferno for anything he might have done in this world.20

That religious sanctions not supported by public opinion have little impact on human conduct is, says Mill, illustrated by a number of current behaviours or practices, among them duelling and "illicit sexual intercourse", discussed in the writings of Jeremy Bentham. Believers know that these practices are offences against God and yet frequently engage in them. Duelling is practised because according to public opinion (at least in certain countries on the continent) it is an appropriate way of defending one's honour in response to certain types of personal insult. Illicit sexual intercourse is common because it does not generally meet with severe public disapproval. All believers who have committed sins of this sort find ways to justify to themselves the belief that in the end God will not take their crimes and misdemeanors too seriously. It is remarkable, Mill seems to suggest, how free almost all those who have not committed any great crimes

19 Ibid., 412.

(and, indeed, many of those who have) seem to be of the fear of "eternal punishment"—even in their hour of death.\(^{21}\)

To be sure, Mill concedes, individuals can be found upon whom the idea of punishment in the afterlife has a tremendous effect. But cases of this kind usually involve extraordinary states of mind such as hypochondria or severe depression in persons predisposed to melancholy. Yet even in cases of the latter type that effect, he suggests, could be merely temporary.\(^{22}\)

Furthermore, he acknowledges, there are people capable of enduring much suffering and even of sacrificing their lives for the sake of their religious beliefs. However, he argues, apart from the fact that they are frequently motivated by the desire for glory, such acts of devotion occur mostly under extraordinary conditions. Consequently they shed little if any light on the motivation of human conduct in "normal" circumstances. In addition the ability to inspire them, far from being unique to religion, is characteristic of all great causes.\(^{23}\)

**Religion as teacher of morality**

The conception of religion as a "supplement to human laws, a more cunning sort of police, an auxiliary to the thief-catcher and the hangman" having been refuted, "[we] may now," says Mill, "have done with this . . . the vulgarest part" of the inquiry. All the same, there may, he grants, be truth in the "more highminded" view that religion is necessary as a "teacher. . . of social morality."\(^{24}\) This view finds expression in the writings of Locke and Tocqueville, for example.\(^{25}\) Mill adduces evidence for it from the

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 413-15.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 414.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 415.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 415-16.
past. Ancient peoples, he observes, were inclined to look upon their morals, laws, beliefs, arts, etc., as "revelations" from vastly more powerful, superhuman or divine beings.\textsuperscript{26}

Mill's explanation of this phenomenon can be restated as follows: The ancients' inclination to ascribe divine origins to their laws and morals was the consequence of: first, those peoples' "hopes and fears" concerning what the gods could do for and to them; and second, early humankind's tendency to suppose that the gods, because of their superior might, must also have been superior in wisdom and knowledge. These hopes, fears and suppositions, on the other hand, rested on the belief that everything tangible in the world, whether ordinary or extraordinary, good or bad, was the work of gods. And the latter belief was commonly held in ancient times at least partly because of early humankind's ignorance of the "fixed laws according to which physical phenomena succeed one another."\textsuperscript{27}

The relation between science and religion

Let us pause briefly to note that here, for the first time in "Utility", Mill indicates one possible major cause of the current weak state of religious belief--the advancement of natural science in the modern, positivist sense, meaning knowledge of the laws of causation governing the "facts of Nature."\textsuperscript{28} However, he does not now elucidate how or why the progress of science should have such a corrosive effect on established religious beliefs. All he does is point out the conflict between scientific progress and primitive fetishistic or polytheistic religious beliefs only.


\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Three Essays}, \textit{CW}, X, 416.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

Religion as teacher of morality—continued

Returning to Mill's main argument, we see that in his view those "rude" pagan peoples felt compelled to conform to any rules of conduct which they presumed to embody the wishes of the gods. Were it not for the forging of this link between rules and gods in their minds, Mill concedes, they might never have begun to develop morally.29

Nevertheless, the question is whether what is true of the "savage" of antiquity is also necessarily true of the civilized man or woman of today. "Are not moral truths strong enough in their own evidence, at all events to retain the belief of mankind [even, Mill implies, when their original religious underpinnings have crumbled] when once they have acquired it?" Mill asks, apparently rhetorically.30

Let us recall some of the staggering atrocities committed in supposedly civilized societies since Mill's time—for example, the Holocaust, the Great Soviet Famine of the early 1930s, and the unrestrained killing of civilians in the total wars of the twentieth century. In light of these atrocities we cannot help wondering why that should have been merely a rhetorical question for Mill.

Yet Mill goes on to say that the beneficial effects of certain moral precepts discovered in the past, especially those espoused by Christ (for example, the "new commandment to love one another"), have become the "property of humanity, and cannot now be lost by anything short of a return to primaeval barbarism." Humankind's continued adherence to the most "noble" moral truths learned thus far, then, insofar as it depends on the perpetuation of a truly "cultivated or civilized" way of life, is not for him the foregone conclusion that the above seemingly rhetorical question initially makes one think it is. Indeed, nowhere in "Utility" does Mill say or imply that a relapse into barbarism is impossible. True, later in the same paragraph he assures us that the most

29 Three Essays, CW, X, 416.
30 Ibid.
noble precepts of morality are in no danger of being forgotten after they have been "once acknowledged as the creed of the best and foremost portion of our species." But again, he does not say that all of the "best and foremost portion of our species" have already adopted this partly Christian, partly philosophical, and partly "other" system of morality. To the extent that they have not yet done so, Mill here seems tacitly to indicate, to that extent the future of civilization is not yet secure.\(^{31}\)

We observe that the distinction Mill makes in his introductory remarks between the few and the many is once again brought to our attention. But this time he brings it up in connection with the issue of the future of civilization. To restate the critical point just made, Mill appears to be suggesting that the prospects of civilization turn largely on the choice which the few--"the best and foremost portion of our species", as Mill puts it--make in the domain of morality.

The "treason of the intellectuals" in the twentieth century, their contribution, however unwitting and indirect, to the perpetration of the atrocities mentioned above, compels us to ask: How could Mill have been certain that the few will make what was for him--just as it was later for Julien Benda--the right choice, the choice most conducive to the preservation and advance of civilization? If he could not, what did he think should be done to increase the likelihood of them making the right choice?

Yet instead of immediately confronting these grave issues, Mill goes on to draw the reader's attention to a major harmful consequence of viewing morality as part of a revealed religion. "[Ascribing] a supernatural origin to the received maxims of morality," he says, "consecrates" and therefore "protects" them from critical scrutiny.

So that if among the moral doctrines received as a part of religion, there be any which are imperfect--which were either erroneous from the first, or not properly limited and guarded in the expression, or which, unexceptionable once, are no longer suited to the changes that have taken place in human relations (and it is my firm belief that in so-called christian morality,

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 416-17.
instances of all these kinds are to be found)—these doctrines are considered equally binding on the conscience with the noblest, most permanent and most universal precepts of Christ.32

To put Mill's point briefly, the consequence is that one is compelled to accept along with the good ones a host of moral precepts embedded in "religion" which are imperfect because they are either erroneous or inadequately expressed or outworn.

For Mill, then, the practice of teaching morality as part of a revealed religion was beneficial and necessary in the past. Thus far he agrees with Locke and Tocqueville. Where he parts company with them is in arguing that this practice has on balance become a social liability for two reasons. First, it is no longer capable of yielding any benefits because the lesson of morality has already been learned. Second, it remains a liability insofar as it precludes the possibility of improving morality (as well as religion) through reasoned argument. The conclusion which he wants us to draw for ourselves is that that practice should now be discontinued.33

It should be pointed out that in conceding the usefulness in the past of teaching morality as though it were of supernatural origin even though as a matter of fact it is not, Mill tacitly indicates that the truth is not always and everywhere useful. We shall briefly examine certain implications of this point in our concluding remarks.

A few observations remain to be made about another matter Mill raises here, the moral problem of Christianity, as well as about the manner in which he raises it.

At first it is not clear what particular religion if any is targeted in the argument which includes the long statement quoted above. Midway through that statement, however, Mill gently indicates that "so-called christian morality" is not without the imperfections of religious morality just identified. But his doing so in the form of a parenthetical remark gives the impression that his mention of Christianity here is a mere

32 Ibid., 417.

33 Ibid.
passing one, intended only to illustrate the larger point about the problematic relationship between religion and morality in general which the quotation as a whole appears to make. That remark even seems to minimize the degree to which Christianity does in fact illustrate the problem.

Nevertheless, whereas in the portion of the quotation preceding his parenthetical remark Mill speaks of the doctrines and precepts of "religion", in the part of the quotation immediately following the parentheses he speaks of the doctrines and precepts of "Christ." To put it simply, he substitutes Christianity for "religion". It turns out that although the main point of the passage quoted has wider applicability, Christianity really is the target.

Evidently Mill is here gently further preparing the reader for the far more thorough explicit criticism, mainly on moral grounds, to which he subjects Christianity later in the essay. He thus builds on On Liberty, in which, as has already been argued, he attempts both to clear the way for and to take the first steps towards such a criticism. We surmise that the reason for his gentleness is to minimize the shocking effect that criticism will have when he finally makes it, and so to maximize receptivity to it.

Concluding remarks

Having shown that the vulgar view that religion is socially useful as enforcer or as teacher of morality is in the first instance baseless and in the second true for the past only, Mill can now turn to the other, "more elevated" part of the inquiry. We, however, before proceeding to the second part of Mill's inquiry, pause to review and reflect briefly on the main points of the first.

First, Mill makes clear his view that religion is not necessary to society as a sanction for common morality, and that for the enforcement of the latter "secular inducements" such as honour would suffice. As indicated earlier, this aspect of Mill's
teaching concerning the utility of religion appears to conflict with certain views expressed in the writings of Locke, Hume, Voltaire and Tocqueville.

On the other hand it strongly resembles the position taken in the following passage from Bacon's *Essays*:

Atheism leaves a man to sense, to philosophy, to natural piety, to laws, to reputation; all which may be guides to an outward moral virtue, though religion were not; but superstition dismounts all these and erecteth an absolute monarchy in the minds of men. Therefore atheism did never perturb states, for it makes men wary of themselves, as looking no further: and we see the times inclined to atheism (as the time of Augustus Caesar) were civil times.34

And as Mill indicates, it is in the main identical with Beauchamp's view.35

We cannot here undertake a critical assessment of Mill's argument concerning the dispensability of religion as an enforcer of common morality in the first part of "Utility." Suffice it for now to say that even if it is not without flaws, that argument merits serious consideration. More important, as we shall soon see, like Bacon before him, and by contrast with Beauchamp, Mill does not conclude from that argument that religion is completely bereft of utility.

Second, Mill believes that it would be best now to begin teaching morality independently of religion. At the same time he concedes that in the past the practice of teaching morality as part of religion, even though misleading on strictly theoretical grounds, was socially useful. On this matter he is, as we have seen, in partial agreement with thinkers like Locke and Tocqueville.

In making that concession Mill implies that the truth is by no means always and everywhere useful. Long ago it would have been harmful for the majority of humankind

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35 For that matter, see also David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (1956; rpt. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 70-73 [ch. XIV, entitled "Bad influence of popular religions on morality"]). Indeed, there are many continuities between Beauchamp's analysis of religion and Hume's in the *Natural History*, especially the chapter here noted.
to be taught that morality is in fact not of supernatural origin. For if they had, morality might have had even greater difficulty taking root. Therefore anyone in ancient times who had grasped the autonomous character of morality ought to have been reserved about it in public.36

Third, in the first part of the inquiry we find Mill for the first time in "Utility" raising, albeit by way of allusion, the question whether a conflict exists between science and religion. We are thus compelled to raise the further question whether in his view that conflict, if indeed it exists, has contributed to the current weak state of religious belief.

Fourth, Mill here gives us some insight into the significance for him of the distinction between the few and the many, by implicitly indicating that the future of civilization largely hinges on the choice made by the few in the domain of morality.

Finally, building on foundations laid in On liberty, Mill here quietly and gradually prepares the reader for the more thorough and explicit moral critique of Christianity to come later in the essay. Thus we have yet another indication of how restrained and cautious, how Demosthenean Mill believes he must be even in this the boldest of his public treatments of religion.

We proceed now to the second part of Mill's inquiry, which he suggests will not be as "easily brought to a precise issue" as the first.37

36 A further unstated "corollary" would seem to be that in those times utilitarian philosophy, at least in its treatment of such issues as the truth and usefulness of religion, should have been indirect or esoteric.

37 Three Essays, CW, X, 407.
3/ THE UTILITY OF RELIGION: THE "MORE ELEVATED VIEW"

In this chapter we begin our examination of the second part of Mill's inquiry into the utility of religion, that is, his investigation of the usefulness of religion to the individual or, to be more precise, for "improving and ennobling individual human nature." As in the preceding chapter, we pause from time to time to ponder anything said or implied along the way concerning other important matters, above all the quarrel between science and religion and its bearing on the present state of religious belief.

The vital question

Mill states that the question now facing us is whether religion is socially necessary not in either of the two senses already dealt with, but "in a far higher sense." In other words, the issue is whether religion is "necessary to the perfection of the individual character" and therewith also "to the highest excellence in social conduct."1 ("The highest excellence in social conduct"is, we take it, merely the other-regarding aspect of the "perfection of the individual character.") But the phrases just quoted are meant to capture different aspects of what Mill elsewhere calls "virtue" (or "positive virtue")--which he normally distinguishes from ordinary or "common" morality, just as he here implicitly distinguishes the latter from the "highest excellence in social conduct."2 Thus,

1 Three Essays, C.W. X, 417.
2 Ibid., 415, 417. A brief and somewhat oversimplified account of Mill's concept of (positive) virtue as distinct from ordinary or "common" morality (or the mere performance of duty) must suffice here. According to Mill, virtue is the tendency, usually habitual, to do what is right or good for its own sake, without conscious regard for consequences—to act generously, for instance, or courageously, as an end in itself and not because of the wealth or honour such conduct might bring. Thus virtue is both disinterested and voluntary. It is also relatively difficult of attainment, which is why virtuous people have always been in the minority. For these reasons virtue cannot be legislated into existence, though it may be fostered through education. Common morality, on the other hand, consists in merely abiding by certain rules of conduct—"do not steal", "do not cause bodily harm to others", "keep your promises", etc.—enforced by public opinion and where feasible by law. One is moral in this sense when one abides by such rules not for their
properly understood, the question now to be addressed is whether religion is necessary to the pursuit and attainment of virtue and is for this reason socially useful.

In fact, according to Mill this is question that interests "the best" most of all—more at any rate than does the question of the necessity of religion to "common" morality; for they are far more attracted to virtue than to "common" morality.3

But why that question should be at all interesting to them Mill has so far left unexplained. Could it be that "the best" are beginning to wonder about the future of religion, and about the wisdom of pursuing virtue in a world where the traditional religious support for that pursuit has fallen away?

Be that as it may, how Mill pictures the few is gradually coming into focus for us. What is more, the reason he attaches so much importance to them can now be stated more precisely. To recall, in the preceding chapter it was suggested that Mill sees the future of civilization hinging on the continued commitment of the few to morality. But given that the "the best" are concerned primarily about virtue and not morality, it would, we surmise, be more accurate to say that Mill sees the future of civilization hinging on their continued devotion to virtue. Indeed, there are several passages in other works which confirm our surmise.4 The question, then, which is of such vital interest to "the best"

own sake, but for the sake of avoiding the penalties for violating them. Thus (ordinary) morality is interested, calculating and involuntary. It is made compulsory by society because without it people would constantly be harming each other and society could not long endure such a condition. (Virtue, by contrast, bears uniquely on the ennoblement, improvement and future well-being of society, and perhaps even on its survival in the long run.) The rules of conduct which it comprises being in most cases prohibitions, morality is considerably less demanding than virtue, and so is relatively easy of attainment. Accordingly, morality is said to be common and virtue noble. To restate the last point, we expect people to be moral and blame and punish those who are immoral, whereas we admire those who are virtuous but neither blame nor punish people for being simply moral rather than virtuous. Mill's distinction between virtue and common morality appears to parallel Tocqueville's between virtue and the "principle of self-interest rightly understood." See Utilitarianism, CW, X, 216-17, 219-221, 223, 225, 228, 234-39; Auguste Comte, CW, X, 335, 337-38, 339; and Considerations on Representative Government, CW, XIX, 385-86. See also Tocqueville, Democracy, I, 254-56, and II, 129-35.

3 Cf. Three Essays, CW, X, 417, 415 and 406-07.

4 In the Considerations on Representative Government, for instance: "The natural tendency of men and their works was [in the opinion of the ancients] to degenerate, which tendency, however, by good institutions virtuously administered, it might be possible for an indefinite length of time to counteract. Though we no longer hold this opinion; though most men in the present age profess the contrary creed,
turns out to be the vital question for all of us, however oblivious to it the rest of us might be. Again, to the extent that the dedication hereafter of "the best" to the pursuit of virtue is not a foregone conclusion--and we shall soon see that Mill does not believe it is--the fate of civilization may be said still to hang in the balance.

Let us examine how Mill deals with this vital question.

Mill's psychological approach to religion

Mill then indicates that there are nevertheless a few other questions which must be addressed first: What is it in human nature that makes us "require" religion, or what human "wants" does it satisfy? And what "qualities" does it foster? Finding answers to these questions should, he explains, put us in a better position to determine to what extent those wants can be satisfied, and those qualities (or ones like them) fostered, "by other means".

It must be pointed out that in attempting to psychologize religion--in seeking to understand the belief in the divine merely as the satisfaction of some human need rather than as something elicited in some mysterious, perhaps incomprehensible way by the divine--Mill is making of religion a purely human affair. Like his intimation earlier in the essay that religion should be subordinated to morality, and his decision to investigate the utility of religion independently of its truth, his psychological approach to religion is yet another indication that Mill is closer to atheism than he sometimes appears to be.

believing that the tendency of things, on the whole, is towards improvement; we ought not to forget, that there is an incessant and ever-flowing current of human affairs toward the worse, consisting of all the follies, all the vices, all the negligences, indolences, and supinenesses of mankind; which is only controlled, and kept from sweeping all before it, by the exertions which some persons constantly [emphasis added--BK], and others by fits, put forth in the direction of good and worthy objects. It gives a very insufficient idea of the importance of the strivings which take place to improve and elevate human nature and life, to suppose that their chief value consists in the amount of actual improvement realized by their means, and that the consequence of their cessation would merely be that we should remain as we are. A very small diminution of those exertions would not only put a stop to improvement, but would turn the general tendency of things towards deterioration; which, once begun, would proceed with increasing rapidity, and become more and more difficult to check, until it reached a state often seen in history and in which many large portions of mankind even now grovel; when hardly anything short of superhuman power seems sufficient to turn the tide, and give a fresh commencement to the upward movement": CW, XIX, 388. See also ibid., 385-386; and Utilitarianism, CW, X, 216-17.
A digression on the origin of religion

Before tackling the question of the basis of religion in human nature, Mill takes issue with the view that religion originated in fear, a view which he makes clear was known to the ancients but which he may also have attributed to Hume and Hobbes. Mill's view is that religion originated in the spontaneous anthropomorphic tendency of the human mind—the tendency to attribute such human characteristics as life and especially volition to all non-human physical objects which "appear to be self-moving" or whose "motions and operations" otherwise seem "arbitrary."

That tendency, Mill observes, completely dominated the thinking of primitive peoples for the simple reason that early humankind had the capacity for nothing more advanced. The more advanced mode of thought Mill alludes to here is none other than the method of explanation in terms of "fixed laws according to which physical phenomena succeed one another" which he mentions earlier and which is for him an essential feature of natural science.

The implication is that natural science is incompatible with anthropomorphism because of its mechanistic, deterministic bent. In disclosing causal connections of the mechanistic kind among the phenomena of nature, science divests them of that appearance of arbitrariness or independence of each other upon which anthropomorphism rests.

In any event, the anthropomorphic tendency of early humankind, Mill argues, gave rise first to fetishistic, then to polytheistic beliefs. But whatever form it first took, once belief in the existence of divine beings had been acquired, "fear of them necessarily followed", for they were seen as possessing enough power to inflict great pain and suffering on human beings. At the same time, Mill adds, belief was reinforced by fear,

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6 *Three Essays*, CW, X, 418.
"nothing being conceived to be so great an offense to the divinities as any doubt of their existence."⁷

Having touched on the origin of religion among early humankind and the controversy surrounding it, Mill says that it is unnecessary to discuss at greater length the "natural history of religion." His reason is that "we have not here to account for [religion's] origin in rude minds, but for its persistency in the cultivated."⁸

We cannot help asking why Mill even brings this controversial matter up if he is unwilling to delve into it more deeply, especially since, as he himself indicates, much more can be said about it. His suggestion that it is not directly relevant to the issue under discussion seems a better reason for avoiding it altogether than for giving it such a cursory treatment.

The answer to our question centres on the last quotation. First, the point expressed in that quotation can be restated as follows: "It is a wonder, not that primitive, ignorant peoples had religious beliefs, but that we cultivated or enlightened or civilized people still do!" We take Mill here to be insinuating that "cultivation"--which, as we saw earlier, seems for him to include the development of the intellect through science and philosophy--is fundamentally inimical to all forms, at least all traditional forms, of religious belief. He does not here explain this hostility, but we surmise that it has something to do with the mechanistic, deterministic bent of natural science he alludes to earlier. To be more precise, in seeking the laws of causation governing all natural phenomena, natural science is bound to challenge even the received monotheistic religion. Especially vulnerable to this challenge is the belief in a God who frequently but unpredictably intervenes directly in the mundane course of events. Consequently, Mill seems to say, if, like the ignorant peoples of the past, we civilized or enlightened peoples

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⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
continue to subscribe (even if only half-heartedly) to one of the established religions, we do so despite of rather than because of the progress of science.

If our interpretation of the full significance of the last quotation provided above is correct, then what we have here is another, perhaps even stronger indication that there is in Mill's view a fundamental conflict between religion and science. And we now have reason to believe that Mill sees the progress of science as a major factor in the decline of traditional religious belief, and therewith in the emergence of the present "age of weak beliefs."

Nevertheless, our interpretation would be far less plausible were it not for the brief excursion into the "natural history of religion" which precedes that quotation. As should be clear by now, this excursion helps us to see more clearly than we would otherwise that the main difference between modernity and antiquity which is crucial to the point of the quotation is precisely modern humankind's possession of science.

Second, by giving us that tidbit of "natural history" and then indicating that what also needs explaining is the persistency of religious belief among the "cultivated" of today, Mill compels us to ask whether contemporary religious beliefs are not as far from the truth as ancient ones. Moreover, he prepares us for what he is about to offer--an explanation of the religious propensity of the "cultivated" which, though different in detail from his explanation of the religious propensity of ancient peoples, is yet essentially as mundane or naturalistic as the latter.

Mill's brief discussion of the "natural history of religion" thus turns out to be relevant after all, even if in a subtle, indirect way. Equally important, all of the above further strengthens our sense that Mill intends to explain religion in purely human terms, and that he is in fact an "unbeliever".
Mill's psychology of religion

In saying that what needs explaining is the "persistence of [religion] in the cultivated" Mill is in effect returning to the question of "what it is in human nature which causes it to require a religion." However, he implies that of chief interest to us now is not so much the religious propensity of humankind in general as that of the "cultivated" in particular. We must therefore reformulate the question thus: What is it in human nature which causes even, or especially, the "cultivated" to require a religion?

The answer to this question, Mill intimates, has to do with the gap between what we know, which is very limited, and what we want to know, which is boundless. What happens when we look out toward the infinite, mysterious and awe-inspiring expanses of space lying outside the limits of the tiny region of the cosmos compassed by our experience and knowledge? According to Mill, we are driven to wonder and, having little solid evidence to work with, to speculate endlessly about the many worlds scattered throughout those expanses. Nevertheless, he reminds us,

the domain of our earthly existence is not only an island in infinite space, but also in infinite time. The past and the future are alike shrouded from us: we neither know the origin of anything which is, nor its final destination.9

Therefore, given that we have a much keener interest in the ultimate origin and destiny of our world, how much stronger must be our desire for knowledge of such matters.

We crave a theory, even if only a plausible one, of the "cause or agency" or "powers" governing the world's course from beginning to end. What is more, Mill adds, we fervently hope that this theory will represent that governing "influence" as "benignant" rather than "hostile". So strong is our desire for such 'knowledge' that despite the paucity of relevant evidence at our disposal, we fashion lofty ideas of other-worldly, divine beings with which to satisfy that desire. We do that solely by means of the imagination and with the aid of "specious but inconclusive analogies derived from human agencies

9 Ibid., 418-19.
and design." Those of us with "lofty" imaginations create "lofty" images, and those of us with "groveling" imaginations, "low and mean" ones.10

The passage in "Utility" summarized in the preceding paragraphs is one of the most eloquent and moving in the entire Mill corpus. It bespeaks a melancholy state of mind, and poignantly expresses the 'metaphysical' loneliness, alienation and insignificance one is capable of feeling in the face of this unfathomably vast, dark, strange, cold and indifferent place we call the universe.11

But who is most likely to experience deeply disquieting feelings of this kind? Mill's implicit answer is we "cultivated" moderns, especially the more sensitive and reflective among us, inasmuch as we have been exposed to certain aspects of modern cosmology, such as the theory that the universe is infinite in both space and time. Few if any even educated individuals could have had such an experience in times preceding the advent of the new natural science. In the early Middle Ages, for instance, the vast majority of the highly educated would have imbibed the far more comforting viewpoint derived largely from Aristotle and apparently firmly rooted in the 'natural' or pre-scientific standpoint--of the cosmos as limited, small, closed, geocentric, and in general a relatively cozy place to be.12 In modern times, by contrast, the fundamental experience of 'metaphysical' loneliness and estrangement adumbrated above is, Mill suggests, likely to be quite common, the more so as awareness of the most salient aspects of the new cosmology spreads.

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10 Ibid.


12 For a clear, concise and thoroughly engaging account of the fundamental differences between the ancient and the modern conceptions of nature and the cosmos, see John Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), 53-76.
Mill's psychological explanation of the persistence of religion among the "cultivated", then, goes something like this: The desire for answers to certain basic questions of existence, particularly those of ultimate origin, destiny, purpose and place in the grand scheme of things, may well be inherent in human nature.\(^{13}\) But these questions may have acquired for a large segment of humanity in modern times an urgency and acuteness which they possessed for at best a very few individuals in earlier times. This development may have been largely the result of the advent and growth of science. By disclosing the spatially and temporally infinite and 'open' character of the universe, science has made us keenly aware of how much we have yet to learn if we are ever to find satisfactory answers to some of these questions. As we have already pointed out, it has also contributed to a growing sense of 'metaphysical' loneliness, estrangement and insignificance. Perhaps most important of all, science is by its very nature incapable of dealing with issues of ultimate origin, destiny and meaning. For all these reasons science may have made the natural desire of humankind to have answers to such primary questions stronger, more ardent now than it has ever been. It has certainly done nothing to dampen that desire. Because of science's inability to provide answers to those primary questions, we find ourselves looking, just as humankind always has, to religion for them. True, scientific progress may gradually be undermining the intellectual foundations of religion, with the consequence that humankind is generally far less able to believe now than it was in antiquity. But in no way should this be taken to mean that the progress of science has extinguished our "wish to believe."\(^{14}\)

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\(^{13}\) Mill here appears to adumbrate Schopenhauer's concept of "metaphysical need." For an explanation by Schopenhauer of the "metaphysical need" of humanity, how it is met by religion and philosophy, and how it is rendered more and more acute by the progress of science, see his "On Man's Need of Metaphysics," *The Will to Live: Selected Writings of Arthur Schopenhauer*, ed. Richard Taylor, trans. R. B. Haldane, J. Kemp, Mme. Karl Hildebrand and T. Bailey Saunders (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1967), 1-32.

\(^{14}\) Mill's explanation is largely borne out by the spiritual crisis Tolstoy underwent before his rediscovery of God: see Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession* and Other Religious Writings, trans. Jane Kentish (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987), 30-66, 78-80. Nietzsche too makes the point that modern humanity's need for a "transcendental solution to the riddle of his existence" has, if anything, become even more acute, at least
In sum, according to Mill, the main reason for the persistence of religion even among us "cultivated" moderns is the intrinsically human yearning for clarity about ultimate origins, meaning, purpose and destiny. Since science can neither give us that clarity nor extinguish our yearning for it, in our search for it we still turn, just as our ancestors did, to religion. However, because of the progress of science, we do so with a diminished capacity though not necessarily a less ardent desire to believe.

The validity of the foregoing interpretation of the passage containing Mill's psychological account of the persistency of religious belief in modern times is by no means obvious. Nevertheless, it is also borne out by our earlier argument that the key difference between ancient and modern humankind which he alludes to at the start of that passage is the latter's possession of science. If we are right, then what we have here is an intimation—perhaps the first such intimation in the essay—of the darker or more problematic side of the march of science.

As outlined in "Utility", Mill's psychology of religion seems to assume that what is traditionally referred to as natural theology as well as revealed religion is the work of the imagination rather than of reason and experience combined with faith. Mill, we should note, has nothing whatever to say about faith as an alternative form of knowledge, as if to suggest that no such thing exists. Instead he now introduces poetry into his discussion of the relation between religion and human nature.

Religion and poetry

prose of human life."15 (In an older language, to which Mill himself has recourse from time to time, this "want" might have been described as the love of the noble or the beautiful.) But in his view "[religion], as distinguished from poetry, is the product of the craving to know"—there is, we surmise, an element of irony in Mill's use of the word know here—"whether these imaginative conceptions have realities answering to them in some other world than ours."16 A religious person, therefore, is one who believes in the existence of real, albeit other-worldly and invisible, entities corresponding to these "ideal conceptions."

One rather startling evident implication of Mill's brief comparison between religion and poetry as outlined above should be noted here. It is that theology in its traditional forms is nothing more than poetry which does not see itself for what it is and thinks of itself as something more akin to science than to poetry. At no point heretofore in his essay does Mill come as close as he does now to saying explicitly that all traditional religious beliefs are illusions.

Why do human beings have such a powerful need to believe in the existence of an ideal world distinct from our own or, to put it in more conventional terms, "in a God or Gods, and in a life after death?" Mill's answer seems to be the inability of all humankind

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15 Three Essays, CW, X, 419. When writing these lines Mill might well have had in mind the following passage from Bacon's Advancement of Learning: 'The use of [poetry, which "in respect of . . . matter . . . is nothing but feigned history"], hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul; by reason whereof there is, agreeable to the spirit of man, a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety, than can be found in the nature of things. Therefore, because the acts or events of true history have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man, poesy feigneth acts and events greater and more heroic. Because true history propoundeth the successes and issues of actions not so agreeable to the merits of virtue and vice, therefore poesy feigns them more just in retribution, and more according to revealed providence. Because true history representeth actions and events more ordinary and less interchanged, therefore poesy endueth them with more rareness, and more unexpected and alternative variations. So as it appeareth that poesy serveth and conferreth to magnanimity, morality, and to delectation. And therefore it was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things": Bacon, The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis, ed. Johnston, 80-81.

16 Three Essays, CW, X, 419.
thus far to find complete satisfaction in "earthly life", fraught as it has been with suffering, and the things of this world, given all their intrinsic imperfections. Of course, each of us fleshes out that elemental belief in a manner consistent with his or her character and conception of the "good." Misery in the present life causes "the selfish" among us to picture and hope for a heaven in which they can enjoy a life of eternal bliss. And the imperfect nature of things in this world causes those of us with "finer minds" to long for and imagine another world 'inhabited' by a being or beings of awesome power and flawless excellence. (Be it noted that Mill here describes "the best" as those possessing "finer minds", thereby implicitly distinguishing between the "the best" and the "selfish.") Nevertheless, and according to Mill most important of all, "[so] long as human life is insufficient to satisfy human aspirations" and "earthly life is full of sufferings", "there will be a craving for higher things" and "a need of consolations" which can be satisfied by religion.17

Thus, Mill concedes, religion has indeed been valuable "to the individual, both . . . as a source of personal satisfaction and of elevated feelings."18 On this point there appears to be substantial agreement among Mill, Bacon and Tocqueville. Tocqueville too speaks of religion as the source both of consolations and of such lofty sentiments as the love of the infinite and the immortal. These sentiments in particular are in his view needed to help prevent egoism and materialism, tendencies inherent in humankind, from becoming so pervasive as to "enervate the soul" and degrade the individual. Since democracies encourage those tendencies more than do aristocracies, religion is said by him to be especially beneficial to the individual in a democratic society.19 In his essay "Of Atheism" Bacon says,

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 419-20.
They that deny a God destroy man's nobility, for certainly man is of kin to the beasts by his body, and if he be not of kin to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature. It destroys likewise magnanimity, and the raising of human nature. For take an example of a dog, and mark what a generosity and courage he will put on when he finds himself maintained by a man, who to him is in stead of a god, or melior natura; which courage is manifestly such as that creature, without that confidence of a better nature than his own, could never attain. So man, when he resteth and assureth himself upon divine protection and favour, gathereth a force and faith which human nature in itself could not obtain. Therefore, as atheism is in all respects hateful, so in this, that it depriveth human nature of the means to exalt itself above human frailty.20

Although less forthcoming on the comforting and consoling power of religion, the preceding passage clearly has much to say about religion's capacity to ennoble and edify.

Where Mill may differ with Bacon and Tocqueville is on the question whether humankind must always turn to religion of the traditional, supernaturalistic kind--for instance, Judaism, Christianity and Islam--for such benefits. There may be, he suggests, another way of obtaining them. It is his reflections on this other way that we consider in the ensuing chapter.

Concluding Remarks

To sum up, then, first, Mill sees no need for religion as an enforcer of ordinary morality. Second, although in the past religion was useful as a teacher of morality, he believes it can now be safely divested of that office. Third, he grants that religion has been valuable hitherto as a source of consolations and elevated feelings, but it is by no means clear to him that these benefits could not henceforth be obtained elsewhere--and at a lower cost. If they can, intellectual honesty will require us to admit that the utility of religion as a source of those benefits is only temporary and accidental, not universal and intrinsic. But if they can not, we shall, he implies, have reason to worry about the current weakness of religious belief.

20 Essays, 110.
We have moreover begun to comprehend Mill's conception of the relation science and religion—at least religion in all of its traditional, popular forms. That relation, we now realize, is one of irresolvable conflict. Mill quietly suggests that the mechanistic-deterministic character of science leaves no room for the frequent, direct acts of intervention in the mundane course of events which are integral to the Deities of all popular religions. We should therefore expect to find indications in the text that he considers the progress of science a major cause of the decline of religious belief. And we can safely assume that in his opinion this causal connection has a great deal to do with the fact that we are presently in an "age of weak beliefs."

Furthermore, there is in the text a subtle but in our opinion unmistakable intimation of the morally problematic character of science. The progress of science, we learn, may be strengthening, or at least may not be appreciably diminishing, our will to believe, even as it weakens our capacity for belief. The possibility arises that, as beneficial as science is materially and intellectually, we have by nature certain needs of an immaterial and non-intellectual kind which it can neither satisfy nor extinguish, and which it may be robbing us of the means of satisfying.

One last point. We have learned that the question of the necessity of religion to virtue is especially important to the best, particularly inasmuch as they have begun to doubt the future of religion and are not certain that virtue would be defensible without it. We have also learned that because "the best" are those with the greatest openness to and capacity for virtue, the progress and perhaps even permanence of civilization depends on the perpetuation of their commitment to its pursuit. Hence Mill's preoccupation with "the best." Hence also the critical significance of that question for society as a whole. Yet so far Mill has spoken only of how religion has contributed to the happiness of the individual. True, he has distinguished between the satisfaction sought from religion by the best or "the finer minds"—the belief in "higher things"—and that sought by the "selfish" or baser type—the "hope of heaven." As a result we now have a better
understanding of the difference between the few and many as he conceives it. All the same Mill has thus far left the most important question itself unanswered. It remains to be seen if in the ensuing part of "Utility" he fills this gap in his argument.
4/ THE RELIGION OF HUMANITY AND PLATONIC-MANICHEAN THEISM

The present chapter is taken up mostly with an examination of Mill's conception of an alternative, purely humanistic religion--following Auguste Comte's example, he calls it the "Religion of Humanity"--and of his argument that it is in principle superior to traditional religion as a support for virtue. We also examine his remarks on a form of theism he deems "wholly clear both of intellectual contradiction and of moral obliquity", that is, theism of the Platonic or Manichean kind, ending with a brief speculation on his reasons for bringing it up. Lastly, attention is given to whatever he says or intimates about other important issues, particularly the quarrel between science and religion and its problematic moral and social implications.

The possibility of a purely secular religion

We should consider, says Mill,

... whether the idealization of our earthly life, the cultivation of a high conception of what it may be made, is not capable of supplying a poetry, and, in the best sense of the word, a religion, equally fitted to exalt the feelings, and (with the same aid from education) still better calculated to ennoble the conduct, than any belief respecting the unseen powers.

In the foregoing passage Mill is clearly speaking of a new and radically unconventional form of religion, a wholly secular or worldly one, which he later dubs the "Religion of Humanity." He also expresses the hope that this humanistic religion will perform certain important temporal functions hitherto performed (however imperfectly) by supernatural

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1 Three Essays, CW, X, 425.

2 Again, we return to these implications in the third part of the dissertation.

3 Ibid., 420.
religions. The two temporal functions of religion which Mill explicitly identifies here are "elevating the feelings" (by giving us "ideal objects" or "higher things" to believe in and look up to) and fostering virtue.

A number of questions arise here. Why does Mill call this creed a religion? What does he mean by "religion in the best sense"? How does one understand and deal with one's own mortality from the perspective of this purely human religion?

The problem of the "unbearable lightness of being"

The last question seems to comprehend or at any rate is closely related to the one which Mill decides to address first: How is it possible to arouse "great and elevated feelings" in connection with anything so small and insignificant as temporal life if there is no prolongation of it after death which might invest it with a certain grandeur and weight? Is not the most reasonable response to the "unbearable lightness of being" in a godless, spatially and temporally infinite universe devoid of intrinsic meaning and purpose the Epicurean one of living for pleasure, adhering always to the maxim "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die?" And how do we avert the emergence of a widespread mood of nihilism or despair which might occur, with potentially dire personal and social consequences, if the belief in God and personal immortality is ever completely abandoned?

That this was for Mill not an academic but a painful 'existential' question can be shown from his own life. In his Autobiography Mill describes and explains the state of near suicidal despair into which he sank when he was still a young man barely past adolescence. He "seemed to have nothing left to live for" and "did not think [he] could possibly bear [living in that melancholy state of mind] beyond a year." What precipitated this mental crisis was the shattering realization that the attainment of all his goals in life, including the "changes in institutions and opinions" which he had for years worked to

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4 Ibid.
promote, would not bring him "great joy and happiness." He had been taught by his father to find his own happiness and sense of personal purpose and fulfillment in the active pursuit of the well-being of humankind. But the resulting association in his mind between virtue and happiness had only been artificial. True—or so John had at any rate grown up to believe—it could not have been anything but artificial, since there is no basis for it in nature (as conceived by modern natural science). Yet neither had James Mill made it as durable as he might have if he had been a wiser educator and relied less on the conventional and ultimately inadequate means of forming it—"praise and blame, reward and punishment." Accordingly, that association, steadily eroded by John's irrepressible habit of subjecting everything to analysis (which habit too had been bred in him by his father), eventually dissolved completely. Indeed, by the time he was twenty years old, chiefly on account of the unceasing exercise of his analytical powers, Mill had become incapable of deriving pleasure from anything other than "purely physical and organic" functions. And he could not bring himself to believe that a life that had nothing more to offer than purely physical pleasures was worth living; hence the feelings of utter hopelessness and wretchedness.5

Mill does not himself say that his mental crisis was brought on by religious disbelief, but as Richard Hutton and William James realized, that should not prevent us from thinking the disbelief a factor.6 It is easy to see why Mill would have been much less likely to experience a crisis of this sort if he had been a firm believer. His faith might have given him the satisfaction of believing that in actively pursuing the good of humankind he was doing God's bidding. Even if possessing such a belief would not have sufficed for him to be capable of deriving pleasure from the service of humankind, at least his life would have had a clear purpose and unassailable dignity. In addition, he

5 Autobiography, CW, I, 137, 139, 141, 143, 145.
could have derived much pleasure from the buoying hope of a blessed afterlife as the reward for his virtuous endeavours in this world. Because of his unbelief, no such elevated feelings and consolations were available to him. (Mill might have had these consolations in mind when, in a letter to Carlyle dated nearly eight years later, he spoke of the "unspeakable good" it would have been to him to have a firm faith in God.) It is thus understandable that he began to feel as though his life's work could be aptly described using the following lines from Coleridge:

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

And because at the time of the aforementioned letter to Carlyle he still had not found an alternative way of sustaining his commitment to virtue, it should hardly come as a surprise that he could even now regret his lack of faith.

Mill's own example suggests that despair over the smallness and insignificance of life in a godless, orderless, purposeless and infinite universe where all living beings are mortal, is a feeling or mood to which "the best" are in the highest degree susceptible. Although he does not say so explicitly in "Utility", that he believes they are is borne out by the following excerpt from another of his letters to Carlyle, which letter describes the current state of mind in France:

    I suspect we have been too much impressed, you and I and others, by the Literature of Despair. I was in hopes that despair was the necessary consequence of having no Belief, in a nation at least, though not always in an individual: but I fear that it is only in the nobler spirits, or at least the young persons of strong feelings and artistical capabilities. In France I see every reason to believe that the mass of the well-to-do classes can make themselves comfortable without either God or Devil, either literal or constructive, and are well satisfied to eat their pudding in quiet—those I

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7 Mill to Carlyle, 12 Jan. 1834, CW, XII, 206.

mean who have enough pudding to eat, which is an infinitely larger proportion than in this country. 9

Furthermore, in "Utility" he very obviously takes it for granted that the belief of the "common" portion of humanity in life after death springs not from some "craving for higher things" that could invest human life with nobility and "exalt the feelings", but merely from the "selfish" desire for comfortable self-preservation. 10

Assuming the preceding interpretation to be correct, we can now more confidently affirm what we could only tentatively conjecture before, namely, the reason for the great interest which "the best" have in the question of the necessity of religion to virtue. (We can also better appreciate why Mill is not really as certain of the future advance of civilization as he sometimes appears to be, and why he attaches so much importance to "the best.") It is indeed a vital issue to them, one filled with momentous consequences for their individual lives, and not just the topic of a disinterested scientific inquiry. To perceive more clearly how vital it is, we need only ponder for a moment the thoughts of an individual who, rather like Mill himself, gives every impression of having been "eminent... in heart and mind" (this being how Mill shortly afterwards describes "the best"):

The more our thoughts widen and deepen, as the universe grows upon us and we become accustomed to boundless space and time, the more petrifying is the contrast of our own insignificance, the more contemptible become the pettiness, shortness, fragility of the individual life. A moral paralysis creeps upon us. For a while we comfort ourselves with the notion of self-sacrifice; we say, What matter if I pass, let me think of others! But the other has become contemptible no less than the self; all human griefs alike seem little worth assuaging, human happiness too paltry at the best to be worth increasing. The whole moral world is reduced to a point; the spiritual city, 'the goal of all the saints,' dwindles to the 'least of little stars'; good and evil, right and wrong, become infinitesimal, ephemeral matters, while eternity and infinity remain

9 Mill to Carlyle, 25 Nov. 1933, CW, XII, 192.
10 Three Essays, CW, X, 419-20.
attributes of that only which is outside the realm of morality. Life becomes more intolerable the more we know and discover, so long as everything widens and deepens, except our own duration, and that remains as pitiful as ever. The affections die away in a world where everything great and enduring is cold; they die of their own conscious feebleness and bloodlessness.

Supernatural Religion met this want by connecting Love and Righteousness with eternity. If it is shaken, how shall its place be supplied? And what would Natural Religion avail then?11

Perhaps because of the erosion of traditional religion by the progress of science, then, the more sensitive and thoughtful ones in our midst may increasingly find it difficult to justify committing themselves to a life of virtue. Unless an alternative source of support for that commitment is found, over time we might observe them growing aloof from despair, their contribution to the improvement of humankind steadily diminishing as their energies are diverted more and more toward the pursuit of private pleasures. Progress could indeed at some point grind to a halt.

What must by now have impressed itself upon us is just how much is at stake for Mill here, and why in his view so much turns on how the relation between religion and virtue is understood. For only on the basis of an adequate understanding of that relation can we hope to find an alternative way of sustaining the best in their pursuit of virtue, one which does not rely on any form of supernatural religious belief.

The Religion of Humanity as a support for virtue

To repeat, then, as a young man Mill could fall into a state of deep despair because he had not yet discovered an adequate non-theistic support for the erstwhile dedication of his life to the improvement of humankind. However, by the time he is ready to write "Utility", he has encountered the writings of Auguste Comte, which have helped him arrive at a solution to the problem.

11 John R. Seeley, as quoted in Pobedonostsev, Reflections of a Russian Statesman, trans. Long, 164. Assuming Pobedonostsev's summary account of it (159-65) to be correct, Seeley's "natural religion" is in the main identical to the Religion of Humanity as here described.
One can find, Mill acknowledges in "Utility", a great deal of truth in the Epicurean doctrine, especially in its original, more refined version. But even if we assume that there is no life after death—which assumption Mill here neither denies nor affirms—it does not follow that one cannot and should not care deeply for anything beyond the limits of one's own life. It is, Mill implies, possible to make one's life meaningful and fulfilling by devoting oneself to the mental and material improvement of humankind. The "indefinite duration" of the human species is "practically equivalent to endlessness." This fact together with humanity's "indefinite capability of improvement" make humankind "a large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur of aspiration."\(^\text{12}\)

Furthermore, the more time we will have put between ourselves and those "baseless fancies" of "infinite and eternal beatitudes" which have long governed our thinking but which, he implies, we are now discarding, the better able will the human species and its improvement be to satisfy our love of the noble.\(^\text{13}\) (Mill assumes here that the 'love of the noble' or, as he puts it, the "demand for grandeur of aspiration" is or can be made reasonable. We return to this point later.\(^\text{14}\))

We note that in calling all received theistic beliefs "baseless fancies" Mill seems to display a certain contempt for them. He appears to anticipate with pleasure the time when they are widely regarded in this manner.

In any case, according to Mill, the "noble capacity" to identify our "feelings with the entire life of the human race" is not unique to the few "best" or, as he now describes them, "the more eminent... in mind and heart" among us. We all have it, Mill insists, even if to varying degrees, and we would all make that identification were we to receive

\(^{12}\) *Three Essays, CW*, X, 420.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) See 225-31 below.
the appropriate education. Witness, for example, the religious devotion of the "entire Roman people" to Rome in antiquity, and the love of country so "ardent" among us today. In each case the entity loved, though temporal, exceeds the lifetime of any one human being. But each of these entities comprehends only a portion of the human race. If they can inspire such enthusiasm in "large masses and long successions of mankind," then maybe "that larger country, the world" or the entirety of humankind, can as well. In all cases it is a matter of the kind of education people are given.15

Accordingly, Mill suggests, we need only replace or supplement the prevailing mode of education, which fosters an active sense of duty to one's country or nation, with one that fosters an active sense of duty to humankind.16 This new, internationalist-philanthropic morality would be cultivated in "superior natures" by anchoring it in such natural passions or sentiments as "sympathy and benevolence and the passion for ideal excellence", which in them are strong. The same method would be used as far as possible with "inferior" natures, although because these passions are considerably weaker in them, recourse would of necessity be had to their sense of shame.17

We pause briefly merely to note that Mill here gives us additional insight into the nature of "the best" as he conceives it. The best, he implies, are "superior natures", distinguishable from "inferior" ones by the fact that such other-regarding feelings as "sympathy and benevolence and the passion for ideal excellence" are strong enough in them to serve as a foundation for true, disinterested virtue. (For that matter, the greater


16 Lest it be thought that Mill is here recommending altogether doing away with the sense of devotion to one's nation or country, see Considerations, CW, XIX, 546-53, where Mill explicitly argues that nationality is the cultural matrix of a free society. Mill's position on the question of nationalism versus internationalism appears to resemble that of Mazzini, who also believed that political nationalism was in principle compatible with a genuine and effective form of internationalism at least in the moral domain: see Joseph Mazzini, The Duties of Man and Other Essays, trans. Ella Noyes (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd.; New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1907), 41-59.

17 Three Essays, CW, X, 421.
strength of those feelings in the best is probably the main cause of their being more attracted to virtue.)

To come back to the main argument, according to Mill, conduct in conformity with that "exalted" internationalist-philanthropic morality would not be motivated primarily by the desire for some external benefit. Even so, there is a kind of reward that one could legitimately seek in certain circumstances—for instance, in times of suffering, when consolations are needed, or "in moments of weakness", when more incentives to virtuous conduct would improve its chances of happening. It is the real or imagined sympathy or approval of all those dead or living whom we love and admire, among them family, friends and especially such great benefactors as Socrates and Christ. This is a much surer kind of reward than some "problematical future existence", because, he implies, the source of the latter, unlike that of the former, is "unseen" and unknown.18

"To call these sentiments by the name morality, exclusively of any other title, is," Mill asserts, "claiming too little for them." They deserve to be seen as a "real religion", whereas morality should (in keeping with the established meaning of the term) be thought of as comprising only the good deeds and works flowing from those sentiments.19 Mill justifies his proposed extension of the use of religion with this definition:

The essence of religion is the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires toward an ideal object, recognized as of the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire.20

Mill then claims that the "Religion of Humanity", which he has just adumbrated, fulfills this definition better than most religions, and as well as any of the traditional religions "in their best manifestations."21 Shortly afterwards, the climax of the essay:

18 Ibid., 421-22.

19 Ibid., 422.

20 Ibid. As John Morley notes, Mill here tacitly shifts from his earlier, more traditionalist, theistic definition of religion—religion is or includes "belief in a God or Gods, and in a life after death"—to a new, non-theistic definition, one that is indifferent as between theism and atheism: Morley, "Mr. Mill's Three Essays," 195. For a closer look at this shift, see 126-30 below.
I will now further maintain, that it [the Religion of Humanity] is not only capable of fulfilling these functions [all the important functions of religion], but would fulfil them better than any form whatever of supernaturalism. It is not only entitled to be called a religion: it is a better religion than any of those which are ordinarily called by this title.22

Admittedly, given how radical the preceding bold claim is and how far-reaching its implications, Mill's account of the new, wholly secular kind of religion in "Utility" cannot but strike us as all too brief. Fortunately, clarification can be obtained from other works.

Mill's other treatments of the Religion of Humanity: *Auguste Comte and Positivism*

In fact, Mill's fullest treatment of the Religion of Humanity is found in *Auguste Comte and Positivism*. There Mill purports merely to be giving an exposition and assessment of Comte's conception of that religion instead of setting forth his own understanding of it. Nevertheless, after expounding the basic features of Comte's humanistic religion, Mill says that Comte "was justified in the attempt to develop [sic] his philosophy into a religion, and had realized the essential conditions of one." Mill thereby gives us to understand that as regards the "essential conditions" or features of the Religion of Humanity he is in complete agreement with Comte, consequently that in expounding the latter's understanding of those "essential conditions" he is simultaneously divulging his own.23

What, then, are the basic characteristics or "essential conditions" of the Religion of Humanity? Mill brings these characteristics to light while showing how the Religion of Humanity as conceived by Comte and himself satisfies all the requirements of a religion: To begin with, like all other religions, the Religion of Humanity has a creed

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21 *Three Essays, CW, X, 422.*
22 Ibid.
consisting of beliefs about "human destiny and duty" which would govern the life and conduct of the believer. The principal tenets of its creed are, presumably, that continued progress is possible and that we have a duty to act in ways conducive to the moral and material improvement of humankind.\textsuperscript{24}

In addition, as is the case with any genuinely religious creed, "there must be a sentiment connected with this creed, or capable of being evoked by it"--love and devotion are words Mill uses to characterize it--"sufficiently powerful to give it in fact, the authority over human conduct to which it lays claim in theory."\textsuperscript{25}

Furthermore, in most religions that sentiment "[crystallizes] round a concrete object." Mill asserts that although this "object" can be a deity, like the God of traditional theism, it need not be. Moreover, it would be better if that object were "a really existing one"; but once again, it need not be, as is illustrated by the Deity of tradition religion (or so Mill implies, at any rate, when he says that "in all the more important cases [it has been] only ideally present"). The first example Mill gives of a proper object of religious belief and feeling other than a deity--"the Infinite nature of Duty"--suggests that it could be something of this world.

In the case of the Religion of Humanity this object is none other than the "Human Race" in its "great collective existence." It must be conceived as "at once ideal and real", and as a "continuous whole" incorporating all generations of humankind--past, present and future.\textsuperscript{26} Contrary to what many would expect, the "Human Race" so conceived, says Mill, is as capable of serving as an object of religion--an "ideal object" which, through a person's "attachment and sense of duty towards" itself, would "control and discipline all his other sentiments and propensities, and prescribe to him a rule of life"--as the Deity of

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 332.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 333.
traditional religion. That is why, he concludes, it is perfectly reasonable even if not wholly "consonant to usage" to speak of a Religion of Humanity as Comte has done. In any event "all must admit," he adds lamely, "that... this Religion of the Infidel cannot, in honesty and conscience, be called an intrinsically bad one."27

We now have a better understanding of what Mill means when he states in "Utility" that love of and duty to humanity are a kind of religion. The preceding points are consistent with, and indeed amplify and clarify, the definition of religion which we find there. (Recall that in "Utility" he defines religion as "the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires toward an ideal object, recognized as of the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire.") In so doing they enable us to see more clearly how this definition makes Mill's conception of a secular, non-theistic religion possible.

To return to Auguste Comte, Mill then proceeds to buttress his point about the ability of the "Human Race" in its "collective existence", or as Comte calls it, the "Grand Etre", to inspire love and devotion by arguing that "the idea of the general interest of the human race" is susceptible of "majesty." (Here again Mill follows Comte's lead.) Because it extends from the present both into the "unknown recesses of the past" and into the "indefinite and unforeseeable future", the Grand Etre, says Mill, "appeals to that feeling of the Infinite, which is deeply rooted in human nature, and which seems necessary to the imposingness of our highest conceptions."28

It goes without saying that of the three temporal phases of human life--future, present and past--the last lies beyond the reach of our service. Even so, Mill points out, we "can still love" our predecessors, not only those who "loved" and benefitted us personally, but also those who, having worked hard and sacrificed much in behalf of

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 333-34.
humankind, are deserving of "everlasting and grateful remembrance." If we truly honour and remember the benefactors of the past as we should, we will seek to emulate them.

Indeed, Mill suggests, it is that "honourable remembrance" of the "great dead" which incites to virtue the most, more even than "[living] in thought" with the ideal human beings of the future. Nevertheless, if it is to actualize fully its potential majesty, and if its power to ennoble human conduct is to be maximal, the idea of the Grand Etre must be so construed as to exclude those of our predecessors who have not "played their part worthily in life." And we should dwell on the imperfections of those included only to the extent needed to keep from "[falsifying] our conception of facts." At the same time, says Mill, for the idea of the Grand Etre to be complete, it must also incorporate, albeit "in a subordinate degree", all non-human "sentient beings to which we owe duties, and which have a claim on our attachment." Included would be animal species "like the noble dog who gives his life for his human friend and benefactor."

Clearly Mill's hope is that if we bear in mind all of the above points, we will readily see the majesty and ennobling influence of which the "Human Race", construed as a great "collective Existence", is capable. However Christian and democratic the idea of a Religion of Humanity might seem in certain respects, as Pater recognized, there is no denying its aristocratic aspect.

29 Earlier (323-324) Mill mentions by name some of those whom Comte wished to see included in the Religion of Humanity's pantheon (or "choir invisible", to use George Eliot's image). Among those named are Thales, Homer and St. Francis of Assisi, which brief list should give the reader some idea of the catholicity of Comte's taste.

30 Ibid., 334.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 In his unpublished paper "Moral Philosophy" Pater speaks of Comte's positivist version of the Christian "calendar" as "analogous" to Hegel's idea of "great men" and Carlyle's notion of "heroes": Walter Pater Papers [hereinafter referred to as WPP] (Houghton Library, Harvard University), 17. For drawing my attention to this comparison I am indebted to T. R. Wright, The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of
Finally, we should by now have an adequate idea of the essential conditions or characteristics of the Religion of Humanity as Mill himself conceives it.

*Utilitarianism*

Of equal interest to us is what Mill says about the psychological foundation of the Religion of Humanity in *Utilitarianism*. The question he compels us to ask is whether there exists a "natural basis of sentiment for utilitarian morality?" Are there any sentiments or desires in human nature which could help make it enjoyable to pursue the greatest happiness of the greatest number, and might therefore serve as an internal natural support for utilitarian morality? If no such sentiment can be found, then as Mill's own earlier experience attests, whatever association between the "feeling of duty" and "utility" (or the greatest happiness of the greatest number) can be forged in us by education is vulnerable to the "dissolving force of analysis." Those of us with a high degree of "intellectual culture" are especially at risk.\(^34\)

Mill's answer is that "there is this basis of powerful natural sentiment", and it is the "social feelings of mankind", to be more precise, the "desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures." According to him, not only is this sentiment a part of human nature, but there are a number of conditions or "influences of advancing civilization" which make it stronger. One such condition is the increasing interdependence among individuals caused by the advance of civilization. The more dependent people become on each other, the more important they perceive society as a whole as well as each of its essential aspects to be to their lives, and the stronger the social ties binding them seem.\(^35\)

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Ibid., 231.
Another is the tendency of diminishing social inequality which accompanies the march of civilization. The closer society gets to perfect equality, the greater the range of others whose interests one feels compelled to take into account and indeed comes to see as fundamentally identical to one's own. Moreover, the stronger the perceived need to cooperate with others and to think in terms of the collective and not only of the individual interest.36

As the ability and perceived need to think and act with a view to the collective interest grow, having regard for the interests of others becomes less and less a matter solely of calculating self-interest and increasingly one of sentiment: as Mill puts it, each individual learns "to identify his feelings more and more with their good, or at least with an ever greater degree of practical consideration for it."37 Mill further says,

He comes, as though instinctively, to be conscious of himself as a being who of course pays regard to others. The good of others becomes to him a thing naturally and necessarily to be attended to, like any of the physical conditions of our existence.38

Since it is in each individual's interest that everyone else be capable of identifying his feelings with the good of others, once this capacity had begun to develop, it was bound to be fixed on and nurtured by education (as well as being reinforced by external sanctions). At the same time this non-calculating, affective identification with the good of others both promotes and is in turn fostered by growing interdependence and decreasing social inequality.39

For all of the above reasons, then, as civilization progresses, the tendency to think and act with a view to the general happiness is "felt to be more and more natural", and the "feeling of unity with all the rest" which animates that tendency grows ever stronger.

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 232.
39 Ibid.
Imagine, Mill goes on to say, this "feeling of unity" now being "taught as a religion", and all the forces "of education, of institutions, and of opinion" being harnessed (as they once were in behalf of traditional religion) for the purpose of strengthening that feeling. There can be no doubt that it would suffice as a source of sanction for utilitarian morality. Notwithstanding the highly objectionable nature of some of his political and moral ideas, Comte

has superabundantly shown the possibility of giving to the service of humanity, even without the aid of belief in a Providence, both the psychical power and the social efficacy of a religion; making it take hold of human life, and colour all thought, feeling, and action, in a manner of which the greatest ascendency ever exercised by any religion may be but a type and foretaste; and of which the danger is, not that it should be insufficient, but that it should be so excessive as to interfere unduly with human freedom and individuality.  

To restate the main point of the passage, the non-theistic Religion of Humanity, inasmuch as it is fed by this growing "feeling of unity with our fellow human beings", has the capacity to exert on human life an influence far greater than that once exerted by theistic religions.

**Why a Religion of Humanity?**

Even if we are not, surely the average thoughtful reader in Mill's time could not have failed to be struck by the highly unorthodox character of the secular, humanistic religion elaborated in "Utility", *Auguste Comte* and *Utilitarianism*. A recent commentator's statement that Mill "has left out of the 'essence' of religion the essence of religion" would have resonated widely.  

Clearly, for a godless religion to be logically possible, it must also be possible to provide a definition of the term *religion* that is both non-theistic and adequate to the phenomena. Yet nowhere does Mill give a convincing

40 Ibid.

explanation of how one can sensibly speak of religion "in the best sense of the word" as something that does not and need not include what we would normally regard as its defining feature—the belief in God or gods. His defence in Auguste Comte—that "the term so applied has a meaning, and one which is not adequately expressed by any other word"42—hardly suffices. The fact that the word religion in his use of it "has a meaning" is, by itself, not enough to legitimize that use, particularly since it conflicts so sharply with ordinary usage. Mill might perhaps have been justified if, as he asserts, his meaning could not be "adequately expressed by any other word." But he makes no argument and gives no evidence for this assertion. The remainder of what he says by way of self-defence in Auguste Comte either begs the question or is beside the point.43 He might have attempted to defend his unorthodox definition of religion with a philological argument. However, unlike Matthew Arnold, he does not take that route.44 He simply goes ahead and defines it thus as though there were nothing extraordinary and unexceptionable about doing so.

To be sure, Mill's non-theistic definition of religion is logically related to what he says earlier about religion in its traditional, theistic form, to wit, that it is a kind of poetry which supplies our "want... of ideal conceptions grander and more beautiful than we see realized in the prose of human life." Thus understood, traditional religion too, and not just the Religion of Humanity, could be said to fit that definition. The main specific difference between the old, theistic and the new, humanistic religion would then consist

42 Auguste Comte, CW, X, 333.

43 Ibid.

44 Guided by a notion of what a scientifically palatable reconstruction of Christianity would involve somewhat different from Mill’s, Matthew Arnold too proposes a highly unorthodox definition of religion. He explains or justifies his definition—religion is "morality touched by emotion"—by an appeal to earlier, pre-theoretical (hence pre-theological) usage, his argument being that the current popular conception of religion stems from the corruption of that usage by dogmatic theology: see Literature and Dogma. The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold [hereinafter referred to as CPW], ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), VI, 170-201. For an attempt to fill the aforementioned lacuna in Mill’s thought, one which takes into account Arnold’s arguments, see John Dewey, A Common Faith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934).
primarily in the former's erroneous belief that its "ideal object" is a real being. But the two would have a great deal in common, and so calling both of them religions would appear to be justified.

However, none of this brings us the least bit closer to solving the problem which his disciple John Morley pointed out,\(^{45}\) for that matter, which he himself recognized\(^{46}\)--that his non-theistic definition of religion is fundamentally at odds with the established understanding of the term. (Indeed, they must be at odds with each other if it is to be logically possible for Mill to speak of his secular-humanistic creed as a kind of religion.) So the question is: Given all the theistic baggage which the word religion has accumulated over the centuries, why should Mill even want to retain it instead of adopting some other term, like creed or ideology or cult?\(^{47}\) Or if, as Morley implies, Mill at bottom identifies religion with ethics (which identification he accomplishes by "leaving out" the distinctively religious element in religion), why is he not content simply to use the language of morality and virtue?\(^{48}\)

A number of possible reasons can be suggested here. First, as startling as most Victorian readers would have found Comte's and Mill's idea of a Religion of Humanity, they might well have found it even more startling had it been presented as a substitute for religion per se, hence as part of a concerted effort to do away with religion altogether. Thus, by using the language of religion Mill hopes to blunt the shocking effect of his proposed ideological reforms, at the same time to ease the transfer of certain sentiments traditionally associated with supernatural religion--for instance, reverence and

\(^{45}\) Morley, "Mr. Mill's Three Essays," 196-97.

\(^{46}\) Auguste Comte, CW, X, 333.

\(^{47}\) In his letter to John Pringle Nichol of 30 Sept. 1848 (CW, XIII, 738-39), Mill uses the phrase "culte de l'humanite", though he goes on to say that this cult "is capable of fully supplying the place of a religion, or rather (to say the truth) of being a religion."

\(^{48}\) Morley, "Mr. Mill's Three Essays," 196-97.
hallowing\textsuperscript{49}—to the new creed.\textsuperscript{50} The likelihood of his reforms succeeding would be considerably enhanced thereby. To recall, Mill explicitly acknowledges in "Coleridge" that at present no new philosophy could gain widespread support in Britain except in the form of a religious philosophy.\textsuperscript{51} (It is, we believe, in the light of this acknowledgement that one best understands Mill when in \textit{Auguste Comte} he says, with evident approval, that Comte's elaboration of the Religion of Humanity represents "[the erection of] his philosophy into a religion."\textsuperscript{52} Mill is, of course, aware that calling this new, humanistic creed and sentiment a religion may cause many of the rest, or at least the atheists among them, to "turn away from" it. Yet he deems it necessary to take that risk.\textsuperscript{53})

Alternatively, calling it a "religion" can plausibly be interpreted as a tacit indication that the ultimate objective of this creed and the good works to flow from it is the elevation of humankind to a godlike condition. The mere utterance of the last explanation is enough to make one want to dismiss it as outlandish. Still, the possibility that it is true cannot be ruled out of court. In fact, modest support for it can be found in the text. In \textit{Auguste Comte} Mill shows not the slightest discomfort either with Comte's idealizing designation of the object of his Religion of Humanity as the "Grand Etre", or

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Auguste Comte}, \textit{CW}, X, 324.

\textsuperscript{50} Such, at any rate, is the intention which Konstantin Pobedonostsev (Procurator of the Holy Synod under Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II) would most likely have attributed to Mill: see his \textit{Reflections of a Russian Statesman}, trans. Long, 158-62. That Mill was not alone among atheistic or agnostic humanists in having such political motives for describing his creed as a religion is suggested by the following anecdote about John Dewey: "John Dewey and his associates, in 1933, alarmed at the growing interest in the American Humanists [led by Irving Babbitt], made a disingenuous attempt to capture the word 'humanism' by issuing what they called 'The Religious Humanist Manifesto.' Now Dewey's friends, with few exceptions, were not religious men; and when once Dewey himself was asked why he employed in his writings certain religious overtones quite inconsonant with his naturalistic system, he replied that to cut away at once the last vestiges of religious sentiment might wound some people unnecessarily; they must be accustomed more gradually to the divorce": Russell Kirk, Foreword to Irving Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership} (Boston, 1924; rpt. Indianapolis: Liberty \textit{Classics}, 1979), 14-15. I am grateful to Patrick Malcolmson for bringing this anecdote to my attention.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{CW}, X, 160.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{CW}, X, 332; see also 331 and 335.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 332.
with his own later reference to it as "that other Great Being." Yet the latter reference in particular strongly suggests that humankind thus idealized is being put on a level with, or at a minimum made kindred to, God.

The Religion of Humanity and traditional religion

To return to "Utility", as has already been remarked, the essay's central claim is that the Religion of Humanity is "not only capable of fulfilling [all the important functions of religion], but would fulfil them better than any form whatever of supernaturalism." This is what Mill means earlier when he intimates that the Religion of Humanity could turn out to be a religion "in the best sense of the word." Our interpretation is supported by the statement immediately following the former claim: "[The Religion of Humanity] is not only entitled to be called a religion: it is," we recall Mill saying, "a better religion than any of those which are ordinarily called by that title."

The "important function of religion" which appears to be uppermost in his mind is the "improvement of character", or the cultivation of "virtue" (which, we repeat, for him consists in the firm disposition selflessly to pursue the good of humankind). Mill probably would have answered in the affirmative Morley's question:

"[Is] he not being drawn by that passion of his for seizing above all else the ethical aspects of things human or divine, into leaving out those vital elements of religion which are not and never can be reducible to ethical expression?"

54 Ibid., 333.

55 Pobedonostsev, for one, would have concurred: see Reflections of a Russian Statesman, trans. Long, 174.

56 Three Essays, CW, X, 422.

57 Ibid., 420.

The Religion of Humanity would, according to Mill, promote selfless or purely disinterested feelings and behaviour much more consistently and successfully than any past and present religions ever could. The latter, with their promises of a blissful eternal after-life for the virtuous and their threats of eternal unfathomable pain for the vicious, provide external incentives to virtue so great as to make it almost impossible even for the best to be completely free of selfish motives for virtuous conduct. Belief in the reality of these other-worldly incentives makes it difficult even for "the most unselfish of mankind" (this being how Mill here characterizes the best) to care much for "any other distant and ideal object", such as the moral and material improvement of our earthly existence.59

The contradictions and anomalies of traditional religion

Furthermore, the Religion of Humanity is completely free of the blunting and perverting effect the traditional religions cannot avoid having on the intellect if they are "to produce their best moral effects." The problem with the latter is that there appear to be some inescapable fundamental contradictions and "perplexities" or anomalies in them. One example is the belief common to all of them that God is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly benevolent and just, and is also the author of a world fraught with misery and suffering.60

The moral contradiction evident in this bedrock theological belief cannot, says Mill, be eliminated by distinguishing between the God of nature and the God of revelation. Such a distinction does, perhaps, mitigate somewhat the severity of the problem in that the God of revelation can appear--as he does in Christianity--"a far more

59 Three Essays, CW, X, 422-23.

60 Ibid., 423; a fuller restatement of this belief together with a more thorough analysis of its main flaw is provided in "Nature," ibid., 388-91.
benignant Being than the Author of Nature." Even so, the believer must acknowledge that "the same being is the author of both."61

What is more, Mill points out, neither are the putative revealed truths about the God of revelation free of "moral difficulties and perversions." Take, for example, the Christian teaching that God has created countless multitudes of human beings knowing full well that they are fated to spend an eternity in Hell after an infinitesimally brief sojourn on earth. This aspect of God's creation must seem morally monstrous by any "ordinary" standard of "justice and humanity."

The latter teaching is but the worst of a number of such morally anomalous beliefs, most of which, says Mill in a brief digression, "are happily not so unequivocally deducible from the very words of Christ as to be indisputably a part of christian doctrine." He has in mind such doctrines as "atonement and redemption, original sin and vicarious punishment: and . . . the doctrine which makes belief in the divine mission of Christ a necessary condition of salvation."62

Mill's digression

Mill does not say that all of these beliefs are morally problematic. He instead intimates that they all belong to the Christianity of the established churches but not necessarily to the one true, authentic form of Christianity, the Christianity of Jesus Christ. They may, he suggests, be aspects merely of Paul's creative interpretation of Christ's teaching.63

What is the point of Mill's brief digression? It may have to do with the fact that distinguishing thus between the Christianity of Jesus Christ, Christianity in its true form,

61 Ibid., 423-24.
62 Ibid., 424.
63 Ibid.
and that of the churches allows one to hold that the Religion of Humanity is compatible with Christianity while repudiating almost all of what now passes for the latter. Once the traditional view of him has been properly deconstructed, Jesus Christ can assume his rightful place in the Religion of Humanity's pantheon. In this way some link, some degree of continuity can be established between Christianity and the new religion.

But why might Mill want to establish any such link? The most plausible explanation we can give is that he would want to for the same, primarily political reason he earlier chooses to call his new, humanistic creed and sentiment a "religion." Again, as Mill indicates in "Coleridge", establishing some link between the new and the old would enhance receptivity to the new. No new philosophical doctrine, he maintains, can at present hope to gain a large following in Britain unless it is generally thought to provide at least "collateral support" to Christianity.64

Mill, of course, would not have been the first to employ the politic device of seeming to demonstrate the existence of a substantial affinity or continuity between the new moral or religious creed and the essential or authentic teaching of Christ. In this he would have been preceded by Locke and Lessing, for example.65

64 In a note which he dictated to his wife shortly after hearing of the death of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy demonstrates in a most interesting way Comte's poor grasp of "policy": "If Comte had introduced Christ among the worthies in his calendar it would have made Positivism tolerable to thousands who, from position, family connection, or early education, now decry what in their heart of hearts they hold to contain the germs of a true system. It would have enabled them to modulate gently into the new religion by deceiving themselves with the sophistry that they still continued one-quarter Christians, or one-eighth, or one-twentieth, as the case might be: This is a matter of policy, without which no religion succeeds in making way": Thomas Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy, ed. Florence E. Hardy (Toronto: Macmillan, 1962), 146, as quoted in Wright, The Religion of Humanity, 202. (Wright rightly implies [202] that by the new religion Hardy means the Religion of Humanity.) While dictating the preceding note, Hardy might in his mind have been measuring Comte against the standard of "policy" set by Mill, whom he evidently deemed "one of the profoundest thinkers of the last [i.e., nineteenth] century": The Life of Thomas Hardy, ed. Florence E. Hardy, 330.

65 See John Locke, The Reasonableness of Christianity (Chicago: Gateway-Henry Regnery, 1965); and Gotthold Lessing, "The Education of the Human Race," Lessing's Theological Writings, ed. and trans. Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 82-98. What distinguishes Mill from Locke is not so much his view that Jesus was not the "son of God" in any sense of the term stronger than the Lockean one, as his blasphemous insinuation (424) that Jesus might not even have been the "son of God" in the more limited, Lockean sense of the term. (In The Reasonableness of Christianity [22-33] Locke purports to show that the Jewish people in antiquity tended to equate the meaning of the expression Son of
In any case, the point of the digression may well be to induce the reader to distinguish between received and true Christianity in a way that renders the distance between the latter and the Religion of Humanity smaller than it seemed at first. The reader would then be more receptive to the possibility that a substantial link exists between them. Mill, we believe, begins to forge that link earlier in the essay, and he finishes forging it in "Theism", the last of the Three Essays.66

Further anomalies of traditional religion

Another morally disturbing aspect of Christianity as such is the belief that God is willing to allow "countless millions of human beings... to live and die, to sin and suffer" when it would have been so easy for him to rid human life of all sin and suffering. One last problem pointed out by Mill is that the authenticity of all putative divine revelations has been called into question especially by the "strongest and most cultivated minds." Skepticism about the possibility of authenticating any such alleged revelation, he adds, "appears to grow with the growth of scientific knowledge and critical discrimination."67

Here Mill indicates more explicitly than anywhere heretofore in "Utility" that a tension of some kind exists between science and supernatural religion—not only polytheistic religions, but even the more advanced, monotheistic type promulgated by the established Christian churches. And he implies more clearly than ever before that progress in science has had much to do with the present weak state of religious belief. But once again he does not explain how or why.

66 See ch. 10, especially 275-80, below.
67 Three Essays, CW, X, 424-25.
The pernicious effects of traditional religion

Having outlined the various moral, logical and scientific anomalies of traditional religious belief, especially of Christianity, Mill then takes up their morally and intellectually pernicious tendencies. He states that the only way to preserve one's belief in and love of God (as traditionally understood) without suffering "any perversion of the moral sentiments" is to focus on "what is beautiful and beneficent" in one's religion and disregard everything repellent.

The problem with this solution, in his view, is that it requires a degree of intellectual "inactivity" or "torpidity" unattainable by any "person of exercised intellect." Thoughtful individuals who want to preserve their faith are compelled to find some sophisticated way of rationalizing those anomalies that is tantamount to a perversion of the understanding, if not of the conscience. (Mill does not illustrate his point, but again, he might have had Maurice or Mansel in mind when making it. Mansel, it will be recalled, to save the orthodox belief in God's omnipotence and perfect goodness, argued that such words as good and omnipotent, when used to describe God, do not signify what is signified by them in everyday speech.) In neither case would the result be an improvement or strengthening of the intellect.\textsuperscript{68}

We note here that Mill shows (without endorsing) how belief in God as traditionally conceived is able to keep from being undermined by the moral anomalies inherent in that conception. But he does not show how the belief in God as such, even one free of those moral anomalies, could shield itself from the hurtful blows continually inflicted on it by science. This fact is entirely consistent with his earlier intimations that so long as science continues to progress, nothing can be done to halt the weakening of the belief in the divine.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 425.
The Mill clearly expects us to cross here is that the Religion of Humanity is entirely free of all such morally and intellectually debilitating anomalies. We have, it seems, yet another reason for deeming it superior to traditional religion.

**Platonic-Manichean Theism**

There is, Mill points out, one form of supernaturalism which "stands wholly clear both of intellectual contradiction and of moral obliquity." Unlike traditional Christianity, it does not represent God as an omnipotent Creator whose "moral character and purpose" are somehow expressed in all that transpires in this world. Rather, it represents Him as a less than omnipotent "contriving goodness" locked in battle either with "intractable" matter, as Plato thought, or with the "Principle of Evil", as the Manicheans thought. The main purpose of the divine "contriving goodness," according to this theology, is to bring about the "complete triumph of good over evil" (which is the end of history); and all of "Nature and Life" is but the "product" of the Deity's struggle with Evil or matter to realize that ideal.69

The moral and intellectual superiority of the Platonic-Manichean form of theism to its traditional counterparts is due in large part to the doctrine that God is powerful but not all-powerful. For this doctrine absolves God of responsibility for all the evil and suffering in the world, and shifts the burden of that responsibility onto the shoulders of His adversary. God's goodness can thereby be maintained without any contradictions. Consequently anyone who chose to subscribe to Platonic or Manichean supernaturalism would be spared the pernicious effects of all such anomalies.70

What is more, the Platonic-Manichean kind of theism casts all virtuous individuals as "fellow [combatants] in the great strife" between God and Evil. They become, in Carlyle's words, "soldiers of the same army, enlisted, under Heaven's

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69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.
captaincy, to do battle against the same enemy, the Empire of Darkness and Wrong."71 Hence the person and purposes of each such individual are dignified or "exalted" to a degree hardly approachable from any other perspective. The practical effect of this edifying teaching, Mill implies, could only be salutary--to give greater enthusiasm and energy to the pursuit and practice of virtue.

All these reasons taken together lead one to conclude that from the standpoint of morality Platonic-Manichean theism is in principle a highly beneficial kind of supernaturalism. As Mill says, "it can produce on whoever can succeed in believing it, no other than an ennobling effect."72

That is high praise, indeed so high as to make one wonder why in "Utility" Mill promotes the Religion of Humanity so much more vigorously than he does the Platonic-Manichean theism. Were the latter capable of performing effectively "every important function of religion" without any ill consequences, there would be no reason even to mention the former, much less to allow, as Mill does a little later, the two to be "held in conjunction."73 In fact, it would be incumbent upon us to promulgate that morally unobjectionable form of supernaturalism as, in his words, "a permanent substitute for the religion of humanity." Why, then, does Mill do the reverse? Must it not be because he has grave doubts about the future prospects of the Platonic-Manichean kind of theism? And what would be the reason for those doubts?

Anticipating the preceding line of questioning, Mill makes the following highly important claim: The evidence supporting it, consisting in "specious but inconclusive analogies derived from human agency and design", is "too shadowy and insubstantial",


72 Three Essays, CW, X, 425; see also 426. For a similar assessment by Mill of the Platonic conception of God, see "Nature," ibid., 388-91.

73 Ibid., 425.
and the promises made by it are "too distant and uncertain", for Platonic-Manichean
theism ever to be "a permanent substitute for the religion of humanity." Nevertheless,
to repeat, he concedes that "the two may be held in conjunction."75

It is hard to believe that Mill makes this concession without being aware of just
how hollow it will seem to many of his readers. Once again, if the Platonic-Manichean
kind of theism had the potential to be the religion of the future, the most sensible thing
for us to do would, as Mill implies, be to concentrate on promoting it and forget about the
Religion of Humanity. But evidently because of the lack of solid scientific support for it,
it has no such potential. In that case we should, following Mill, direct our efforts
primarily if not solely to the promotion of the Religion of Humanity. And saying, as Mill
does, that "the two may be held together" must be understood as a polite way of
indicating that Platonic-Manichean theism may prove to be ineffectual, and of relegating
it to a subordinate status.

Yet another question arises at this point. If Mill truly believes the Religion of
Humanity will suffice as the religion of the future, why does he feel compelled to make a
case, however brief, for the Platonic-Manichean form of theism? Why does he even
bring up a form of supernatural belief whose long term prospects appear so uncertain to
him?

At present we can do no more than suggest three possible answers, for we are as
yet in no position to choose among them. First, as Alexander Bain, one of Mill's closest
friends and intellectual companions, suggests, his sympathetic treatment of Platonic-
Manichean theism is best understood as a polite concession to religious orthodoxy.76

74 Ibid. Curiously, this is the only time in the entire essay that Mill chooses not to capitalize the name of
the new, secular-humanist religion, and it occurs during his brief but respectful examination of the nature,
virtues and prospects of Platonic-Manichean theism.

75 Ibid., 419, 425.
Mill hopes thereby to placate the more conservative elements of British high society and to dampen their hostility to his other, more radical ideas, especially his idea of a humanistic religion.

Second, Mill is recommending Platonic-Manichean theism primarily as a transitional or provisional form of worship. (He could, of course, be doing so all the while knowing that this kind of theism may prove to be of little efficacy in the short as well as the long term.) To be more precise, it is an "improved" version of Christianity intended mainly for those of us in the intervening period (that is, from now until such time as the Religion of Humanity can suffice for virtually everyone) who could not be fully satisfied by a merely humanistic religion. Mill himself admits that there may be people "who need it." This second answer is clearly also supported by the ensuing quotation from a previously cited letter from Mill to Bain:

On [the question of religion], certainly I am not anxious to bring over any but really superior intellects & characters to the whole of my own opinions--in the case of all others I would much rather, as things now are, try to improve their religion than to destroy it [emphases added--B.K.].

Third, in speaking briefly but sympathetically about Platonic-Manichean theism, Mill indirectly expresses his concern that the Religion of Humanity may not quite suffice, not now, not ever, at least not for a significant portion of humankind. In this connection it should be noted that Mill has thus far said nothing about how the Religion of Humanity might help skeptics or atheists (who, we can safely say, are more likely than the theists to see death as the annihilation of self) deal with the fear of death.

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77 Ibid., 426.
We shall revisit the question of Mill's main reason for bringing up the strengths and weaknesses of Platonic-Manichean theism and the three possible answers to it in a later chapter.

One important point remains to be made here. Mill does not attempt in "Utility" to justify the claim that the evidence for the best form of theism is "shadowy and insubstantial." A comprehensive defence of that claim can be found only in "Theism", the third and final essay in the posthumously published Three Essays on Religion. We must familiarize ourselves with that defence if we are to gain a complete understanding of Mill's teaching concerning the relation between science and religion. It is for this reason that we next turn to "Theism."

Concluding remarks

Nevertheless, we must pause to review the main points of this chapter and briefly explore their significance.

The question of the necessity of religion to virtue is in Mill's view of vital significance both to "the best" and for the future advance of civilization. For as the strength of traditional religion, together with its support of virtue, continues to decline, individuals by nature favourably disposed to virtue are increasingly likely to wonder about the point of devoting themselves to it. Future moral and material progress is thereby made uncertain.

However, Mill purports to have found a solution to the problem. He claims that the Religion of Humanity, inasmuch as it is able to satisfy the "craving for higher things"78 and to endow human life with dignity and meaning, should suffice as an alternative source of support for virtue. For that matter, he avers, the Religion of Humanity is better suited to fostering virtue than "any form whatever of supernaturalism."

78 Ibid., 419.
Unlike all forms of supernaturalism which hold out the promise of a blissful afterlife as a reward for the performance of duty in this life, it would not minister to the "selfish" desire for "personal salvation."79 Hence there is little chance of the disinterestedness of true virtue being compromised by it. It would also achieve its best moral effects without dulling and perverting the intellect, whereas the traditional forms of theism (again, because they hold that God is both omnipotent and perfectly good) have not been intellectually nearly as benign. And in contrast with traditional religion, the Religion of Humanity, owing to the partial reality of its object, would not be susceptible to erosion by the progress of science.

Moreover, with the appropriate form of education assisting it, the Religion of Humanity would be able to draw everyone into its fold, even if its strongest, purest adherents, those fully satisfied by it, were most likely to be found among the best.

Mill's reasons for calling his new, humanistic creed and sentiment a religion coincide in large part with his reasons for distinguishing between the original teaching of Christ and the doctrines of established Christianity. As he indicates in "Coleridge", a new creed's prospects of taking hold are significantly better if stress is laid on its links to or affinities with the old, established beliefs. No new philosophy can at present become influential in Britain except in the form of a religious philosophy, and only if it is seen to provide at least "collateral support" to Christianity.

Nevertheless, there is, according to Mill, a kind of theism which, be it in its Platonic or in its Manichean version, has none of the moral defects of the established religions, which therefore "can produce on whoever can succeed in believing it no other than an ennobling effect." The problem, he says, with this form of theism is that the scientific support for it is so meagre as to make it incapable of taking the place of the Religion of Humanity. Its future seems uncertain.

79 Ibid., 422.
Consequently, the Religion of Humanity will be the only truly solid, reliable ideological alternative open to us in the science-dominated future, once "those baseless fancies" about "infinite and eternal beatitudes" beyond this world "have receded into the past." The Platonic-Manichean theism might be of some help, but perhaps only as a transitional or provisional form of worship. As such it would be intended primarily for those of us in the intervening period (that is, from now until such time as the Religion of Humanity has gained ascendancy) "who need it", who could not be fully satisfied by any purely secular religion. Followers of Mill can only hope that the secular-humanistic religion will sooner or later adequately fulfill, as Mill seems to believe it will, "every important function of religion."

Nevertheless, the very fact that Mill feels compelled to bring up and defend a form of theism whose prospects seem so dim to him makes us wonder how complete or unqualified his confidence in the sufficiency of the Religion of Humanity truly is. Not only might he be concerned that time could run out on traditional, theistic religion before the only viable, secular alternative to it is capable of taking its place. Perhaps he is also concerned that the latter may never be fully sufficient for all of us. These concerns could only be compounded by whatever doubts he has about the efficacy of the morally blameless Platonic-Manichean theism, even in the more limited role of a transitional or provisional form of worship. But if Mill has doubts about both the ultimate adequacy of the Religion of Humanity and the efficacy of the Platonic-Manichean theism, how can he be certain that the best of humankind will continue to esteem virtue highly and pursue it ardently? How can he be confident of the permanence and ongoing progress of civilization?

Slowly, gradually, over the course of the essay the presence of science on the scene has loomed larger and larger. At last it has become abundantly clear that in Mill's view the progress of science has been a prominent factor in all of the developments and issues probed thus far, and we are ready to investigate why it has. Accordingly, we
proceed now to examine Mill's conception of the quarrel between science and religion as it is conveyed in the last of his *Three Essays on Religion*—"Theism."
Part II

The Scientific Support for Religion
5/ SCIENCE AND THE EXISTENCE AND ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

In the second part of the dissertation, which consists of chapters five through eight, we delve into Mill's teaching concerning the scientific support for theism as expounded in his last major work, the essay "Theism." The fifth chapter (the present one) focuses on what science tells us about the existence and attributes of God, the sixth, on such scientific support as there is for the belief in life after death, and the seventh, on the light science and experience throw on the possibility of miracles, including the miracle of Divine Revelation. Through such an examination we gain a clearer understanding of Mill's conception of the conflict between science and religion—and therewith his claim in "Utility" that the evidence for theism even "in its best manifestation" is "too shadowy and too insubstantial... to admit of its being a permanent substitute for the religion of humanity." We summarize his conception and probe certain aspects of it in the eighth chapter. When we have completed this examination, we will be in a better position to explore Mill's view of the moral and social significance of that conflict.

Mill's introduction

Mill opens the introductory section of "Theism" with the observation that the "aspect of the dispute" between "believers and unbelievers in natural and revealed religion" is at present markedly different from what it was in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To begin with, non-believers are now making their arguments in a "more softened temper." Mill gives two reasons for this change in "moral attitude" on their part. First, experience has taught them that the unqualified "destruction of superstition" which characterized much of the progressive thought of the eighteenth century is not the most effective way to "regenerate" humankind. Second, the
"philosophical study of history" (which, incidentally, Mill lauds as "one of the most important creations of recent times") has demonstrated the usefulness to humankind of various religious doctrines and practices in earlier stages of its development. Consequently, those religions are thought by the present generation's "more instructed" atheists and skeptics to "deserve admiration and gratitude", albeit only of a relative kind. To Christianity in particular and to theism in general is ascribed, in Mill's words, "the position...of things once of great value but which can now be done without; rather than, as formerly, of things misleading and obnoxious ab initio."

Furthermore, the nineteenth century has witnessed a corresponding change in the "intellectual attitude" of "thoughtful unbelievers" towards religion. Whereas in the eighteenth century non-believers waged the "war against religious beliefs" primarily "on the ground of common sense or of logic", they now, claims Mill, wage it primarily on scientific grounds. The "progress of the physical sciences is considered to have established" conclusively certain truths or "matters of fact" which contradict those beliefs. At the same time the "science of human nature and history" is thought by atheists and skeptics to have yielded a wholly new and valid way of explaining the religious doctrines of the past. Historical science purports to have shown that these doctrines are "natural growths of the human mind" in earlier phases of its development which will inevitably give way to other creeds when the "conditions necessary to their continued existence" have disappeared. In fact, Mill says, among non-believers the sociological-historical mode of investigation "seems even to be superseding" the more old-fashioned approach, which focuses directly on the question of the truth or falsity of the doctrine investigated.2

Mill applauds the emergence of an historical science of ideas or, to use current academic terminology, the sociology of knowledge. A "cautious thinker", a true man of science as Mill conceives him, cannot be content simply to prove a given conviction

1 Three Essays, CW, X, 429.
2 Ibid., 429-30.
false. He can be fully confident of his judgement only if he is also able to explain how and why that belief ever came to be held, especially if it was or is a widely held belief.\(^3\)

Nevertheless, says Mill, the "historical treatment" of any opinion should never be allowed to take precedence over the "dogmatic" treatment of it, that is, the investigation of its "truth or falsity", hence of the "sufficiency of the evidence on which it rests." The most important determination to be made about any opinion is not how and why it ever took hold, but whether or not it is true. Therefore we must "from time to time" investigate the question of religion as a "strictly scientific question." According to Mill, such an investigation requires that the "evidences" of religion be tested by the methods of science and with reference to the very principles underpinning the "speculative conclusions drawn by physical science."\(^4\)

Mill then closes his introduction with the following statement of intent:

> It being granted then that the legitimate conclusions of science are entitled to prevail over all opinions, however widely held, which conflict with them, and that the canons of scientific evidence which the successes and failures of two thousand years have established, are applicable to all subjects on which knowledge is attainable, let us proceed to consider what place there is for religious beliefs on the platform of science; what evidences they can appeal to, such as science can recognize, and what foundation there is for the doctrines of religion, considered as scientific theorems.

Clearly Mill's intention is to assess the truth of various fundamental religious beliefs on unabashedly purely scientific grounds, to try, as it were, both natural and revealed religion before the tribunal of science. Mill does not entertain questions regarding the validity of such an approach. For (apart from intuitive knowledge\(^5\)) he recognizes as knowledge nothing other than that body of beliefs substantiated in conformity with the established

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\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid., 430-31.

\(^5\) For instance, knowledge of "our own bodily sensations and mental feelings": *Logic*, *CW*, VII, 7.
"canons of scientific evidence"—not even the knowledge allegedly yielded by or contained in faith.

The scientific view of the world

In the section of Part One of "Theism" immediately following the introduction, Mill briefly elucidates the view of the world presupposed by natural science. According to this view—which gains strength with every new scientific discovery—every event is causally related to some other event or events preceding it in time, "or in other words, depends for its existence on some antecedent." Nature consists of "distinct chains of causation" in which each cause brings about its effect according to fixed laws. But the "action of each cause" is never completely independent of the actions of other causes. On the contrary, it is "so interfered with" by them that "every effect is truly the result rather of the aggregate of all causes in existence than of any one only." This can only be because the operation of each law of causation is such as to complement or counteract rather than be completely unaffected by the operation of other laws. And there would be no such interaction if these laws were completely unrelated to or independent of one another.6

It follows, then, that nature is "one connected system, or united whole." Each natural event is causally linked more or less directly with every other event in nature, though the magnitude of its effect on the others may vary considerably from one event to the next. And the laws governing the ways in which natural events influence each other together form a system which reflects the unity of nature in all of its visible heterogeneity. Only by disclosing those laws and the relations among them will science be able to explain the phenomena of nature in their interconnectedness.7

6 Three Essays, CW, X, 432.
7 Ibid., 432-33; see also 454-55.
Polytheism and science

Such a view of the world is, Mill argues, fundamentally incompatible with polytheism. Polytheism grew out of a pre-scientific way of looking at things or perspective which Mill acknowledges to be natural, even if fundamentally misleading. Within this perspective, natural phenomena appear to be independent of antecedent and concurrent events, hence, in Mill's words, "to be the result of forces altogether heterogeneous, each taking its course quite independently of the others." The pre-scientific perspective, then, presupposes a world carved up into a large number of separate spheres or "departments", each governed by a power operating autonomously, very much in isolation from the powers governing the other spheres. Given their belief in the autonomy of these ruling forces and powers of nature, it was perfectly natural for pre-scientific peoples to think of them as having "conscious wills", and to confer upon them a special, divine status.8

Now a world governed by a multitude of autonomous divine beings with "conscious wills" of their own would of necessity seem fragmented, chaotic. In such a world, events capable of exerting a massive influence on human life--volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, earthquakes and the like--again, because they would appear to be independent of both antecedent and concurrent events, could hardly fail sooner or later to be construed as the acts of independent gods with capricious natures. The earliest discoveries which revealed that physical events are in fact not independent but causally linked with other physical events according to certain fixed patterns were therefore bound to spur "individuals of exceptional genius" to question the received religious explanations of these phenomena. The greater their knowledge of those causal connections as well as the ways in which they influence each other, the stronger their sense of nature as a "connected system." And of course, the weaker the hold of polytheism on these men's

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8 Ibid., 431.
minds. (Mill does not name any such "individuals of exceptional genius" here, but while penning this phrase he could well have thought of Socrates, as portrayed in Aristophanes' Clouds, and Lucretius.)

Monotheism and science

The case of monotheism is, as Mill shows, more complex. According to monotheism, the world is governed by a single divine being, and everything that happens is, whether we understand it or not, part of God's overarching plan. Thus monotheism is prima facie compatible with science, for both picture the world as a unified whole. In fact, says Mill, in various parts of the world progress in science contributed to the eventual replacement of polytheism by monotheism.

Nevertheless, he argues, we must distinguish between "vulgar" and refined monotheism. The former sees the rule of God as consisting in "special decrees, made pro hac vice"; these are "acts of variable will", completely independent or self-determined and following no humanly recognizable pattern. Divine rule thus conceived points to a God of particular providence only, whose interventions in the happenings of this world would appear unintelligible and unpredictable to the unassisted human understanding. Yet this view of the Divine is incompatible with at least one main tenet of science—that all events in nature "originate from definite natural antecedents" in accordance with fixed general

9 Ibid., 431-32, 454-55.
11 Three Essays, CW, X, 431-32.
12 Ibid., 433. The Latin phrase "pro hac vice" may be translated as "for the sake of this change here" or, less literally, "for this turn or occasion (only)", as the OED suggests. Mill uses it to highlight the particularity, the ad hoc nature of God's actions as represented in the popular conception of Divine rule.
laws. For that tenet precludes the possibility of any particular act of divine intervention of the sort whose outcome is up to the very "moment of action" completely undecided or undetermined. Therefore, "vulgar" monotheism is, like polytheism, intellectually wholly unsustainable.¹³

By contrast, monotheism of the more refined sort conceives God as a power "governing the world by invariable laws" of nature and not by "acts of variable will." To that extent it is consistent with science. There are, to be sure, two distinct versions of refined monotheism. According to one, each event in nature is the product of a particular Divine volition, but in producing these events God always abides by the laws of nature. The other (held by Leibniz, for example) argues that God created a world governed by a set of unchanging laws and possessing the power to "go on of itself" in conformity with those laws. Nevertheless, regardless of how we might attempt on grounds of reverence to justify preferring either version to the other, science, says Mill, is indifferent as between them.¹⁴

Even so, as Mill himself recognizes, the question is whether there is a form or variant of refined theism¹⁵ that is not only consistent with but also corroborated by science.¹⁶ We cannot here hope to subject his entire treatment of this complex issue to a close analysis. A brief summary, interspersed with analytical comments, of his main scientifically informed arguments must suffice.

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¹³ Three Essays, CW, X, 433.

¹⁴ Ibid., 433-34.

¹⁵ Mill suggests that monotheism and theism be used interchangeably, monotheism being the only form of "Theism which can claim for itself any footing on scientific ground", that is, the only form of theism that merits serious consideration from a theoretical standpoint: ibid., 432.

¹⁶ Ibid., 434.
Science and the existence of God: the cosmological proof

The first theological issue which Mill addresses and upon which the findings of science have in his view a direct bearing is whether the argument for God's existence from the necessity of a First Cause is valid. This species of argument is known as the cosmological proof, and it may be summarized as follows: Everything that exists has a cause. Therefore the world, which is but the totality of all existing things (each of which has a cause), must also have a cause. And that cause can only be God. Consequently, God exists.17

Mill counters with an argument reminiscent of the one Kant uses to show that it is impossible through such cosmological speculation to get beyond the paradox or "antinomy of pure reason" that there both must be and cannot be a First Cause.18 The so-called cosmological proof, says Mill, is based on a misapplication of the concept of causation. As the ordinary, everyday use of the word cause and its cognates suggests, that concept is properly applicable to the production only of changes or events in the world and not of the world as a whole or of any permanent element in it.19

But, Mill concedes, if there is a permanent element in nature which can be shown to be a factor in the production of every natural event or change, this element may be regarded as a kind of First Cause. In fact, he adds, modern science has succeeded in disclosing just such a First Cause: "Force." We now have good reason to believe that every physical event or change is at least partly the effect of a certain "quantum of Force". Moreover, Force is everywhere and always "essentially one and the same", and according to the recently discovered law of "Conservation of Force" there is a fixed quantity of it in

17 Ibid., 434-35.
19 Three Essays, CW, X, 436.
nature. To Force thus conceived we can legitimately apply the term *First Cause*, if by the latter is meant "universal cause." All the same, modern science appears to have proven that Force is not a First Cause understood theologically, to wit, as that which created the world as a whole.20

Yet the matter does not, Mill observes, end here. Proponents of the argument from a First Cause could counter--indeed, have since Plato countered--with the following: Every change is the effect of a certain force. Mind is a type of Force because it can effect change. Indeed, all force other than Mind ultimately derives from it. As human experience of voluntary agency demonstrates, Mind has the capacity to originate change, whereas the force at work in the "phenomena of inanimate nature" does not. The latter can cause change or motion in an object only by being transferred to it from another object already in motion, to which the force in question had previously to be transferred by yet another moving object, and so on. Since force of this kind is not self-generating or self-activating, it could not have originated the series of transferences which account for all the motion and change in inanimate nature. It follows, then, that all change in both the animate and the inanimate spheres of nature "owed its beginning to... one cause, voluntary agency, if not that of man, then of a more powerful Being."21

Mill's rejoinder is, in his own words, "according to the best lights of science:" If the law of Conservation of Force holds, then the will, though capable of originating motion, does not "create Force." It can only convert into a form needed to effect change "a portion of Force which already existed in other forms." Modern physiology teaches that the force made use of by the will is a product of the transformation, through the "processes of chemical composition and decomposition" which nutrition comprises, of Force in yet another, evidently more elemental form. By this process of transformation (or "liberation", as Mill puts it) a "fund" of force is generated "upon which every

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20 Ibid., 436-37.

21 Ibid., 437.
muscular and even every merely nervous action, as of the brain in thought, is a draft."

Since, to repeat, the Force ultimately disposed of by the will has always existed (albeit in constantly varying forms) and was not itself created by it, we must conclude that the world was not created by "a volition." And we note that this conclusion too is forced upon us by the science of nature.\(^{22}\)

Even so, as Mill admits, this rejoinder does not amount to a final refutation of the cosmological proof of God's existence. The unrepentant theist could plausibly assert that it is nothing more than a reason to subject that proof to further refinement and qualification. We may concede that Force does not derive from will, but, this theist might continue, so long as the former itself did not engender the latter, the two must be acknowledged to be co-eternal. As human experience again shows, Will alone can originate change, even if only by converting a portion of the permanently fixed quantity of Force from some other form into one suitable to mechanical motion. Consequently, the creation of the "kosmos, or order of the universe", if not of the universe as a whole or permanent non-mental elements in it such as "Matter and Force", must ultimately be attributed to a Will. And that can only be the Will of God.\(^{23}\)

Nevertheless, Mill argues, modern science has proven that volition does not have a monopoly on the creation of motion. Motion originates in other, often much more potent causes, such as electricity, chemical action, and heat. And the origination of motion in these agents is not simply reducible to the transference of mere mechanical motion from one object to another. It could consist in the "liberation" of a force which was previously only latent in them, or in the transformation of that force into a form different from the one it had before. In response to the rejoinder that those other causes or agents must have received the force they dispose of from elsewhere, it must be

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\(^{22}\) Ibid., 438.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 438, 440.
acknowledged that the same is true of volition. For to repeat, modern science has demonstrated that volition obtains its force from a source other than itself, the "chemical action of the food and air." Therefore, the First Cause need not be a Will.

Of course, the proponents of the argument from a First Cause could then maintain that the "first or universal Cause" must be or have a Will because volitions alone of all things are uncaused. But, Mill points out, one can counter on the basis of "experience" (and here he clearly means experience as interpreted or explained by science) that the essential "properties of matter" too are uncaused and, unlike "any particular volition", eternal, and therefore have at least as much right as Will to be dubbed First Cause.24

There is, finally, an a priori, intuitionist argument with which one might attempt to justify the claim that the First Cause is God: Mind is clearly and undeniably a fact of the universe. But "it is self-evident that nothing can have produced Mind except Mind." Moreover, Mind of a given level of power and excellence could have been produced only by one greater and more powerful than it. This point, if we think through its implications, compels us to grant the existence of an eternal mind of infinite power and greatness as the origin of all lesser levels of mind. And that Eternal Mind can only be God, the First Cause of the universe.25

Mill advances two arguments in response to the preceding line of reasoning, but only one of them directly incorporates the findings of modern science, and it can be summarized thus: Only Mind can "consciously produce Mind", to be sure. But it does not follow that "unconscious production" of a mind by something non-mental is impossible. That it is possible is attested by the highly corroborated scientific theory of evolution. According to this theory, "the state of the planet was once such as to be incompatible with animal life" in any form, and human life made its first appearance

24 Ibid., 438-39.

25 Ibid., 439-40.
much more recently than animal life as such. The theory clearly implies that at some point in time—exactly when is not known—mental states evolved out of non-mental ones. True, it has been said that "nobler" or "higher" things cannot have baser or lower origins, or that the simpler and less organized cannot give rise to the more complex and more organized. But the combined weight of common experience and modern scientific speculation tips the balance in favour of the opinion that the opposite is the "general rule of Nature."26

Thus, Mill contends, natural science proves that the argument from a First Cause, a curious blend of *a priori* and *a posteriori* reasoning, affords no adequate "foundation for the establishment of Theism". In his view the strongest argument for the existence of God, the argument from design, is purely *a posteriori*. It is an example of the kind of reasoning or thinking that one encounters in science; therefore, he indicates, it can and should be treated as a legitimate scientific theory.27

The argument from the marks of design in nature

Mill summarizes the argument from the marks of design in nature (in short, the argument from design) in its original form as follows: Anything created for a certain purpose by an intelligent mind, say, that of a human artisan, possesses certain characteristics which bespeak its creation by design. Now the order of nature, or at least a substantial portion of it, exhibits these same characteristics or marks. Nature must therefore have been created by an intelligence, one possessing a power vastly greater than that of human beings. The intelligent being in question can only be God.28

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26 Ibid., 440.
27 Ibid., 434-35, 440, 441.
28 Ibid., 446.
The foregoing argument, Mill observes, is based on an analogy between human artifacts and the order of nature or certain parts of it. Although the tendency among logicians is to regard analogies as a type of inductive evidence, they are in fact a very inferior type. Any analogy is only as strong as the resemblance between its two terms. And even when the resemblance is strong and therefore "[affords] a certain presumption of similarity of cause", the magnitude of that presumption is difficult to measure.29

Mill then states that it is possible to recast the argument from design so as to give it greater force. In its revised form it exemplifies the kind of inductive argument which corresponds to the method of agreement. But logicians hold that kind to be the "weakest of the four" types of inductive argument. Accordingly, in Mill's view, the new and improved version, though more compelling than the original one based on analogy, must still be considered at best a rather tenuous scientific foundation for theism.30

The revised argument from design goes like this: The components of, say, an eye and the various "collocations" which together make up the structure of its parts all have one property in common: "they all conduce to enabling the animal to see". Conducing to the power of sight is the only respect in which they resemble each other which is also unique to them. For although "likeness of composition and organization" exists among them, it also "exists among all other parts of the animal." Moreover, the coming together or convergence of the parts of an eye must in each instance, like all things with temporal beginnings, have a cause or causes. But according to the rules of inductive logic, there have been far too many instances of such a convergence for them to be explainable by a "random concurrence of independent causes", that is, by chance. These different parts can be brought together to form the eye so frequently only by some cause common to all of them. And since they all share the circumstance of contributing to the power of sight

29 Ibid., 446-47.

30 Ibid., 447-48; see also 482, 483.
(which circumstance is, again, unique to them), there must be a connection between "the fact of sight" and that common cause. "This I conceive to be a legitimate inductive inference, and the sum and substance of what Induction can do for Theism," says Mill, and then spins out the remainder of the argument: Given that sight follows upon instead of preceding the convergence of the parts of an eye, the former can be related to the latter only as its "final" rather than as its "efficient cause." Therefore "an antecedent Idea of [sight]... must be the efficient cause" of the formation of the eye, which is to say that the origin of the latter must be "an intelligent will." And that intelligent will is the will of God.31

Such is the argument from design in its most convincing form. In Mill's estimation it is "greatly strengthened by properly inductive considerations." Nevertheless, although the "adaptations of nature afford a large balance of probability in favour of creation by intelligence... this is no more than a probability."32 (Indeed, as Mill notes later in the essay, that evidence is "insufficient for proof, amounting only to one of the lower degrees of probability."33) And ("revelation apart") science can provide no firmer foundation for theism than the inductive inference on which that argument is built.34

31 Ibid., 448.
32 Ibid., 450.
33 Ibid., 482.
34 In his often insightful treatment of Mill's religious thought Alan Millar defends Mill's argument from design as follows: "[It] is strange that Mill should, without comment, assume that the Method of Agreement applies to final causes. The very notion of final cause, as indeed of an efficient cause, is foreign to the thinking about causation in A System of Logic, where the methods for discovery are introduced as pertaining to antecedent 'conditions' of phenomena and their consequences. Note, however, that the sort of connection for which Mill is looking, between conspiring to produce sight and the cause or causes of there being eye structures as we now know them, can be expressed without recourse to the notion of final causes. Mill is seeking an explanation for the fact that there are many species of animal with complex eyes; organs which are extremely well suited to enabling their possessors to see. The considerations he adduces about the eye suggest that any explanation should satisfy a certain constraint: the fact that the structures have parts conspiring so well to produce sight should figure in the explanation of there being animals which possess such structures. Once this is granted the hypothesis that eyes are the products of intelligent design comes in as a plausible explanation which satisfies the constraint [emphasis added—BK]": "Mill on religion," The Cambridge Companion to Mill, ed. John Skorupski (Cambridge: Cambridge
The Darwinian challenge

Mill then concedes—with "regret"—that recently another way of scientifically explaining such "wonderful" natural phenomena as the formation of the eye has caused quite a stir. That way is based on the principle of "the survival of the fittest." As Helen Taylor points out, Mill alludes here to Charles Darwin's attempt to explain the evolution of new, more highly organized species of animal and vegetable life from simpler ones through the mechanism of "natural selection."

Some commentators—John Morley and Bertrand Russell, for instance—see Mill's remarks on the Darwinian theory of evolution as indicative of his unwillingness to give it serious consideration or think through its implications. True, Mill does say at one point that "its adequacy... is still and will probably long remain problematical." At another he argues that "there is something very startling, and prima facie improbable in this hypothetical history of Nature." Yet nothing in those two remarks attests to disbelief or heedlessness or indifference on his part. In the first one Mill says that Darwin's hypothesis will "probably long remain problematical", not that it will always be so. In the second he speaks of it as "prima facie" rather than as actually or truly improbable. What he is in fact expressing there is how fascinating and baffling he finds the theory. His own perplexity has surely been vindicated by the scientific and philosophical controversy that has surrounded Darwin's theory ever since it was first published. Later, in his final assessment of the


35 Ibid., 448-49.

36 Helen Taylor, "Introductory Notice" to Three Essays, CW, X, 371.


38 Three Essays, CW, X, 449.

theory and its significance for his inquiry, he asserts that "it is not so absurd as it looks", and that the "analogies which have been discovered in experience, favourable to its possibility, far exceed what anyone could have supposed beforehand."40 This assertion coupled with what he says immediately afterwards shows not only that he has given the theory a good deal of thought, but also that he is open to the possibility of its eventual scientific confirmation.41

More importantly, Darwin's theory of evolution is, in Mill's view, by no means inconsistent with the "creation by intelligence" hypothesis, but were it ever to be "admitted", "it would greatly attenuate the evidence" for that hypothesis.42 Explaining their evolution in a wholly secular, naturalistic manner, the theory would show that the phenomena of nature once thought to point to a Divine Creator of the universe in fact do no such thing.

Nevertheless, until such time as its scientific status is decided, it may be wise to adopt a somewhat skeptical posture towards the Darwinian hypothesis. Indeed, we, at least the non-scientists among us, might proceed as though the theory had not yet come up for discussion, or at least as though it could be safely set aside or (as Husserl would say) "bracketed", even if only temporarily. It is, we believe, at least partly out of concern for what is useful to society, especially to British society, in the present43 that Mill, keeping up the appearance of skepticism bordering on incredulity regarding Darwin's theory, says,

40 Three Essays, CW, X, 449.

41 Himmelfarb holds as we do that Mill's attitude towards Darwin's theory of evolution was anything but one of indifference or close-mindedness; however, Mill emerges more of a skeptic from her interpretation than he does from ours. Cf. Gertrude Himmelfarb, Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution (New York: Norton, 1959), 297-98, 450, and Mill's letters to: Bain, 11 Apr. 1860, CW, XV, 695; Herbert Spencer, 2 Dec. 1868, CW, XVI, 1505; Hewett C. Watson, 30 Jan. 1869, CW, XVII, 1553-54, and 24 Feb. 1869, ibid., 1567; and Edward Livingstone Youmans, [? Mar. 1869], ibid., 1570.

42 Three Essays, CW, X, 450.

43 See 183, 184-85, 203-11 below.
Leaving this remarkable speculation to whatever fate the progress of discovery may have in store for it, I think it must be allowed that, in the present state of our knowledge, the adaptations in Nature afford a large balance of probability in favor of creation by intelligence.44

Evidently, for reasons of "policy" rather than out of unqualified disbelief or lack of interest, Mill raises the issue of Darwinism's scientific merit only, one might say, to drop it like a hot potato.

Yet while appearing thus to have for the time being shielded the "argument from marks of design in nature" from further Darwinian criticism, Mill quietly indicates that what little force it has may be slowly dwindling to nothing. For his argument implies that every new piece of evidence for the Darwinian hypothesis is simultaneously a new piece of evidence against the design argument. Science itself might in the end deprive the hypothesis that there is a God of the only scientific support to which it could ever reasonably lay claim.45

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44 Three Essays, CW, X, 450.

45 Leslie Stephen offers a different interpretation of Mill's remarks on the theological implications of "natural selection." He takes Mill to be saying that "Darwinism does not prove that there was not 'creation' at some indefinite time[,] though it does show that there is no need for supposing a creation since the existing order began": Sir Leslie Stephen, John Stuart Mill, The English Utilitarians (London: Duckworth, 1900), III, 441. In our opinion this interpretation, although persuasive on first reading, is ultimately untenable, for it rests on some highly dubious assumptions. Stephen assumes (441) that the argument from design as conceived by Mill presupposes a God who intervenes frequently and directly in the order of nature, at precisely the moment when a "wonderful" thing such as an eye comes into being. That is to say, he thinks Mill has in mind what we shall here call a "direct teleology." He may be right, but he provides no textual evidence for his assumption. Furthermore, a different but no less plausible reading can be given of Mill on this particular point. As Stephen's own remarks reveal (440-41), the argument from design is consistent with an indirect teleology, or in his words, a teleology of "nature as a whole." To be more precise, it is logically possible to argue that in creating the universe God arranged circumstances so that wonderful things such as eyes would come into being in conformity with the laws he has prescribed for all of nature rather than through his frequent, unpredictable and direct "intervention in the actual series of natural events" (441). For that matter, there are a number of passages in other parts of the essay "Theism" which indicate that Mill has exactly that indirect teleology in view when expounding his version of the design argument: Three Essays, CW, X, 452, 453-54, 474, 479. We should also recall that Mill, in keeping with the principles of science, explicitly rules out all forms of theism which postulate a God who intervenes often, unpredictably and directly in the order of nature. To accept Stephen's assumption would be to impute to Mill a contradiction of the grossest sort, one hardly consonant with the widely held view of him as a thinker with extraordinary powers of reasoning. Finally, Stephen supposes Mill to mean by creation primarily an act of direct divine intervention in the natural course of events whereby something comes into being in an already existing world, not that unique act whereby the world as a whole comes into being: John Stuart Mill, 441. Although this assumption too is plausible, Stephen once again fails to support it with
Science and the attributes of God

The question which Mill now addresses is, "[Given] the indications of a Deity, what sort of a Deity do they point to? What attributes are we warranted, by the evidence which Nature affords of a creative mind, in assigning to that mind?"46

In answering the question Mill once again makes use of a wide variety of arguments, some of them logical or dialectical, others more scientific. We shall outline the main ones, highlighting those in which the principles or findings of science seem to play a more prominent role.

The power of God

As we have already seen, Mill argues elsewhere that the idea of a God who is both omnipotent and perfectly good is self-contradictory and morally perverse. Nevertheless it

46 Three Essays, CW, X, 451.
is difficult if not impossible to determine on moral grounds alone which of these God is. Unless additional grounds can be adduced for denying the belief in His omnipotence, the possibility that God is all-powerful and therefore bad cannot be precluded.

In "Theism" Mill endeavours to supply just such additional grounds: The argument from design implies that in endeavouring to achieve His ends God employs various kinds of means and materials, with all of their properties and the constraints on action which these entail. In other words, the argument implicitly ascribes wisdom to Him, at the very least the wisdom of an artisan. But to do so is effectively to deny that His power is unlimited. For were He truly omnipotent, He would have been able to will all His objects into existence directly and immediately, without forethought and "contrivances."47

Neither, says Mill, is it possible to defend the belief in God's omnipotence by arguing that God was not compelled to employ means and materials, but instead chose "to do so in order to leave traces by which man might recognize his creative hand." If God's power were truly unlimited, "he had only to will", without the aid of contrivances, "that men should know that they themselves and the world are his work." One can, of course, rejoin that God must have "wise reasons", as yet unknown to us, for not immediately and completely revealing Himself to us. Yet this rejoinder is to no avail, since it too is tantamount to a denial of God's omnipotence. The claim that God has hidden reasons for leaving something clearly good like His complete Self-revelation undone implies that He

47 Ibid., 451-52. Mill defines contrivance as the "adaptation of means to an end" (451). Mill may well have learnt the argument that omnipotence is incompatible with the necessity of employing means to achieve any given ends, from Bishop Berkeley, who in the second of his Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous has Philonous say, "We, indeed, who are beings of finite powers, are forced to make use of instruments. And the use of an instrument shows the agent to be limited by rules of another's prescription, and that he cannot obtain his end but in such a way and by such conditions. Whence it seems a clear consequence that the Supreme Unlimited Agent uses no tool or instrument at all. The will of an Omnipotent Spirit is no sooner exerted than executed, without the application of means. . . .": Principles, Dialogues, and Philosophical Correspondence, ed. Colin M. Turbayne (New York: Library of Liberal Arts-Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 161. That Mill was sufficiently versed in Berkeley's writings to have found this argument there is attested by his extensive critical reviews of new editions of Berkeley's works and studies of his thought: "Bailey on Berkeley's Theory of Vision," CW, XI, 247-69; and "Berkeley's Life and Writings," CW, XI, 451-71.
was forced by external conditions not fully under His control to postpone one good object for the sake of another, "still better" one. According to Mill, however,

the necessity of postponing one thing to another belongs only to limited power. Omnipotence could have made the objects compatible. Omnipotence does not need to weigh one consideration against another."48

The knowledge of God

About the knowledge of God, on the other hand, no positive inferences can be drawn from the "fundamental principles of natural religion as deduced from the facts of the universe." Those principles, says Mill, do not "contradict the supposition of perfect knowledge", but neither do they "prove it." The many wonderful things found in nature attest to an inordinately high level of knowledge and skill in God's possession. Nevertheless, these same marvels are not without "abundant defects." Take the human body, in Mill's view "one of the most striking instances of artful and ingenious contrivance which nature offers." We cannot, he notes, help wondering "whether so complicated a machine could not have been made to last longer, and not to get so easily and frequently out of order." There are two possible ways of explaining why such flaws exist between which we are unable to decide. Either God's knowledge and skill are complete, that is, they extend to the limit set for them by the "materials" and "forces" at His disposal, and He could have done no better with the means available to Him. Or it was in principle possible to do still better, but God could not because His knowledge and skill are incomplete.49

For that matter, as Mill indicates, the presence of defects in the marvels of nature can be explained in yet a third way--by proceeding on the assumption that other intelligent non-human beings exist who are independent of God and have power enough

48 Three Essays, CW, X, 452-53.
49 Ibid., 453-54.
to thwart His purposes. According to Mill, popular Christianity shared with Zoroastrianism the assumption of a principle of evil independent of God and embodied in a single powerful superhuman being; this being was known to Zoroastrians as Ahriman and to Christians as the Devil. (Indeed, says Mill, many Christians continue even now to believe in the existence of the Devil.) Furthermore, both religions view the course of events in this world as the continuing struggle for supremacy between these two beings, hence between good and evil.

The problem with this third way, Mill suggests, is that, as is the case with all other forms of polytheism, it cannot be reconciled with the fundamental principles of natural science, especially the tenet that nature is a unified whole governed by a set of fixed "general laws." Natural science conceives the government of the world as a settled matter rather than as one forever in dispute. The appearance of ongoing strife among competing independent powers which in the past gave rise to various kinds of polytheism turns out for Mill to be illusory, as the same general laws of nature lie at the origin of good and bad things alike.

To be sure, as Mill argues earlier in the essay, it would be possible to recast polytheism so as to eliminate the problem. One could imagine the gods ruling each his or her own part or aspect of the world independently of the rest but all in perfect harmony with one another and in complete agreement over the boundaries separating their several domains. Yet such a reconstructed polytheism, though perhaps consistent with the

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50 Mill does not say so himself, but the persistence of this belief may have been due in part to the influence of such poets as Byron and Goethe, who make poetical use of the Manichean idea in some of their works. See for instance Lord Byron, Cain: A Mystery, The Poems and Dramas (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, n. d.), 671; and Goethe, Faust, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (1961; rpt. Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1963), ll. 271-354.

51 Three Essays, CW, X, 454.

52 Ibid., 454.
"known facts", would not be any more plausible than the supposition of a single Deity
"with divided purposes" which nevertheless somehow dovetail with each other.53

In fact, Mill contends, the "evidences of natural religion" point to a single Deity
with a well integrated set of purposes but with limited power to realize them. The one
main purpose God appears to have in mind for His more marvellous creatures, especially
the highly developed forms of life, is their preservation. Nature does, of course, harbor
destructive tendencies as well. But "rarely" if ever does anything destructive happen that
suggests "contrivance" or "design" as clearly as formative and preservative processes
frequently do--except when one creature must destroy another in order to preserve itself,
that is, except as a necessity of life.54

Actually, Mill adds, this intertwining of the destructive with the preservative in all
living beings is evident even at the more fundamental level disclosed by the science of
chemistry. For bound up with the "chemical compositions" integral to life are chemical
"decompositions." It has been shown that the chemical process which fuels life--
"oxidation"--is at the same time the "great agent of decay in both organic and inorganic
substances."55

Thus there does not seem to be any empirical warrant for ascribing the destructive
activities necessary to life to the will of a Deity distinct from and operating independently
of the One which wills the genesis and preservation of living beings. Nor any for
maintaining that "the preserving agencies are wielded by one Being, the destroying by
another." All other instances of destruction, including the "imperfections" in things, "are
like the unintended results" of unforeseen external events, or of the excessive or deficient

53 Ibid., 455.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
use of some substance needed to produce or preserve any given creature. "[Or] else they are the consequences of the wearing out of a machinery not made to last for ever."\(^56\)

"We may conclude, then", that no Deity exists other than perhaps God the Creator, but that God's power is limited either by the incompleteness of His knowledge or by the intractability of the materials at His disposal.

**The moral attributes of God**

Now that we know that God, if He exists, is of limited power, we can, says Mill, without contradicting ourselves affirm His perfect "goodness and justice." However, we must still inquire whether there is any evidence to support that affirmation.\(^57\)

Mill begins by reminding us that such marvels of nature as vegetable and animal life afford some evidence of design or contrivance. He adds that indications of contrivance can be found as well in certain highly complex though inorganic natural entities, for instance, the solar system.\(^58\)

He then asks, "To what purpose. . . do the expedients in the construction of animals and vegetables, which excite the admiration of naturalists, appear to tend?" His answer, given without hesitation, is that "they tend principally to no more exalted object than to make the structure remain in life and in working order for a certain time."\(^59\) The individual lives for a brief while, and is survived by the species, but the latter too exists only for a "limited period" of time. The same can be said of those entities of an inorganic nature which exhibit marks of design. Take once again the solar system. It is so structured that the interplay of its parts makes for the stability of the system as a whole.

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\(^56\) Ibid.

\(^57\) *Three Essays, CW*, X, 456.

\(^58\) Ibid.

\(^59\) Ibid.
over an immense expanse of time. Even so, Mill points out, recent cosmological inquiries have given us to believe that

the solar system was once a vast sphere of nebula or vapour, and is going through a process which in the course of ages will reduce it to a single and not very large mass of solid matter frozen up with more than arctic cold.

And long before it freezes up, all life in it will have become extinct. If, as Mill says, God "does not wish his works to perish as soon as created", it also clearly follows that God did not intend them to endure forever.

The passage about the eventual freezing up of the solar system (as well as the argument in which it is embedded) was probably among those Walter Pater had in mind when in an unpublished set of notes he described Mill's essays on religion as "gloomy." That passage certainly helps to dispel the notion that Mill was a naive optimist. His writings may indeed be optimistic, but there is a highly sobering, not to say dark, side to that optimism. It is remarkable, however, with what equanimity Mill brings up, together with its disquieting theological implications, the disturbing astrophysical hypothesis about the eventual death of the solar system.

Nevertheless, a problem arises here. To recall, in "Utility" Mill says that the "duration" of the human species is "indefinite", making it "practically equivalent to endlessness." He emphasizes how long its life is compared with that of any individual, because he wants to drive home the point that it can be a "large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur of aspiration." In "Theism", on the other hand, he underscores how brief the life of the species is compared with the duration of the solar

60 Ibid., 456-57.
61 Ibid., 457.
62 Ibid.
63 "Art and Religion," WPP, 11, as quoted in Wright, The Religion of Humanity, 137.
64 Three Essays, CW, X, 420.
system, and by implication how much more brief compared with that of the universe. Why is Mill so certain that widespread awareness of the latter fact would not vitiate the ability of the human species, however idealized, to satisfy the human "craving for higher things", and thus render futile all talk of a godless humanistic religion?

Perhaps he is not as certain as he seems, but because he fears there might not be any viable alternatives to the Religion of Humanity in the long run, he has chosen to keep his doubts to himself. We must, he might have thought, do what we can with what we have, and should not brood over inescapable evils, lest we render ourselves incapable of doing anything at all. The equanimity with which he regarded the mortality of the solar system might, then, have been more apparent than real.

To return to the text, Mill states that from the fact that God intends His works to endure for a "limited period" of time no inference can legitimately be drawn regarding His moral attributes; for mere existence is not a moral end, and willing the limited duration of His creatures is not the same as willing their good. We cannot, says Mill, even deduce anything concerning His feelings towards "his animate or rational creatures", for example, the nature and degree of His love for them.

In addition, living beings have been made to feel pleasure and pain. We must, Mill says, admit the possibility that God has given them that capacity wholly with a view to their self-preservation, for they tend to find pleasing those objects which conduce to their existence and painful those which threaten it.

Yet there is, he adds, ample reason to believe that God actually "desired the pleasure of his creatures." First, we derive pleasure from the "play of the faculties,

\[65\] See especially chs. 8 and 10 below.

\[66\] In the final chapter of "Theism" Mill explicitly counsels against "all unnecessary dwelling upon the [inescapable] evils of life": Three Essays, CW, X, 484.

\[67\] Ibid., 457.

\[68\] Ibid.
physical and mental." The acquisition of knowledge even of "painful things" is "agreeable", says Mill, once more reminding us, as he so often does, of Aristotle. In fact, we get pleasure simply from the "normal working" of our bodies. Pain, on the other hand, usually comes when the proper functioning of the organism is in some way impeded by an external force not adequately protected against; and since such experiences are always accidental, it would be a mistake to try to assimilate them to God's design. Of course, frequently pain occurs merely as a result of the internal workings of the body, independently of any external influences. That happens not while the body is operating normally or according to design, but rather when some part of the body does either more or less than it was intended to do, for example, when the stomach secretes excess acid. It follows that the latter kind of pain too has not been contrived by God.

One could object that God must be held "accountable" for our "susceptibility to pain." Nevertheless if, as has been argued, His power is limited, then it is "extremely probable" that God had no choice. The ability to feel pain may well be indissolubly linked with the ability to feel pleasure.

The probability that God desires the pleasure of His creatures but not their pain may entitle us to ascribe to Him, as one of His attributes, a certain degree of benevolence. All the same, there are no grounds for claiming that "his sole or chief purposes are those of benevolence, and that the single end and aim of Creation was the happiness of his creatures." In fact, Mill argues, the available evidence suggests the contrary. Witness, again, the pain and misery which have plagued human life from the very beginning, and how long it has taken humankind to bring about a modest degree of moral and material improvement. We may grant that our perfectibility is a gift from God. Yet it is hard to

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70 Three Essays, CW, X, 458.

71 Ibid., 458.
believe that He could have endowed humankind in its most primitive state with the capacity gradually to raise itself to the level of "a Newton or a Fenelon" unless He Himself has the ability to produce such highly perfected human types by "other means" and "at a less frightful cost." And if He does have that ability, then the only plausible reason for His not having exercised it consistent with His limited benevolence is that the happiness of His creatures is not His primary concern.72

Neither do we, according to Mill, have grounds for ascribing to God any other moral qualities, such as justice. We can find not even a "shadow of justice in the general arrangements of Nature." And whatever justice there is in human society is of human making only, humankind striving "against immense natural difficulties" to create for itself a "second nature, far better and more unselfish than [it] was created with."73

Concluding remarks

To conclude, then, "Utility" and "Theism" both hold that there is evidence, even if it is rather thin, of the existence of God. In "Utility" Mill indicates that the only rational support available to theism is Paley's version of the design argument, which is based exclusively on "analogies of Nature with the effects of human contrivances."74 In "Theism", on the other hand, Mill offers a version of that argument which he says has more "weight" than Paley's because it is grounded in an inductive inference, albeit of the weakest kind, rather than in mere analogies.75 Notwithstanding this difference, the two essays share the view that the design argument warrants not the belief, but only the hope, that God exists.76

72 Ibid., 458-59.
73 Ibid., 459; see also "Nature," ibid., 396-97.
74 Ibid., 426.
75 Ibid., 447.
Nevertheless, concerning the existence of God the two essays differ in another, ultimately more important way. To recall, whereas in "Theism" Mill raises the spectre of Darwinism, no mention is made of it in "Utility." Accordingly, Mill is forced in "Theism" to reckon with a highly problematic consequence of the scientific confirmation of Darwin's theory (which confirmation he admits could eventually happen)—the severe attenuation, perhaps destruction, of theism even in its best, noblest form. This contingency he does not face in "Utility."

As for the nature of the Deity, in Mill's view the evidences of nature and science point to a God of vast yet limited power, possessing great though not necessarily perfect knowledge, and perhaps benevolent in some degree, but apparently not primarily concerned with the "happiness of his creatures." And in all its essentials this view is, we believe, common to both "Theism" and "Utility." For not only does Mill state explicitly in the latter that God's power is limited; he also intimates there that His knowledge and benevolence may be limited too.

76 Cf. ibid., 426 and 483.

77 Ibid., 459.

78 He intimates as much in "Utility" when he says that God "may be able and willing" to grant us life after death: ibid., 426.


For some interesting criticisms of Mill's theology, especially his argument that God could not be both perfectly good and omnipotent, see Henry Reeve, "Mill's Essays on Theism," Edinburgh Review, 141 (Jan. 1875), 14-26; Hutton, "Mr. Mill's Essays on Religion," Criticisms, I, 196-203; and Harry Austryn Wolfson, "The Philonic God of Revelation and His Latter-day Deniers," Religious Philosophy: A Group of Essays (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1961), 16-17, 23-26. Of these, Wolfson's is the most cutting. His main point is that, like Spinoza and Hume before him, Mill resurrects old objections to the belief in an omnipotent God known and cogently answered by scriptural religious philosophers such as Philo, but misleadingly puts them forward as original and so unanswered ones.
One difference between "Utility" and "Theism" concerning the nature of the Divine is worth noting. Whereas the former seems indifferent as between the Platonic and the Manichean conception of the Divine, the latter comes down clearly on the side of the Platonic. However, in "Theism" Mill is unable to decide between two variants of the Platonic conception. Moreover, he does not refer to it as Platonic. Why he does not is a question to which we shall return in due course.79

79 See 275-81 below.
The subject of the present chapter is Mill's enquiry in "Theism" into the natural evidence and scientific support for the belief in immortality. Mill begins by distinguishing between "indications of immortality... which are independent of any theory respecting the Creator and his intentions", and "those which depend" on some such belief.1 He then proceeds to an examination of the former.

Indications of immortality independent of theism

For personal immortality to be possible, what is commonly referred to as the soul must, says Mill, be a "separate substance", a real entity distinct from the body and not adequately explainable in purely physical terms. Otherwise, the conclusion seems inescapable that when the body disintegrates, so to does the mind.2

Science, the mind-body relation and immortality

Nevertheless, science is, according to Mill, unable either to disprove or to confirm that the soul is a "substance per se." Mill's argument runs as follows: We could prove that the causes of such phenomena as thinking, feeling and willing are physical only if we had the power to "produce an organism, and try whether it would feel" or think or will. But this power we do not possess; all we are capable of is making one organism give birth to another. Therefore, no such proof can be given. True, there is plenty of evidence to support the more modest claim that every thought, volition, etc., is preceded or accompanied by "some action of the bodily organism", and that "cerebral action is, if not

1 Three Essays, CW, X, 460.

2 Ibid.
the cause, at least, in our present state of existence, a condition *sine qua non* of mental operations." At the same time, no evidence whatsoever can be adduced for the belief that the mind continues to exist after the brain has been destroyed. Yet nothing said thus far proves that when the brain stops functioning, so too does the mind, whereupon consciousness ceases forever. It may be that the soul survives, albeit in an unconscious state, until such time as "some other set of conditions supervenes" which can revive it--though we have no idea whether these conditions even exist, let alone what they might be.3

Furthermore, the fact that we possess no evidence of the soul's existence after death is not as telling as the fact that we have no evidence of, say, the existence of witches. If witches exist, they exist on earth. Therefore the absence of any evidence of their existence on earth is a compelling reason for denying their existence altogether. The same cannot be said of the soul. What can be said is that after death the soul "does not remain on earth", but we must be open to the possibility that it exists "elsewhere."4 If we are not, it is probably because we have fallen into the trap of viewing the relation between soul and brain as a "metaphysical necessity", or as a hard and fast causal connection. Associative psychology has shown that that relation is nothing more than a "constant coexistence within the limits of observation" between one batch of "human sensations" which we group together under the term *states of consciousness*, and another under the term *brain*. And although we have never experienced the former disjoined from the latter, we can easily so imagine it.5 Moreover, says Mill in a Humean fashion, "we know of no reason in the nature of things against the possibility of its being thus disjoined."6

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3 Ibid., 460-61.
4 Ibid., 462.
5 Ibid., 461-62.
6 Ibid., 462.
Mill's Berkeleyan argument

As Mill acknowledges, a question arises here. If "all things in Nature perish, the most beautiful and perfect being, as philosophers and poets alike complain, the most perishable", why should the human soul be any different?

Mill answers thus: Our states of mind are the only things of which we have immediate or direct knowledge, hence the "only things which we directly know to be real." Accordingly, these must be judged to be "much more real" than material things. For not only are we unable to perceive matter as such, but as the science of psychology shows, we even lack grounds for believing that "matter" is anything other than "a name for our expectation of [certain] sensations" to follow immediately upon the occurrence of "certain other sensations." As "Mind, (or whatever name we give to what is implied in consciousness of a continued series of feelings)" is "the only substantive reality", or "is in a philosophical point of view the only reality of which we have any evidence", one cannot reasonably draw inferences about its perishability from any analogy between it and something else whose reality is at best contingent and cannot be demonstrated.8

We must confess to having at first been, like John Morley, quite perplexed by the foregoing reasoning.9 The subjectivism or idealism evinced by Mill here seems even more extreme than that of Hume. Indeed, as Morley too recognizes,10 it resembles the idealism of Bishop Berkeley, the eighteenth-century British philosopher best known for his enigmatic dictum "esse [of "unthinking things"] is percipi."11 However Berkeley

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7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 462-63.

9 According to Morley, it "would equally well serve to nullify our conclusions upon the properties of all other kinds of matter, as [it is] here used to nullify our conclusions from the phenomena of cerebral matter. The line of ontological argument taken by Mr. Mill here no more damages propositions reducing mental operations to functions of a physical organism, than it damages propositions connecting heat and light and growth with the sun": "Mr. Mill's Three Essays," 222.

10 Ibid.
intended it to be understood, we question whether Mill is himself completely convinced of the truth of that dictum as he implicitly construes, defends and uses it in “Theism.”

That he is not fully persuaded is suggested by one particular deficiency in his defence which could hardly have eluded him. There is nothing in that defence to preclude the possibility that *percipere est aliquantum decipi* ("to perceive is to be somewhat deceived"), or that objects of perception are less real than things not perceived. Yet in some of his other works he demonstrates a clear awareness of both possibilities, at times even appearing to affirm them.

Take the following remarkable passage from his *Logic*, in which he succinctly expounds the doctrine of the “relativity of human knowledge” in its “most complete form”:

But although the extreme doctrine of the Idealist metaphysicians, that objects are nothing but our sensations and the laws which connect them, has not been generally adopted by subsequent thinkers; the point of most real importance is one on which those metaphysicians are now very generally considered to have made out their case: viz., that *all we know* of objects is the sensations which they give us, and the order of the occurrence of those sensations. Kant himself, on this point, is as explicit as Berkeley or Locke. However firmly convinced that there exists a universe of "Things in themselves," totally distinct from the universe of phenomena, or of things as they appear to our senses; and even when bringing into use a technical expression (*Noumenon*) to denote what the thing is in itself, as contrasted with the *representation* of it in our minds, he allows that this representation (the matter of which, he says, consists of our sensations, though the form is given by the laws of the mind itself) is all we know of the object: and that the real nature of the Thing is, and by the constitution of our faculties ever must remain, at least in the present state of existence, an impenetrable mystery to us. "Of things absolutely or in themselves, [says Sir William Hamilton,) be they external, be they internal, we know nothing, or know them only as incognisable; and become aware of their incomprehensible existence, only as this is indirectly and accidentally revealed to us, through certain qualities related to our faculties of knowledge, and which qualities, again, we cannot think as unconditioned, irrelative, existent in and of themselves. All that we know is therefore phaenomenal—phaenomenal of the unknown." The same doctrine is laid down in the clearest and strongest terms by M.

Cousin, whose observations on the subject are the more worthy of attention, as, in consequence of the ultra-German and ontological character of his philosophy in other respects, they may be regarded as the admissions of an opponent.

There is not the slightest reason for believing that what we call the sensible qualities of the object are a type of anything inherent in itself, or bear any affinity to its own nature. A cause does not, as such, resemble its effects; an east wind is not like the feeling of cold, nor heat like the steam of boiling water. Why then should matter resemble our sensations? Why should the inmost nature of fire or water resemble the impressions made by those objects upon our senses? Or on what principle are we authorized to deduce from the effects, anything concerning the cause, except that it is a cause adequate to produce those effects? It may, therefore, safely be laid down as a truth both obvious in itself, and admitted by all whom it is at present necessary to take into consideration, that, of the outward world, we know and can know absolutely nothing, except the sensations which we experience from it.\(^\text{12}\)

Here, especially in the last paragraph, Mill clearly argues that how we perceive "outward" or external things is largely misleading as to the true nature of those things in themselves. And, he indicates in the sequel, the same holds for inward or internal things. "As body is understood to be the mysterious something which excites the mind to feel, so mind is the mysterious something which feels and thinks."\(^\text{13}\) To restate the point, "on the inmost nature (whatever be meant by inmost nature) of the thinking principle, as well as on the inmost nature of matter, we are, and with our faculties must always remain, entirely in the dark."\(^\text{14}\)

Moreover, in An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy he explicitly acknowledges that many of its proponents believe the doctrine of the "relativity of human knowledge" as expounded above implies that the "Noumenon" is "much more real" than the "Phaenomenon." He says that in their view the former is the "permanent Reality",

\(^{12}\) CW, VII, 59-62.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 63.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 64.
whereas the latter is only its "passing manifestation." While summarizing thus their view Mill does not unequivocally give us to believe that he disagrees with it.

The problem is, these two claims—that phenomena are less real than things in themselves, and that we are deceived about the nature of the latter—together call into question the reality of the self as we perceive and know it, hence of the soul as we ordinarily think of it. Therefore the effect of accepting the noumenal—phenomenal distinction (from which those claims would appear to follow logically) must, one would suppose, be to undermine or critically weaken the hope that the soul can somehow survive the death of the body. Such at any rate was, as Mill surely knew, Berkeley's own view. At the very least, that hope seems still more fragile when made to rest on the Humean or even Kantian interpretation of the doctrine of relativity than when made to rest on Berkeleyan one.

If our argument is correct, then it may not be straining credulity to suggest that Mill's use in "Theism" of the Berkeleyan "line of ontological argument" to support the hypothesis that the soul may be immortal was not dictated solely by theoretical

15 *CW*, IX, 7.

16 In a footnote that first appears in the sixth edition of the *Logic*, while commenting on John Grote's attack on the Lockean/Kantian realist's version of the doctrine of relativity, Mill states that "as a metaphysician" he has "no quarrel" with the version which "denies altogether the reality of Noumena", that is, the Berkeleyan idealist's version: *CW*, VII, 62n-63n. Although Mill's statement certainly cannot be construed as a rejection of that version, neither can it be construed as a categorical endorsement, especially when what Mill says on the subject elsewhere is taken into account.

17 In his preface to the *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Berkeley says, "Upon the common principles of philosophers we are not assured of the existence of things from their being perceived. And we are taught to distinguish their real nature from that which falls under our senses. Hence arise skepticism and paradoxes. It is not enough that we see and feel, that we taste and smell a thing: its true nature, its absolute external entity, is still concealed. For, though it be the fiction of our own brain, we have made it inaccessible to all our faculties. Sense is fallacious, reason defective. We spend our lives in doubting of those things which other men evidently know, and believing those things which they laugh at and despise": *Principles, Dialogues, and Philosophical Correspondence*, ed. Turbayne, 105. The sequel (106) makes clear that by *those things [that] we spend our lives in doubting of* Berkeley means above all the "immediate providence of an all-seeing God and the natural immortality of the soul." For he says there that one of the consequences of his own "principles", which "carry with them a great opposition" to the widely accepted philosophical doctrine outlined above, is "that atheism and skepticism will be utterly destroyed"—implying thereby that atheism and skepticism are consequences of that philosophical doctrine.
considerations. Perhaps here he is intentionally, for practical reasons, playing up grounds for hoping the human soul is immortal while playing down grounds for fearing it is not.\(^{18}\)

\(^{18}\) In the prefaces to the *Principles* (3) and the *Three Dialogues* (105-06) Berkeley emphasizes the usefulness of his "principles" as a support for the belief in the existence of God and the "natural immortality of the soul" and therewith for the "study and practice of virtue." As is demonstrated by his writings on Berkeley, Mill recognizes that Berkeley "prized" his philosophical teaching primarily on account of the solid foundation he thought it provided for the theistic doctrines needed to sustain morality: "Berkeley's Life and Writings," CW, XI, 465, 466-67. Thus, Berkeley's conviction that his basic "principles" were especially well suited to bolstering the belief in the immortality of the soul could hardly have been lost on Mill.

The preceding notwithstanding, this issue cannot be resolved without a careful study of Mill's own metaphysical doctrine as set forth in *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, which study is beyond the scope of the present undertaking. The following brief reflection may suffice for now. In *Hamilton*, as in the *Logic*, Mill seems on the whole to prefer philosophical skepticism over Berkeleyan idealism; for instance, regarding unknowable things in themselves allegedly standing hidden behind knowable corporeal phenomena, he appears to hold the skeptical view that their existence cannot be proved nor disproved, rather than the Berkeleyan view that it can be disproved: see, for example, Hamilton, CW, IX, 6-10, 17-18, 134-35, 187n, 204-208; for Mill's explicit criticism of Berkeley's idealistic metaphysical doctrine and avowed preference for Hume and Kant on certain key points, see "Berkeley's Life and Writings," CW, XI, 459-465, 467. (True, Mill's statement in *Hamilton* [207-208] that the real existence of "Mind" in some sense of the term is indisputable has a Berkeleyan ring to it, and so reminds us a little of the passage from "Theism" under discussion. But joined to that statement is his skeptical insistence on the unknowability of the Mind's nature. This insistence, although or perhaps because it serves only to complicate and obscure the matter, is not echoed in "Theism." At the same time, in *Hamilton* (193) he contends—at any rate seems to contend—that being a philosophical skeptic does not force one to disbelieve in the immortality of the soul. Yet his supporting argument is anything but persuasive. In the first place, he says that "it is precisely as easy to conceive that a succession of feelings, a thread of consciousness, may be prolonged to eternity, as that a spiritual substance for ever continues to exist; and any evidence which would prove the one, will prove the other." This is, to put it mildly, not saying much. (That it is not may well explain why in "Theism" Mill feels compelled by practical considerations to resort to the Berkeleyan kind of ontological reasoning—even though in *Hamilton* (193) he notes with pleasure that the once popular *a priori* argument that "a spiritual substance, by the essential constitution of its nature, cannot perish" is almost never brought up now.) Mill then proceeds ostensibly to advance and defend the claim that "metaphysical Scepticism"—such as that of Hume, with whom he often appears to identify—is logically independent of atheism; presumably he has in mind to reinforce thereby his previous contention that skepticism is logically independent of the belief that the soul is mortal. But this is how he actually puts his claim: "The notion that metaphysical Scepticism... has for its logical consequence atheism, is grounded on an entire misapprehension of the Sceptical argument, and has no locus standi except for persons who think that whatever accustoms people to a rigid scrutiny of evidence is unfavourable to religious belief" (193). What was Mill himself if not someone who thought that "whatever accustoms people to rigid scrutiny of evidence is unfavourable to religious belief?" Moreover, the core of the bit of reasoning with which he purports to defend his claim is an argument from authority, which by its very nature cannot be conclusive: Hamilton affirms (contrary to many others, among them non-believers as well as believers) that there is no necessary or "natural connection" between Humean, "philosophical skepticism" and atheism, ergo there is no such connection (193, 134). In addition, in a lengthy footnote much later in the work, as though he were further exposing the hollowness of the aforementioned argument from authority, Mill tries to show, first, that Hume in fact saw himself as an atheist, but disguised his own views somewhat by means of "fetches" and the like (as eighteenth century "freethinking philosophers" were wont to do); and second, that Hamilton fundamentally misunderstood Hume's thought (498n-99n). (In "Berkeley's Life and Writings," CW, XI, 466, Mill states that "before Hume, nobody of note had attempted, even as an intellectual exercise, to set out the case on the atheistical side", clearly implying that Hume made that attempt. For an ample quotation from the note in *Hamilton* containing Mill's elucidation of the right way to read and interpret Hume, see 211, n. 51 below. For Mill's explanation of the "fetch", and of how and why "writers against Christianity in
Mill's view of science and the mind-body relation revisited

Other evidence can be adduced in support of the foregoing suggestion. Let us recall Mill's first argument on the subject, this time relying as much as possible on his own words: To demonstrate the mortality of the soul, science must prove that all mental operations are the effects of physical processes. And to "make that proof good it would be necessary that we should be able to produce an organism, and try whether it would feel." But "we cannot do" this, for "organisms cannot by any human means be produced, they can only be developed out of a previous organism." Consequently, "[there] is . . . in science, no [positive] evidence against the immortality of the soul", though neither is there any for it.

What is particularly noteworthy about the preceding argument is the omission of all reference to time. To be more precise, at no point in the argument does Mill use such adverbs of time as at present, for a long time, now or never. The fact that he never says "never", or nowhere unequivocally states that science is and will always be incapable of explaining feeling, thinking, imagining, etc., in terms of purely chemico-physical processes, seems especially significant. For it tacitly suggests that at some point in the future science might be able to provide such a reductionist explanation.

One could, of course, object that we are reading far too much between the lines. If Mill thought the inability of science to give a purely physicalistic explanation of mental phenomena might be accidental and temporary rather than intrinsic and therefore permanent, he could have said so explicitly. So why did he not?

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19 Three Essays, CW, X, 461.

20 Ibid., 462.
Indeed, we ourselves would be far less inclined to raise the matter, were it not for the following passage in the *Logic* (in which passage Mill justifies the independence of psychology):

But, after all has been said which can be said, it remains incontestable that there exist uniformities of succession among states of mind, and that these can be ascertained by observation and experiment. Further, that every mental state has a nervous state for its immediate antecedent and proximate cause, though extremely probable, cannot hitherto be said to be proved, in the conclusive manner in which this can be proved of sensations; and even were it certain, yet every one must admit that we are wholly ignorant of the characteristics of these nervous states; we know not, and at present have no means of knowing, in what respect one of them differs from another; and our only mode of studying their successions or coexistences must be by observing the successions and coexistences of the mental states, of which they are supposed to be the generators or causes. The successions, therefore, which obtain among mental phenomena, do not admit of being deduced from the physiological laws of our nervous organization: and all real knowledge of them must continue, for a long time at least, if not always, to be sought in the direct study, by observation and experiment, of the mental successions themselves. Since therefore the order of our mental phenomena must be studied in these phenomena, and not inferred from the laws of any phenomena more general, there is a distinct and separate Science of Mind [all emphases added--BK].

Noting the presence in it of adverbs of time such as those highlighted by us, we see right away that the preceding passage shows Mill to be anything but closed to the possibility of a purely physicalistic explanation of mental phenomena.\(^2\)

\(^2\) *CW*, VIII, 851.

\(^2\) That he is not closed is also implied by the passage from "Theism" in which, as noted earlier, Mill remarks on a certain "tendency of all recent speculation." The substance of Mill's argument there can for our present purposes be restated thus: According to the "recent speculation" in question, there was a time on earth when minds and even living beings did not exist; hence at least the first forms of life, possibly also of mental life, must have been produced by inanimate and non-mental—that is, corporeal—causes. This theory gains a measure of support from various "known analogies of Nature" as well as from a "multitude of [natural] facts" which clearly indicate at a minimum that higher, more complex beings can develop from lower, less complex ones. "Unconscious production" of minds, therefore, "must not be assumed" to be impossible, and "it is not necessary" to believe that the minds "known to our experience" were produced by "a prior intelligence": *CW*, X, 440-41.

Our conjecture is given further credence by the following fascinating entry in Mill's all too briefly kept diary: "One of the things which most require to be written about, and to be written much and well, is the perfect sufficiency of what is called materialism in theory, to supply the scientific foundation of idealism in feeling and practice": Diary, 3 Mar. 1854, *CW*, XXVII, 658-59.
One is thus faced with a choice: either interpret Mill's treatment of this possibility in the chapter on immortality in "Theism" so as to render it consistent with his treatment of it in the Logic, or settle for the interpretation which makes it inconsistent. We lean towards the former option.

Then how to explain the slight ambiguity regarding time which marks Mill's treatment of that possibility in "Theism?" The best explanation we can provide is essentially identical to the one we give earlier of Mill's way of treating the Darwinian hypothesis. It is at the same time an explanation of Mill's use in "Theism" of a Berkeleyan line of argument as support for the hypothesis that the soul may survive the death of the body. It runs as follows: Mill knows how "consoling" the belief in a future life is; he knows the desire of it is in many people so strong as to make them believe such a thing exists even though there are no rational or scientific grounds for so believing. At the same time, in his view science will, "for a long time at least, if not always", be unable to prove that the soul is mortal. Therefore, out of concern for what may be "conducive either to [one's] satisfaction or to [one's] usefulness", he attempts to bolster at least the hope that it is immortal. How? With some plausible philosophical arguments, and without saying anything he believes to be clearly false. But as he develops those arguments he intimates that time may eventually run out on this hope too.

**Indications of a future existence which presuppose theism**

Besides the Berkeleyan argument, Mill offers one other plausible argument in support of the hope of life after death. It builds on some of the theological conclusions which he earlier derives from the design argument.

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23 *Three Essays, CW, X*, 463.

24 Ibid., 466. For a more complete understanding of what Mill has in mind in using this phrase here, see ibid., 482-85; and 225-31, 261-63 below.
To recall, Mill claims to have shown that God may exist, and assuming God exists, that His power and goodness, and maybe also His knowledge, are limited. From this conception of God it follows that He "either could not, or would not," satisfy all of our desires. Since "we do not know the limits either of his power or of his goodness", we must, according to Mill, concede that the desire of eternal life may be one of those frustrated desires.25

Yet although natural theology affords no grounds for belief in life after death, it does afford grounds for hope. For all we know, God may indeed have both the power and the wish to give us eternal life, "provided," says Mill, "that it would really be beneficial to us."26

Even so, he warns, assuming God has granted us "this gift", it would be inconsistent with reason and science to expect to commence life in the other world with a character radically different from the one developed over an entire life in this world.27 Traditional teachings about Heaven and Hell are thus for Mill intellectually utterly


26 Ibid., 466.

27 Ibid., 466-67. This is how Mill conceived life after death at least as early as 1844, as is shown by the following excerpt from a letter he wrote to his close friend John Sterling just weeks before the latter's death in September of that year: "I have never so much wished for another life as I do for the sake of meeting you in it. The chief reason for desiring it has always seemed to me to be that the curtain may not drop altogether on those one loves & honours. Every analogy which favours the idea of a future life leads one to expect that if such a life there be, death will no further change our character than as it is liable to be changed by any other important event in our existence—and I feel most acutely what it would be to have a firm faith that the world to which one is in progress was enriching itself with those by the loss of whom this world is impoverished": 16 Aug. 1844, CW, XIII, 635.

Reeve finds Mill's conception of life after death "more entirely destructive of faith and morals" than any other doctrine propounded in the Three Essays. For him it amounts to a rejection of the "ideas of retributive justice and moral responsibility" and therewith to a subversion of the rule of law. Mill's theory, should it ever be universally accepted, would have the unintended effect of encouraging us to become each the judge of the extent of his or her personal obligations, the ultimate disastrous consequence of which would be to "let loose all the bad passions of the human race, and turn earth into hell": "Mill's Essays on Theism," 27-28. Reeve fails to take into account Mill's arguments in "Utility" concerning the feasibility of making morality not only theoretically but also practically independent of traditional theistic belief. Unfortunately, this failure is rather typical of Reeve's review as a whole.
unsustainable if taken literally, though he would probably, like Matthew Arnold, concede that they may have some value as poetry.28

Hope, Mill seems to say, may not be much to go on, but for those who have difficulty coming to terms with the possibility that death means personal annihilation, hope is better than denial. At least for some time to come it may even be more reasonable.

A qualification is in order here. Strictly speaking, only the last, theological argument actually provides a foundation for the hope of life after death. The earlier, non-theological arguments do no more than expose the groundlessness of the dogmatic materialist's insistence on the mortality of the soul. As such they are important, even necessary. But Mill, at any rate, never presents them as a basis for hope.

The foregoing qualification has a highly interesting implication about which Mill is silent. As has already been discussed, earlier in "Theism" he asserts that the Darwinian hypothesis poses a grave challenge to the design argument, which is all we have by way of rational, scientific grounds for hoping that God exists. Thus, (apart from Revelation) if Darwin's theory is ever "admitted", the effect will be to remove the only support possible for the hope of a future life.

The reason for Mill's silence should not be too difficult to determine, given his earlier intimation that, at least in the present, the hope of life after death helps satisfy some non-material need which many of us have, and is therefore beneficial to society as a whole. Stating that implication explicitly at this point in time would not materially contribute to the progress of knowledge (for he would merely be dotting the i), though it could weaken the hope of a future existence sooner than is necessary.

28 See, for instance, Matthew Arnold, St. Paul and Protestantism, CPW, VI, 54; and Literature and Dogma, CPW, VI, 176, 178, 211-13, 229-31.
The doctrine of metempsychosis and Mill's reserve

In his essay "On the Immortality of the Soul" Hume, qua philosopher, supplies many reasons for doubting the belief in the immortality of the human soul. Yet early in the essay we find the following highly interesting passage:

Reasoning from the common course of nature, and without supposing any new interposition of the Supreme Cause, which ought always to be excluded from philosophy, what is incorruptible must also be ingenerable. The soul therefore, if immortal, existed before our birth.

Hume here clearly provides a conditional argument for the doctrine of metempsychosis or palingenesis, one strongly resembling certain arguments found in the writings of other philosophers, for example, Plato and Lucretius. But he also implies that the doctrine of metempsychosis is theoretically more defensible than the Christian doctrine of a generable but incorruptible soul. On this point Schopenhauer fully agrees with him.

Wordsworth too seems in some measure to share this view; in his opinion the "notion of pre-existence" at the very least is an "element in our instincts of immortality" and has a "foundation in humanity." The question is: Why does Mill, in the chapter of "Theism" which treats of the immortality of the soul, not address that argument if, as we surmise, it

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29 David Hume, "On the Immortality of the Soul", Essays Moral, Political and Literary (Toronto: Henry Frowde, 1903), 598. Later in the same essay (603) Hume says, "The Metempsychosis is...the only system of this kind [that is, the only kind of belief in the immortality of the soul] that philosophy can hearken to."


could hardly have been unknown to him? Why does he not even mention the theory of metempsychosis, given that, as "Utility" proves, he is aware of it?^{33}

In actual fact, though he does not speak of that doctrine explicitly, he does allude to it. Let us look more closely at the relevant passage from "Theism":

We have therefore sufficient evidence that cerebral action is, if not the cause, at least, in our present state of existence, a condition *sine qua non* of mental operations; and that assuming the mind to be a distinct substance, its separation from the body would not be, as some have vainly flattered themselves, a liberation from the trammels and restoration to freedom, but would simply put a stop to its functions and *remand it to unconsciousness*, unless and until some other set of conditions supervenes, capable of *recalling it into activity*, but of the existence of which experience does not give us the smallest indication [emphases added--BK].^{34}

This passage--especially words in it like *remand* and *recalling*, which signify a repetitive, cyclical process--clearly, albeit ever so subtly, suggests that if the mind is in truth "a distinct substance", then a soul or mind exists before as well as after any particular life, hence that its existence extends *ad infinitum* into the past as well as into the future. Could it be that Mill shares Hume's view of the superiority, from a strictly philosophical or scientific standpoint, of the theory of metempsychosis to the Christian belief in a *generable* but indestructible soul?

We believe that he does,^{35} and would provide two additional reasons for our opinion. First, Mill makes the foregoing point in the first section of the chapter on immortality, where he deals with the issue of immortality as a purely scientific question, abstracting from what rational and revealed religion have to say about it. He does not

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^{33} *Three Essays*, CW, X, 427.

^{34} Ibid., 461.

^{35} Morley does not take this position—at any rate not explicitly. But towards the end of his critical review of Mill's *Three Essays* he says, "One more remark. Whatever force the section on Immortality may possess, that force would be exactly as great, if in every place where Immortality is used, we choose to substitute Metempsychosis. When controversialists are disposed to use Mr. Mill's essay as a weapon against those who doubt the immortality of the soul, they will do well to remember that it is exactly as strong a weapon against those who doubt the Transmigration of the soul": "Mr. Mill's Three Essays," 222.
repeat that point when he revisits the issue from the standpoint of rational theology in the second section of the chapter (or from the standpoint of revealed religion still later in the essay\textsuperscript{36}). Instead, he gives the impression of proffering a modified version of the Christian teaching that the soul is \textit{generable} but survives death.

The second reason, which also reinforces the first, has to do with Mill's terminology. Of the various expressions which he uses in "Theism" to signify the soul's existence beyond the present—\textit{life after death, future life, eternal life, and immortality}—\textit{immortality} seems best suited to the theory of metempsychosis. At any rate, Hume explicitly establishes a logical link between \textit{immortal} and \textit{ingenerable}; afterwards Wordsworth employs the word \textit{immortality} in his poetical treatment of the idea of metempsychosis in the Immortality Ode.\textsuperscript{37} And Mill seems to follow in their footsteps. In the chapter on immortality (not to mention the essay as a whole) the use of the word \textit{immortality} is confined to the first, the non-theological section, where, as we maintain, the theory of metempsychosis is shown to be neither verifiable nor falsifiable. In the second section—which, again, deals with the arguments for a future life deriving from natural theology, and in which a modified version of the Christian teaching regarding life after death seems to be proffered—Mill favors the expression \textit{future life}. For that matter, when we compare his earlier and later formulations of the main issue of that section, we find that in the latter \textit{immortality} is replaced by \textit{future life}. True, twice he uses the phrase \textit{eternal life}.\textsuperscript{38} But as he must surely have expected, on these occasions his readers, especially those with a Christian background, will likely understand him to mean eternal future life or eternal life after death.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36} See \textit{Three Essays}, CW, X, 481, 482.


\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Three Essays}, CW, X, 465, 466.
Nevertheless, if Mill does in fact share Hume's philosophical preference for the doctrine of metempsychosis over the Christian teaching about life after death, clearly his manner of divulging that preference in "Theism" is even more indirect, more reserved than Hume's. Why is that?

In our opinion his reserve in this instance is once again best explained by considerations of prudence. For reasons which can become fully clear only later,\textsuperscript{40} Mill believed that at the time it was necessary to express one's views on such matters without lying, yet in such a way as to minimize offense to a still firmly entrenched Christian orthodoxy. He appears to reply thus to Hume: Assuming the theology of "Theism" to be at least temporarily valid, there is at present no point in trumpeting the superiority, from a strictly scientific standpoint, of the doctrine of metempsychosis to that of the generation of indestructible souls. For natural religion, especially when conjoined with revealed religion, requires us to give preference to the latter. If, owing to further advances in science, theism as such should ever cease to be a force in society, then will be the time to speak more openly of that fact. And even then it should be spoken of with caution, so as not to stir up unsustainable hopes.

Concluding remarks

On the question of the immortality of the soul, then, Mill's position in "Theism" is essentially identical to his position in "Utility." For in the latter too he maintains that although we have no grounds for believing, yet we are not thereby prevented from hoping, that the "power which has done so much for us may be able and willing" to grant us "life after death."\textsuperscript{41} But again, (apart from the lack of supporting arguments in

\textsuperscript{39} Even so, nothing Mill says about the possibility of a future life in the second, rational-theological section of the chapter on immortality is, strictly speaking, inconsistent with the doctrine of metempsychosis. We are led to wonder whether in his view there is anything in natural religion \textit{per se}, considered independently of revealed religion, to contradict that doctrine.

\textsuperscript{40} See especially 206-208, 274-84 below.
"Utility") the key difference between the two is the absence in "Utility" of any clear indication that, and why, the further progress of science could eventually extinguish even that already feeble hope.

41 Three Essays, CW, X, 426; see also 427.
Introduction

At the start of the penultimate chapter of "Theism", the chapter entitled "Revelation", Mill points out that until now the inquiry into the grounds of theism and the belief in personal immortality has been "strictly confined" to the evidences of nature or science. In other words, the entire inquiry up to this point falls within the domain of rational or natural theology, or as Mill calls it, "natural religion." It remains for him to consider the claims of "revealed religion", to investigate what if anything Revelation can teach us concerning God, immortality, etc., that we cannot learn by the "light of Nature" alone.¹ This investigation is the main focus of our discussion in the present chapter.

Before we begin, however, let us recall that in "Utility" Mill fails to justify his claim that as science progresses, belief in the genuineness of Christian Revelation wanes.² We shall see if that gap in his argument is closed in his treatment of Revelation in "Theism."

The question, Mill says, is whether there is evidence of an "external" sort, that is, "testimony of the senses or of witnesses", sufficient to prove that any alleged Divine Revelation is genuinely so.³ He answers in the negative. The core of his elaborate treatment of the issue is a refined version of Hume's argument for skepticism about the reality of miracles (or "supernatural" occurrences, as Mill describes them), the assumption being that Divine Revelation in the traditional sense is a kind of miracle.⁴

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¹ *Three Essays, CW, X, 468.*
² Ibid., 424-25.
³ Ibid., 469-70.
⁴ Ibid., 470.
more interested in this part of Mill's discussion because of the bearing on it which he thinks natural science has. Let us examine Mill's essentially Humean argument.

**Hume's argument: the original version**

We focus here on those alleged miracles for which the evidence consists in the testimony of witnesses, especially that which comes to us second-hand, in "books and traditions." For Protestants, at least, miracles belong to the past, hence all present knowledge of them is based exclusively on testimony about past miracles recorded in books or preserved by oral tradition. It is only such alleged miracles that Protestants and Catholics both can credit. And it is primarily at miracles of this type that Hume's argument is aimed.5

According to Hume, if the actual occurrence of the fact attested "would be more at variance with experience than the falsehood of testimony", then the reasonable thing to do would be to disbelieve the testimony.6 This is true however credible the testimony on other grounds (for example, the number of witnesses, and their reputation for honesty and intelligence), because we also know from experience that "even under the best conditions testimony is frequently either intentionally or unintentionally, false."7 Now a miracle, defined as a "breach of a law of nature", is such a fact. Therefore, we ought not to believe any testimony about miracles; in Mill's politic words, the "supposition [that the testimony is erroneous] ought to be preferred."8

Mill notes two minor problems with Hume's argument. First, the evidence of experience on which the argument depends is merely "negative evidence" and so cannot

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5 Ibid., 471, 480.
6 Ibid., 471.
7 Ibid., 471-72
8 Ibid., 472.
be conclusive. Frequently facts are encountered which initially seem incredible because they run counter to all experience but which are subsequently confirmed. Second, the argument appears to assume that the evidence of experience against miracles does not change with time, that it always had and always will have the same force. This assumption would be acceptable enough if the question were merely about the possibility of miracles in the future, as though none had occurred thus far. But the opposing side would say that experience need not always have told against miracles, and that such Divine interventions in the course of nature did in fact take place.

Therefore, according to Mill, we have a situation in which the "negative" evidence of human experience in general against miracles can apparently be countered with "a certain amount of positive evidence in favor" of them. The question then is: Which way does the balance of evidence tilt--for or against miracles?9

Hume's argument: the refined version

To vindicate Hume's argument in the face of the foregoing criticism, "it has," says Mill, "to be shown that the negative presumption against a miracle is very much stronger than that against a merely new and surprising fact."10 Mill purports to do just that.

The disclosure of a "new and surprising fact" of nature is, he says, a phenomenon with which we, especially the scientists among us, are all familiar. We see such discoveries not as breaches of all natural laws but as occasions for revising our conception of those laws. We have no difficulty taking this approach to physical discoveries, because, to begin with, we know that our knowledge of the laws of nature is as yet imperfect and in need of refinement. Furthermore, such phenomena do not call

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.
into question the principle of the "universal dependence of phenomena on invariable laws" of nature.

Miracles, on the other hand, are a very different matter. Properly understood, a miracle is a phenomenon which cannot be explained with reference to any law of nature, known or unknown.\textsuperscript{11} To determine whether or not any given event is a miracle, we must, Mill points out, submit it to the following test:

Were there present in the case such external conditions, such second causes we may call them, that whenever these conditions or causes reappear the event will be reproduced? If there were, it is not a miracle; if there were not, it is a miracle, but it is not according to law: it is an event produced, without, or in spite of law.\textsuperscript{12}

Mill illustrates this test with a couple of examples, including the following one:

[A] person professing to be divinely commissioned, cures a sick person, by some apparently insignificant external application. Would this application, administered by a person not specially commissioned from above, have effected the cure? If so, there is no miracle; if not, there is a miracle, but there is a violation of law.\textsuperscript{13}

The "person professing to be divinely commissioned" alluded to in the latter passage is surely Jesus Christ. Mill says later on that Jesus spoke of Himself as having a "special, express, and unique commission from God to lead mankind to truth and virtue."\textsuperscript{14}

But to return to the main point, by contrast with a merely "new and surprising" fact, then, a miracle in the strict sense is an event which contravenes the principle of the dependence of all phenomena on the unchanging laws of nature.

However, whereas earlier ages had scant appreciation of the evidence pointing to this dependence, science has progressed so far over the centuries that that principle must

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 472-74.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 474.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 488.
now be recognized as a "scientifically established truth." Thus, when we today, in the age of science, are confronted with testimony about some alleged miracle, reason dictates that we not rule out the possibility of a scientific explanation of that event which is in principle attainable even if as yet unattained. We must seriously consider the "hypothesis" that the phenomenon in question "may either be due to a law of physical nature not yet known, or to the unknown presence of the conditions necessary for producing it according to some known law."16

The other side of the coin, of course, is that we cannot but doubt the truth of all testimony concerning miracles, at least as regards their miraculous nature. Moreover, Mill implies, no allowances can be made for past miracles. We know how primitive science was in the past, how little there was then of the intellectual rigor and discipline required to distinguish systematically between reality and appearance, or between the contents of perception and those of the imagination.17

The argument from free will

In addition, according to Mill, the attempt to justify belief in miracles by drawing an analogy between God's interventions in the course of nature and those of humankind is to no avail. The proponents of this approach usually subscribe to the belief in free will, which belief allows them to argue that if human beings, by virtue of their free will, can effect "breaks" in the "chain of causation" and originate new such chains, then surely God can too. Mill's point, however, is that it is a mistake to think that the issue turns on whether or not human beings have free will. Even if there were such a thing as free will (which premise Mill ultimately denies), humankind could not escape the necessity of

15 Ibid., 473.
16 Ibid., 476.
17 Ibid., 473, 479.
using physical means to effect those breaks—means whose relations to the intended effects are governed by the laws of nature. On the other hand, when an event is said to be one of God's miracles, the implication is not only that, like every alleged human act of free will, it constitutes an interruption of the natural chain of events, but also that God used either no means whatsoever, or "such [means] as are in themselves insufficient", to effect the interruption. It is owing to the latter implication especially that we in the age of science have such difficulty believing in miracles. Thus, however right the proponents of the "free will" argument for the reality of miracles may be to look for analogies between Divine and human interventions in nature, the analogy they purport to have found is beside the point.18

The argument from the probable existence of a providential God

Nevertheless, Mill says, the "above considerations" do not add up to a conclusive refutation of the belief in miracles. To be more precise, those considerations would together amount to such a refutation only if alleged miracles were our sole grounds for believing in the existence and providence of God. But we have positive grounds independent of all testimony about miracles at least for hoping that God exists, grounds disclosed in the scientifically unassailable design argument. Thus, that God might from time to time choose to act in a miraculous fashion "must be reckoned with as a serious possibility." So the question now is: Given that there is positive evidence of God's existence and providence, what can we reasonably say about His way of governing the universe, and about any role miracles might play in His government?19

Mill's answer to this question is clear and unequivocal. "[The] whole," he asserts, "of our observation of Nature" shows, or in his even stronger words, "proves to us by

18 Ibid., 474-76.
19 Ibid., 477.
incontrovertible evidence", that God governs "by means of second causes."\(^{20}\) (Here he sounds very much like a deist.) _Governing by second causes_—this language goes back at least as far as Francis Bacon\(^{21}\)—means achieving certain results through the action of natural agents or causes. Mill's view, therefore, is that (assuming His existence and providence to be fact) God rules indirectly, by natural or physical causes and in accordance with the laws of causation governing all natural phenomena, rather than directly, by acts of "creative will" which supercede the laws of nature. This truth, "not obvious" in earlier ages, when knowledge of causal relations among physical phenomena was meagre, has over the centuries become increasingly evident, as a consequence of the progress of science.\(^{22}\) And, Mill declares in a statement remarkable for its confidence in the magnitude of the current knowledge of nature:

... there now remains no class of phenomena of which it [that is, the fact that they are "governed by natural laws"] is not positively known, save some cases which from their obscurity and complication our scientific processes have not yet been able completely to clear up and disentangle, and in which, therefore, the proof that they also are governed by natural laws could not, in the present state of science, be more complete.\(^{23}\)

To be sure, Mill adds, "[against] this weight of negative evidence" must be "set... the positive evidence of miracles." Nevertheless, there is a problem with this evidence. The case for miracles would be easier to make if "we had the direct testimony of our senses to a supernatural fact." But, says Mill, such testimony is non-existent. We never actually perceive the "supernatural character" of any alleged miracle, which means that there is nothing in the perception itself to preclude the possibility of explaining the fact...

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\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) In *The Advancement of Learning*, for instance, while responding to the criticisms levelled against learning by the divines, Bacon says, "For certain it is that God worketh nothing in nature but by second causes": *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*, ed. Johnston, 9.

\(^{22}\) *Three Essays*, CW, X, 477-78.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 478.
entirely in natural terms. The putative miraculous quality of any given "new and surprising" event is, thus, "a matter of inference and speculation." With nothing except "inference and speculation" behind it, even a theist will have no grounds for preferring belief in the event's miraculous nature to disbelief, though no natural explanation of the event be as yet available either. The former option would be more defensible if it were supported by what our knowledge of nature indicates about "God's ways", but no such support is forthcoming. In fact, our knowledge of nature overwhelmingly favors the general view that God rules by natural causes, making any allegations about miracles highly doubtful. Mill does not say so explicitly, but the conclusion about the "positive evidence of miracles" to which he appears inexorably to lead us is that there is none.24

The argument from the benevolence of God

Yet the matter does not end there. Mill points out that the "weight of negative evidence" yielded by the lawfulness of nature in general might in any given case be offset by a "very extraordinary and indisputable congruity in the supposed miracle and its circumstances with" those attributes which we have reason to ascribe to God. It is, Mill acknowledges, possible to argue that because God is good or benevolent, His normal mode of government notwithstanding, He can be expected to perform a miracle "when the purpose of the miracle is extremely beneficial to humankind." One such purpose might be, as Mill says, "to accredit some highly important belief."25 (Mill's example is admittedly vague, but its vagueness is in keeping with his express intention not to examine the unique claims of any particular Revelation.26)

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 478-79.
26 Ibid., 468, 469.
Mill's rejoinder to the above argument is two-fold. First, nothing that God "has or has not actually done" to or for humankind is unambiguously deducible from His goodness. This follows logically from certain conclusions reached earlier—that although God is good or benevolent, since His power is limited, and the happiness of humankind is not His highest priority, we cannot precisely determine the limits of His goodness. If, Mill reminds us, we try to "reason directly from God's goodness to positive facts", we soon find ourselves at a loss to explain much of the suffering and evil with which the annals of human history are filled. Moreover, there is nothing in His goodness to explain why He should not have made many more exceptions to His usual method of government (by natural causes) to benefit humankind than He is traditionally thought to have. Nor why something as obviously beneficial as Revelation—whether the true Revelation is Judaic, Christian, Islamic or another—should have been given to humankind "after the lapse of many ages", and in a form and manner that make it so susceptible of doubt and denial. Again, all the preceding facts can be reconciled with the belief that God is good only on the premise that goodness is not one of His primary attributes.27

Second, the goodness of God is not a justification for any "deviation" from His normal method of government except when the beneficial purpose of the deviation could not be attained using the normal method. It follows from what we know about His rule that if "God intended that mankind should receive Christianity", to use Mill's example, then in the beginning He would have arranged things so as to ensure its birth "at the appointed time by natural development." And, he adds, again sounding very much like a deist, "all the knowledge we now possess concerning the history of the human mind, tends to the conclusion" that Christianity did indeed arise "by natural development."28

27 Ibid., 479.
28 Ibid.
Let us dwell a little on the significance of the last point. To claim that God brought about the birth of Christianity solely by natural causes is to deny that God's revelation of Himself through Christ was at any time in any way miraculous. It is to deny the reality of such miracles linked with Christian Revelation as Christ's birth and resurrection, at least as these events were traditionally understood. In fact little if anything would seem to be left of Christian Revelation in the traditional sense. From the standpoint of the above, essentially deistic claim, we find it hard to see how God could have revealed Himself through Christ, if by Revelation is meant a distinct event or set of events associated with one or two or a few highly privileged persons and endowed with a unique or special significance. For deism, assuming it is at all open to the idea of Revelation, requires us to regard everything that has ever happened as revealing God, even if in varying ways and degrees—and not because of some kind of direct Divine intervention. If any event could be judged a complete revelation of God, it would not be any of Jesus' speeches or deeds; rather, it would have to be the writing and publication of such works as Mill's, especially the Three Essays on Religion. Concerning the writing of these works too we would have to maintain not that God directly inspired or commissioned it, but that it was a result of the natural development of the human mind pre-planned and initiated by God at the moment of creation. We would be forced to look upon most everything said until then about God and morality as a mixture, necessary in its time, of revelation and distortion.29 The best that could then be said of Jesus is that, as Mill indicates in "Utility" and elsewhere, he revealed certain aspects of the truth, for example, the Golden Rule and the oneness of God, and distorted others.

What is more, as should by now be apparent, a strictly deistic explanation of the birth of Christianity such as that alluded to by Mill denies not only the miraculous nature of Christian Revelation but also the truth of much of its contents. It denies the truth of

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29 For an eloquent formulation of the deistic conception of Revelation which in the main agrees with the one provided here, see George Eliot, "R. W. Mackay's The Progress of the Intellect," Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings, ed. Byatt and Warren, 270-71.
such Biblical accounts, taken literally, as that of the Resurrection, or of the appearance of the Holy Spirit as a descending dove to those with Christ during His baptism. In general, a deist must reject as false any portion of the alleged contents of Revelation which in its literal sense contradicts the laws of nature (including human nature and history) discovered by science.

Nevertheless, he cannot leave it at declaring those contents false. He must eventually provide an sociological-historical explanation of the emergence of all such falsehoods. It is, we believe, at least partly with this requirement in view that Mill then briefly considers the causes of the "extremely imperfect nature of the testimony" available to us regarding all alleged miracles (be they credited by Christianity or any other revealed religion). The causes which he remarks are: the "credulity" of the peoples of antiquity, borne of their extreme "ignorance" and lack of the intellectual rigor and discipline needed to differentiate clearly "between appearance and reality, and between the natural and the supernatural"; that same credulity, but borne too of the "honourable" desire to believe in a doctrine either because of its "excellence" or out of "just reverence for the teacher"; the habit in antiquity of not questioning allegations about miracles, which habit grew out of the "belief of the age that miracles in themselves proved nothing, since they could be worked by a lying spirit as well as by the spirit of God"; the frequent absence of "direct testimony", or of reliable information even about the identities of the witnesses themselves; the tendency of the chronicler long after the fact to identify as a 'witness" and subsequently also as a "subject" of the miracle someone who was once known merely for having told the story. Clearly, all of these causes lie in the domain of social science and history.30

Regarding the issue of the credibility of testimony about miracles, Mill appears to concede to Catholicism a certain advantage over Protestantism. Protestants, says Mill,

30 Ibid., 479-80.
believe that all miracles took place in ages when science was still in its infancy and
"miracles were thought to be among the commonest of all phenomena." Catholics, by
contrast, hold that miracles have occurred even in the present age. And testimony about
more recent miracles is superior to testimony about earlier ones in at least two respects:
first, there is more of it; second, we know who the "alleged eye-witnesses" are. Consequently, Mill seems to imply, Catholics are better positioned than Protestants to
make a case for miracles.

But Mill's concession is more apparent than real. He states explicitly that not
every Catholic believes even in the most recent miracles recognized by the Catholic
Church, and that all Catholic believers in them are people of "childish ignorance." The
implication is that the "educated" are always non-believers. Mill does not here defend
this position, but we may gather his reason for taking it from a point he makes earlier--
that however ample and solid-seeming the testimony for an alleged miracle, nay, even if we have seen the event with our own eyes and found it astonishing, we still cannot
reasonably deny the possibility of explaining it by some as yet unknown natural cause.
And, he seems to say, properly educated people generally think and act reasonably.

Thus, even granting on the basis of other arguments that a providential and
benevolent God exists, if we properly weigh all of the evidence given above against the
belief that God has performed miracles, in Mill's opinion we must come to the following
collection: "miracles have no claim whatever to the character of historical facts and are
wholly invalid as evidences of any revelation."33

A further conclusion which Mill leaves it to the reader to draw is that we have
nothing positive to learn from revealed religion about God, the soul, and life after death.

31 Ibid., 480.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 481.
The distinction between natural and revealed religion proves from Mill's perspective to have little if any substance and significance. Indeed, we are tempted to say, the collapse of revealed religion is a foregone conclusion if one starts as Mill does from the assumption that the claims of Revelation must be assessed in accordance with the rules and principles of reason or science.

What is more, as has already been mentioned, at the outset Mill states his intention to examine the claims of Revelation in general and not those of any particular Revelation. He thereby gives the impression of not wishing to say anything offensive to pious Christians. But as his argument unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that his views on the subject are equally damaging to all putative Revelations, including Christian Revelation.

**Mill's concession to Christian orthodoxy**

Yet Mill, always anxious, it seems, to make the best possible case for the other side, and capitalizing on every opportunity to foster hope within the limits of reason, does not end the inquiry here. Instead he delivers himself of the following interesting bit of reasoning: To recall, as is suggested by our knowledge of the "order of nature", God (assuming He exists) cares about the happiness of humankind, though not so much as to make it His principal concern, and He possesses great but not unlimited power, whose limits nevertheless we cannot determine. Consequently, He may not have been able at the time of creation to provide adequately for our reception in due course of "all the good" which He had in mind for us; and (as Mill says in the final chapter of "Theism") it may have been necessary for Him occasionally to act miraculously, to interrupt the natural chain of causation, so as to "bestow" certain benefits on us.34 "[When] we consider further," says Mill,

34 Ibid., 482.
that a gift, extremely precious, came to us which though facilitated was not apparently necessitated by what had gone before, but was due, as far as appearances go, to the peculiar mental and moral endowments of one man, and that man openly proclaimed that it did not come from himself but from God through him, then we are entitled to say that there is nothing so inherently impossible or absolutely incredible in this supposition as to preclude anyone from hoping that it may perhaps be true.35

In other words, appearances suggest that the birth of Christianity (Mill's "gift, extremely precious"36) was not the inevitable result of preceding natural or historical causes, but was to a large degree the work of one mentally and morally extraordinary individual, Jesus Christ. Yet Jesus believed that he was, not the founder of Christianity, but the person through whom God revealed Himself to humankind. Considering these points in conjunction with the preceding ones about God's power and goodness, we can see nothing to preclude the possibility, and to prevent us from hoping, that Jesus was right.

**Morley's objection**

According to John Morley, in the foregoing quotation Mill contradicts his earlier statement that all our present knowledge of the "history of the human mind, tends to the conclusion" that Christianity arose "by natural development." For the quotation admits the possibility of a miraculous Divine Revelation, whereas the earlier statement--which, Morley notes, is in keeping with the principles of science--precludes it.37

What makes all of this even more perplexing for Morley is that immediately after conceding that God may have revealed Himself miraculously, through Jesus Christ, Mill closes the chapter on Revelation thus:

I say from hoping; I go no further; for I cannot attach any evidentiary value to the testimony even of Christ on such a subject, since he is never said to have declared any evidence of his mission (unless his own interpretations

35 Ibid., 481.

36 See ibid., 479, where Mill describes "the revelation of Christianity" as "that precious gift."

37 Morley, 204-06.
of the Prophecies be so considered) except internal conviction; and everybody knows that in prescientific times men always supposed that any unusual faculties which came to them they knew not how, were an inspiration from God; the best men always being the readiest to ascribe any honourable peculiarity in themselves to that higher source, rather than to their own merits.38

Mill seems here to be taking back with one hand what he has just given with the other. Why, Morley forces us to ask, does Mill offer Jesus' ascription of a Divine mission to himself as a reason for hoping that Christianity was "in some degree due to a supernatural interposition of some kind", when in the very next sentence he gives us a compelling naturalistic, historical reason for doubting that ascription? Mill, says Morley, clearly intends "Christ's own account of the origin of his gift... to count for something in the mind of any one who is anxious to hope" that God really did miraculously reveal Himself through Christ. But what can it count for, what "value" can Mill assign to it, if, as he himself admits, it is devoid of "any evidentiary value" because Jesus, in attributing his "unusual faculties" to God, only did what "in prescientific times" all great men were wont to do?39

We can appreciate Morley's feeling perplexed. But to begin with, we are not certain he is correct in imputing a contradiction to Mill. Our present knowledge of history, according to Mill's way of putting the matter, merely "tends to the conclusion", hence does not actually prove, that the birth of Christianity was the result of natural causes. In using the word tends, Mill allows for the possibility, however slim, that the conclusion is wrong and Christianity did indeed originate from miracles. We may, Mill seems to say, hope it did, since despite the abundance of evidence to the contrary, science cannot definitively prove it did not. And, Mill suggests in the first, more orthodox-sounding passage quoted above, that hope is not contradicted by historical "appearances."

38 Three Essays, CW, X, 481.
39 Morley, 204-06.
For they indicate that what Jesus taught was due mainly to his "endowments", whereas if they supported a reductionist account of Jesus' beliefs, all such hope would be groundless.

To be sure, strictly interpreted, both Mill's deistic claim and his more orthodox statement are perfectly consistent with another possibility—that in time we shall have an adequate, empirically corroborated sociological-historical account of the birth of Christianity. Our knowledge of history might eventually suffice to prove, instead of merely "tending to the conclusion", that Christianity arose by "natural development." Historical "appearances" pointing to a unique and irreducible individual contribution to history by Jesus could turn out to be optical illusions. Should these advances in the science of history ever come to pass, we would no longer be able to hope that God miraculously revealed Himself to humankind through Jesus Christ. At least this much must be conceded to Morley.

Yet if Mill does not rule out the latter possibility, neither does he explicitly raise it. Perhaps this fact is best explained as another instance of his guarded, politic manner of handling socially sensitive matters. In being silent about that possibility Mill may be trying to lend as much support to orthodoxy as he can without altogether capitulating to it or saying anything false or misleading. His main reason for doing so may be the usefulness to society, even if only for the present, of the hope that the traditional Christian conception of God's Revelation of Himself through Jesus Christ has at least some validity.

That such is his reason is suggested by an observation which he makes in the final chapter of "Theism": "It is [Christ,] the God Incarnate, more than the God of the Jews or of Nature, who being idealized has taken so great and salutary a hold on the modern mind."40 It is also suggested by two points he makes earlier in that chapter: First, some people derive "comfort" from the hope that there is a God Who "continuously cares for

40 Three Essays, CW, X, 487.
man", and could not be satisfied by the non-interventionist God of philosophical deists. Second, the hope that God really did miraculously reveal Himself to us through Jesus Christ strengthens or at least confirms the hope of immortality many of us have, life after death being a "boon" which God was said by Christ to have promised us. 41

Nevertheless, at the same time Mill tacitly indicates that the progress of science may in the end deprive us of that hope too.

The preceding explanation of Mill's reserve here is confirmed by his silence about a further implication of his partial concession to orthodoxy. We have in mind the implication that if, for the reasons cited by Mill, Christians may hope that God miraculously revealed Himself to humankind through Christ, then, for those very reasons, Jews may hope that Jahweh revealed Himself to Moses and the prophets, Muslims that Allah revealed Himself to Mohammed, and so forth. 42 Now as Hume points out, each revealed religion is a standing argument against every other; they cannot all be right. The situation is analogous to a criminal trial in which one witness testifies to the presence of the accused at the scene of the crime when it was committed while another witness affirms "him to have been two hundred leagues distant" at the time: only one witness's testimony can be true. 43 Therefore, had Mill said explicitly that his partial concession to Christian orthodoxy was at the same time a partial concession to Jewish orthodoxy, Islamic orthodoxy, etc., the effect would have been to detract from the very hope which it was his intention to preserve. Given the closeness with which he read Hume's argument

41 Ibid., 482.

42 Unless we are mistaken, nowhere does Mill argue that Jesus was the only religious leader whose teachings were "not apparently necessitated by what had gone before." Nor does he anywhere suggest that "historical appearances" favour a reductionist explanation of the teachings of Moses and Mohammed, for instance, or that our present knowledge of history is sufficient to prove that the births of Judaism, Islam and other religions were "necessitated" by previous events. For that matter, at least so far as Islam is concerned, in the Logic Mill seems to imply the contrary: at one point in his investigation of the individual's role in history (CW, VIII, 938) he asks what appears to be a rhetorical question—"[If] there had been no Mohamet, would Arabia have produced Avicenna or Averroes, or Caliphs of Bagdad or of Cordova?"

concerning miracles, Mill was very probably aware of any such potential effects. Thus, it is reasonable to interpret his silence about that implication as a consequence not of a deficiency in his thought, but of a prudent regard for the current needs of Western societies, especially Britain.

The difference between Mill and Hume

What seems to emerge from the all of this is that even if, as Mill contends, Revelation has nothing positive to teach us, in his opinion we are not therefore entitled simply to dismiss as false every claim of revealed religion which contravenes the principles of science. In this respect Mill appears less radical or extreme than Hume and Spinoza. Towards the end of the chapter "Of Miracles" in Hume's Inquiry, for example, we find the following passage:

Upon the whole, then, it appears that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof; and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof derived from the very nature of the fact which it would endeavor to establish. It is experience only which gives authority to human testimony, and it is the same experience which assures us of the laws of nature. When, therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but to subtract the one from the other and embrace an opinion either on one side or the other with that assurance which arises from the remainder. But according to the principle here explained, this subtraction with regard to all popular religions amounts to an entire annihilation [emphasis added--BK]; and therefore we may establish it as a maxim that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.45

44 In A Theological-Political Treatise Spinoza purports to demonstrate, by a combination of deductive reasoning and Scriptural analysis, that miracles, understood as contraventions of the laws of nature, are an "absurdity": A Theological-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (1883; rpt. New York: Dover, 1951), 81-97. For the point about the extremism of Spinoza's criticism of miracles, I am indebted to Leo Strauss, who in a series of lectures later republished in a modified form under the title "Progress or Return?", characterizes Spinoza as "the most extreme, certainly, of the modern critics of revelation, not necessarily in his thought but certainly in the expression of his thought": The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss, ed. Pangle, 268.

45 Hume, An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding, 137.
A few pages later, having assumed for the sake of argument that all historians of England agree Queen Elizabeth was resurrected one month after her death (which imagined agreement, as the passage quoted below suggests, is probably a stand-in for the orthodox Christian belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ), Hume says,

"But should this miracle [to wit, the miracle of resurrection] be ascribed to any new system of religion, men in all ages have been so much imposed on by ridiculous stories of that kind that this very circumstance would be full proof of a cheat and sufficient, with all men of sense, not only to make them reject the fact but even reject it without further examination [emphasis added--BK]."

Nowhere in his treatment of the question of miracles does Mill express as radical a view as that expressed by Hume in the highlighted portions of the preceding two passages. But how is this difference to be explained?

One reason for Mill's openness to the possibility of miracles suggested by our discussion thus far is the incomplete or imperfect state of the sciences, including those of humankind. Again, as long as we lack a complete scientific account of all human and non-human phenomena, we are in no position to prove hence to insist that there are no such things as miracles.

Yet that reason alone, even if it suffices to explain the difference between Mill and Spinoza, seems inadequate as an explanation of the difference between Mill and Hume. Aside from his having been a powerful proponent of philosophical skepticism, Hume was clearly aware that the sciences had a good deal more progress to make--indeed, in the Inquiry he defends liberty of thought and speech partly on the grounds that further progress in science depends on it. The incompleteness of our knowledge of nature nevertheless does not seem to have been for Hume a sufficient reason to allow, however tentatively, for the possibility of miracles. "Perhaps we cannot absolutely prove

46 Ibid., 138-39.
47 Ibid., 156.
miracles are impossible as long as some riddles of nature remain unsolved," one can imagine him saying, "but we need not have solved all of them to be reasonably certain of the lawfulness of nature in general, hence to be justified in rejecting miracles." Thus, if the incompleteness of science did not prevent Hume from "rejecting" miracles, why should it have prevented Mill?

In our opinion, although the incompleteness of science was probably a necessary condition, it may not have been a sufficient condition, of Mill's greater openness to the possibility of miracles. Mill's natural theology may have provided that sufficient condition. Several times in the chapter under discussion Mill reminds us--and at least once he does so in a way that makes the reader wonder whether he and Hume do not disagree on this point--that we have natural evidence of the existence of God other than alleged miracles. That evidence, he says, points to a God of limited power and possibly of limited knowledge, who at the time of creation might not have been able to provide adequately for humankind's reception in due course of all the benefits He had in store for it. Therefore it might have been necessary for Him occasionally to deviate from His normal mode of rule, which is by natural causes, and intervene miraculously in the earthly course of events in order to bestow some of those benefits on us. Hence the possibility, albeit a remote one, of miracles such as God's Revelation of Himself through Jesus Christ.

Let us note a by now familiar though nonetheless important implication of the foregoing reasoning. To recall, in Mill's view the Darwinian hypothesis poses a grave challenge to the design argument. But the design argument is, again, all the rational, scientific support there is for the hope that God exists. It is that "independent" evidence

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48 Three Essays, CW, X, 468-69, 477, 481. On one occasion (477) Mill seems to imply that Hume did not consider how he would have to develop his argument further or modify it in light of that evidence, as though he had assumed there was no such evidence.

49 Ibid., 468-69, 481.
to which Mill refers several times in the chapter on Revelation. Thus, if Darwin's theory is ever scientifically corroborated, we will have lost the only grounds we could ever have for hoping that miracles—including the miracle of Revelation as Christians traditionally understand it, with its promise of life after death—are possible. Those who hew to Mill's standard may in the end be forced to be as radical on the question of miracles as Hume was.

Yet about this implication too Mill is silent. We suggest that once again his silence is motivated by a concern for the feelings and needs of those who would have great difficulty altogether repudiating the claims of Divine Revelation.

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50 Ibid., 468, 477.

51 We have, of course, all along abstracted from the fact that, by contrast with Mill, Hume seems to leave room for faith, as if to say that belief in Revelation and other miracles is a matter of faith rather than of reason and evidence: Inquiry, 139-40, 140-41. But then Mill too completely ignores Hume's profession of faith. The most likely explanation is that he did not take that profession seriously, that he probably regarded it as a politic move by Hume intended to mollify the forces of religious orthodoxy, or at least to throw their hounds off his scent. One can easily imagine Mill laughing quietly to himself while reading the final paragraph—especially the last sentence in it—of the chapter on miracles in Hume's Inquiry (140-41): "What we have said of miracles may be applied without any variation to prophecies; and, indeed, all prophecies are real miracles and as such only can be admitted as proofs of any revelation. If it did not exceed the capacity of human nature to foretell future events, it would be absurd to employ any prophecy as an argument for a divine mission or authority from heaven. So that, upon the whole, we may conclude that the Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity. And whoever is moved by faith to assent to it is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person which subverts all the principles of his understanding and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience." To provide further support for our explanation, we cite the following passage from a footnote on Hume's manner of writing in Mill's Hamilton: "In the case of the freethinking philosophers of the last century, it is often impossible to be quite certain what their opinions really were; how far the reservations they made, expressed real convictions, or were concessions to supposed necessities of position. Hume, it is certain, made such concessions largely: insincere they can hardly be called, being so evidently intended to be φαντασία, at least συνετοτριττά. I have a strong impression that Hume's scepticism, or rather his professed admiration of scepticism, was a disguise of this description, intended rather to avoid offence [emphasis added—BK] than to conceal his opinion; that he preferred to be called a sceptic, rather than by a more odious name; and having to promulgate conclusions which he knew would be regarded as contradicting, on one hand the evidence of common sense, on the other the doctrines of religion, did not like to declare them as positive convictions, but thought it more judicious to exhibit them as the results we might come to, if we put complete confidence in the trustworthiness of our rational faculty. I have little doubt that he himself did feel this confidence, and wished it to be felt by his readers. There is certainly no trace of a different feeling in his speculations on any of the other important subjects treated in his works: and even on this subject, the general tenor of what he wrote pointing one way, and only single passages the other, it is most reasonable to interpret the latter in the mode which will least contradict the expression of his habitual state of mind": CW, IX, 499n.
Concluding remarks

We see, then, that as in "Utility", so also in "Theism" Mill does not close the door completely on revealed religion, although it is admitted only on terms dictated by reason and science. In the latter essay Mill, primarily because of the present, incomplete state of science, allows for the hope, though a very tenuous one, that Divine Revelation as interpreted by Jesus Christ is in some measure true. But the underlying message there is very similar to that of "Utility"—that if the natural and human sciences continue to progress, that hope may eventually be lost to us too.

52 In the conclusion to his examination of Hume's argument concerning miracles which appears in the Press-copy Manuscript and first two editions of his Logic, Mill says, "It is now acknowledged by nearly all the ablest writers on the subject, that natural religion is the basis of revealed. . . .": CW, VII, 625, q-q626. By his treatment of revealed religion in "Theism" Mill demonstrates his agreement with those "writers."
We proceed now to pull together the different threads of Mill's treatment of the relation between science and religion. We shall weave our account around Mill's own summary of the findings of his inquiry into the scientific support for theism, which summary announces the fifth and final part of "Theism."

The conflict between science and religion

Science, Mill argues, eventually refutes every form of supernatural religious belief, monotheistic as well as polytheistic. How? First, by showing that nature is "one [causally] connected system", or a "united whole", which principle is incompatible with polytheism. Second, by demonstrating the dependence of all phenomena on general laws of causation, which axiom contradicts the belief in particular providence intrinsic to all popular monotheistic religions. Third, by showing that we have insufficient grounds for believing in the existence of God, regardless of how He is conceived.

Thus, as science progresses, the different forms of religious belief ranging from fetishism in antiquity to dogmatic deism in the modern age are sooner or later, each in its turn, eroded by it (although there are other forces at work here as well, such as technological growth). In the end we are left only with theism of the Platonic kind, which can survive only as a theism of imagination and hope rather than as a theism of belief. As Mill says in "Utility", we are "at liberty to indulge the pleasing and encouraging thought, that [Platonic theism's] truth is possible"; and "there is for those

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1 Three Essays, CW, X, 482.
2 Auguste Comte, CW, X, 288.
who need it, an ample domain in the region of the imagination which may be planted with possibilities" or unfalsifiable "hypotheses." But "dogmatic belief" is, he implies, out of the question. Although science cannot prove the tenets of this theism false, the support it is capable of extending to them, besides perhaps being only temporary, is a legitimate basis for nothing firmer than hope.

To be more concrete, science permits us (though possibly not for very long, given the scientific promise of the Darwinian hypothesis) to hope that God exists, but not to ascribe omnipotence to Him, and we will never know whether or not His knowledge is unlimited. In fact, we cannot even be certain that if God does exists He will not eventually die; the strongest argument we can give for denying this eventuality is that God "cannot be subject" to conditions, including those of death, of which He is Himself the author. We have grounds too for believing that God (assuming He exists) is good or benevolent, but the facts of nature also compel us to admit that the happiness of His creatures is not one of His primary concerns.

Furthermore, science is unable either to prove or (at least for the present) to disprove the immortality of the soul. And what we know of God's power and goodness permits us the hope, but no more than the hope, that He would grant us personal immortality if He thought we could benefit from it. For even should He wish to grant humankind immortality—and we will never be able to prove that He would—we cannot be certain of the adequacy of His power to this end. What is more, science and experience do not permit us to believe or even to hope that life after death would be characterized by bliss and perfection, as common opinion would have it, rather than merely by "improvability by our own efforts."

Lastly, reflection upon science and experience makes it clear that we can learn nothing new and positive about God, the soul and life after death from Revelation.

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Nevertheless, at least for the time being we do not have sufficient grounds for insisting on the impossibility of miracles. What little empirical evidence there is of God's existence, which evidence also implies His power and goodness are limited, allows us (if perhaps only temporarily) to hope this Deity "continuously cares for man" and does on occasion directly intervene in human affairs. Those of us who are Christians may hope God really did miraculously reveal Himself through Jesus Christ, as Christ taught. This last set of hopes would have the added benefit of strengthening or at least confirming the hope of immortality.

Accordingly, as Mill puts it, a full "examination of the evidences of theism" from the scientific standpoint leads to the conclusion that skepticism is the only "rational attitude of the thinking mind toward the supernatural."

The whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of Belief into that of simple Hope: and in that, for anything we can see, it is likely always to remain; for we can hardly anticipate either that any positive evidence will be acquired of the direct agency of Divine Benevolence in human destiny, or that any reason will be discovered for considering the realization of human hopes on that subject as beyond the pale of possibility.4

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4 Ibid., 483. Walter Pater's evocative novel Marius the Epicurean can profitably be interpreted as in part a fictional exploration of the psychological aspects of Mill's theism of hope. It depicts the influence exerted by such a theism on the mature thought, feelings and conduct of the main character, a highly sensitive, reflective and cultivated ancient Roman noble named Marius. Having earlier experimented with various forms of Epicureanism and found them all wanting, Marius later seeks but cannot find fulfillment or solace in anything except that theism, and that to a limited degree only. Of great interest too are the indications that even the Stoic rhetorician Cornelius Fronto's version of the Religion of Humanity proves insufficient for him: Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas, ed. Michael Levey (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985). (For a similar reading of the novel, see U. C. Knoepflmacher, Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel: George Eliot, Walter Pater, and Samuel Butler [Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1965], 189-223; for bringing to my attention this highly stimulating work, I am indebted to Vernon, "J. S. Mill and the religion of humanity," Religion, Secularization and Political Thought, ed. Crimmins, 181, n. 8. Knoepflmacher may well be right in supposing, as we surmise he does, that Arnold and Renan had a significant influence on Pater, especially his later writings; but in our opinion he severely underestimates the influence of Mill: see Knoepflmacher, Religious Humanism, 174, 175, 178, 180 and n. 26, 192-93, 203, 207, 213.) That Pater himself would not have balked at our suggestion is supported by his unpublished fragmentary essay "Art and Religion", a large portion of which consists in a searching discussion of leading ideas in Mill's Three Essays, including the idea of a scientifically unassailable supernatural hope: WPP, 11. For bringing to my attention Pater's explicit interest in Mill's writings on religion, I am once again indebted to Wright, The Religion of Humanity, 137.
Further clarification of the conflict

The preceding passage needs unpacking, lest it be interpreted to mean that nothing will ever happen, no scientific discovery will ever be made, which could effectively stifle those remaining hopes. The first part (before the semi-colon) says that the supernatural will "likely always" remain in the region of hope, not that it will certainly always remain there. That is to say, the death of the supernatural even as a mere hope is more, albeit only a little more, than a logical possibility.

Let us, too, look more closely at the second part of the quotation. First, take the assertion that "we can hardly anticipate" ever being able either to verify any alleged miracle or to demonstrate scientifically that there is no God and no afterlife. Strictly speaking, it says less about our ability to do either of these things than about the limits of our knowledge of the future progress of science. Mill may well be suggesting that the fact that we cannot now, given the present state of knowledge, imagine ourselves ever being able to prove, for instance, that God does not exist, does not mean we will never be able to do it. Since, as he would obviously agree, there are as yet many unanswered questions in the field of evolution, we must admit that surprise on the theistic front is conceivable.

Second, and more important, even if it is true that science will never be able to place the "realization of human hopes [concerning the supernatural] beyond the pale of possibility", in the context of Mill's overall argument that truth may well be beside the point. To see why, we must first grasp what Mill means by skepticism and, above all, how he distinguishes between skepticism and negative atheism.

Earlier in the paragraph Mill states that skepticism falls somewhere between belief and atheism, but he does not explicitly say what it actually is. Instead he distinguishes two kinds of atheism: "positive" atheism, which is the "dogmatic denial of [the] existence" of God and of a future life; and "negative" atheism, which is the "denial that there is any evidence on either side" of the dispute. We can, however, make out
Mill's conception of what skepticism is and what separates it from negative atheism from his further point that the latter, though logically distinct from positive atheism, "for most practical purposes amounts to the same thing as if the existence of God had been disproved." To restate that point, negative atheism is virtually as incompatible with any hopes concerning the supernatural as positive atheism. For such hopes, Mill appears to suggest, cannot subsist on the mere logical possibility that God exists admitted by the negative atheist. They need something more substantial to go on, even should that something be no more than "one of the lower degrees of probability." By contrast with negative atheism, (religious) skepticism consists in the recognition of the low probability that God exists as well as of the possibility of miracles and of life after death to which this probability gives rise. Thus skepticism is more than the mere admission of an abstract possibility, or is a more affirmative or positive stance than negative atheism, which is logically completely indifferent as between affirmation and denial. Moreover, since the low probability that God exists conduces to certain legitimate supernatural hopes (regarding personal immortality and the "direct agency" of God in human affairs in

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5 Three Essays, CW, X, 482. In Will to Believe William James, notwithstanding the great respect he had for Mill, appears to have differed substantially with him on this matter. According to James, even if there is no evidence whatever of the existence of God, since science is incapable of demonstrating that God does not exist, we are logically justified in believing that He does, particularly if having such a belief is for us a sine qua non of a happy and fruitful life. We must, of course, be genuinely open to the possibility of God's existence to begin with; as James points out, mastering the logic of his argument alone will not suffice to make of one a believer. On the other hand, to refrain from belief solely on the grounds of lack of evidence is ultimately to act as though we disbelieved, even if we have convinced ourselves that we are merely doubters and not deniers. Thus hope, which for Mill seems to be a third way that falls somewhere between belief and disbelief, is evidently for James not a viable alternative: The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy; and Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine (New York: Dover, 1956), 1-31. But that James' proposed solution—unless, perhaps, it can be separated from his naturalism—will not work for all "robust intellects" who might wish to believe is according to Joseph Wood Krutch suggested by James' own example. Although, says Krutch, "[James] was widely tolerant of even the most fantastically dogmatic religions when they were embraced by others he was compelled to restrict the exercise of his own will to believe within the limits set by the facts which he knew and to rest content with a rather vague confidence that the world was 'somehow good' even though such a belief could rest upon nothing stronger than desire plus the fact that its falsity was not demonstrated with absolute finality": The Modern Temper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), 146. In other words, James too had a religious tendency, but his intellectual integrity kept his belief in God from becoming robust.
particular), skepticism is at least potentially a significantly more hopeful state of mind than negative atheism.

We are now in a position to see why the claim that "we can hardly anticipate" ever being able to prove scientifically that there is no God and no life after death may be beside the point. In making this claim Mill need say nothing more than that "we can hardly anticipate" ever making (on account of further scientific progress) the transition from negative to positive atheism--a transition which on his premises is of little if any practical significance. In truth, the more important question for practical purposes is whether we can anticipate ever making the transition from skepticism to negative atheism, from a state of mind conducive to certain hopes regarding the supernatural to one of virtual hopelessness. Yet it is precisely this question that Mill seems not to raise here--even though earlier in the essay he gives us ample reason not only to raise it but also to answer it in the affirmative: again, when discussing the theological implications of Darwinism in Part I, Mill shows that we can indeed anticipate or prepare for the possible corroboration of the Darwinian theory and the consequent undermining of our remaining supernatural hopes.

Nevertheless, that Mill does not make this last point explicitly here, in the fifth and final part of the essay, is perhaps no accident. He has already spoken once about Darwin's theory of evolution and its theological implications. And he has in effect suggested--possibly, as we argue above, out of consideration for what would at present be socially advantageous--that we non-scientists put the theory out of our minds, even if only for the time being. He may have thought that to raise once more that potentially highly unsettling issue in the concluding part of the essay would serve no useful purpose. The best way to end the essay, he probably decided, was to sound as positive and hopeful a note as one could without saying anything false or misleading.

At the same time, it is, we suggest, precisely in order not to mislead that Mill says a few lines earlier that the domain of the supernatural will "likely always" remain in the
region of hope. His use of the word *likely* instead of *necessarily* may have been intended as a subtle and tactful reminder, which those of us who do not care to be reminded could easily overlook, of the potential future scientific threat to our remaining supernatural hopes.

Whatever else can be said for or against the foregoing interpretation, one of its chief merits is that it offers a plausible account of Mill's reasons for making the statement quoted above as well as of its subtle manner.

**How distinguishable are skepticism and negative atheism?**

One could object that we have overstated the distinction which Mill makes between skepticism and negative atheism, that he does not articulate it altogether clearly, indeed that in a few places what he says tends to blur it.

Yet even if we accept the objection, our original conclusion might still hold. The logical distinction Mill draws between skepticism and negative atheism seems solid and plausible enough. So yielding to our imaginary objector might entail nothing more than that the two stances are not quite as far apart as initially suggested.

Nevertheless, rejoins our conscientious objector, perhaps the negative atheist, who admits the existence of God is logically possible on the grounds that we lack evidence either way, need not be completely bereft of hope. At the same time, even though Mill's skeptic conceives the existence of God, etc., as a probability rather than as a mere possibility, because that probability is slight, the hope begotten by it might very well be a good deal less robust than expected (say, by theists). Indeed, we are very nearly persuaded that since in the present case probability has only slightly more evidentiary weight than bare, logical possibility, in Mill's final estimation the skeptic's hope can be little stronger than the negative atheist's. But then, ironically, the seemingly all-important logical distinction Mill makes between skepticism and negative atheism turns out to be a distinction without a difference.
Admittedly, this rejoinder is harder to dispose of than the suggestion that Mill does not distinguish logically between skepticism and negative atheism. For, again, Mill indicates clearly in both "Utility" and "Theism" that the evidence for the theistic hypothesis in its scientifically most acceptable form is weak. Moreover, to drive the point home, if Mill was in fact persuaded that the skeptic had no reason to be significantly more hopeful than the negative atheist, then, it seems, he really could not have set much store by the Platonic theism of hope and imagination.6

The enigma of supernatural hope

All the same we remain, though with less than full confidence, unconvinced by that rejoinder. At no point does Mill explicitly say, or even unambiguously imply, that since the evidence is weak the hope must be as well. To be sure, according to him the available evidence is insufficient for belief. But his whole point seems to be that it is nevertheless, or perhaps for this very reason, sufficient for hope. Like belief, hope requires nourishment, but evidently, unlike belief, it can subsist and maybe even thrive on very little.

In fairness to the opposing view, however, it must be conceded that nowhere does Mill attempt to estimate more precisely the potential strength of that hope. He probably deemed all such attempts futile. What he does instead is indicate that mere hope is by nature less firm or more tenuous than belief, and that a theism based on the former has much less power to influence the character, to "stimulate and encourage" our "aspirations toward goodness" than a theism based on the latter.7

Now the tenuous nature of the skeptic's hope and the consequent probable feebleness of a Platonic theism of hope may well be the chief reasons Mill prefers not to

6 It would further follow that regarding (supernatural) hope as an alternative to belief and disbelief, Mill is really a lot nearer to William James than one is at first sight led to believe.

7 Three Essays, CW, X, 486; see also 488.
call this theism a religion. (In "Theism" he says it would be inappropriate to do so. 8)

More important, these same considerations help us to understand why he indicates in both "Utility" and "Theism"--even more explicitly in the latter than in the former--that the Platonic theism of hope can at best "aid and fortify" rather than take the place of the Religion of Humanity. 9 For they appear to imply that the prospects of the former are so uncertain or dim as to make reliance on it for the future seem singularly unwise. If to them be joined the further consideration that the progress of science may eventually undermine our remaining hopes, weak as they already are, regarding the supernatural, then those prospects must seem dimmer still.

In the final analysis, therefore, the view that for Mill the Platonic theism of hope is at bottom a lost cause might not be far off the mark. Mill may not be certain it is a lost cause, but perhaps he worries that it is. If so, why is he not more candid about his worry?

Concluding remarks

We must put off tackling this last question until the final chapter. Let us instead give in a nutshell Mill's view of the conflict between science and religion, and then relieve it somewhat by briefly comparing it with the views of two of his greatest contemporaries—Matthew Arnold and Cardinal Newman.

Scientific progress erodes all forms of supernatural religious belief. The only form of theism we are apparently left with is a Platonic theism of hope and imagination. But the hope upon which it is founded is well nigh impossible to measure and may prove to be so feeble as to mitigate severely its efficacy. What is more, the continuing march of science may after a while deprive us even of our remaining hopes regarding the

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8 Ibid., 488.

9 Ibid., 425 and 488.
supernatural, thereby rendering the Platonic theism of hope and imagination completely powerless.

Mill's conception of that conflict falls somewhere between Newman's and Arnold's. Newman eventually became a powerful defender of dogmatic theism in its Roman Catholic version, arguing to the end that the progress of natural science has no bearing on the truths of divine science. Arnold was an equally forceful proponent of an almost diametrically opposite view. He held that in the age of science all traditional ways of representing God and eternal life are necessarily and rightly subjected to close scientific scrutiny. As a consequence of such scrutiny, according to him, the leading lights of humankind are gradually coming to the conclusion that those representations are mostly either edifying, morally inspiring poetry with little or no demonstrable scientific value or mere pseudo-science with no poetic value.\textsuperscript{10}

On this issue Mill is doubtless closer to Arnold. The chief difference between the two can be stated thus: Mill believes we must have scientific grounds at least for hoping that some of our ideas about God and immortality are literally true to be capable of being moved by any kind of poetic treatment of those subjects. To Arnold, on the other hand, it seems enough that science cannot disprove the existence of God and of life after death.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Cardinal Newman's view of the relation between science and religion is developed in The Idea of a University. For Matthew Arnold's view, see especially St. Paul and Protestantism, CPW, VI, passim.; and Literature and Dogma, ibid., passim.


Millar concludes his discussion of the final part of Mill's "Theism" thus: "It has been suggested that in Three Essays on Religion Mill appears "to be a man who had sought to salvage as much as he could from traditional faith." The concluding section of "Theism" on 'supernatural hopes' lends substance to this remark, though it gives a misleading impression of the tenor of the essays taken as a whole. There are no concessions to religious beliefs and attitudes in 'Nature' and the whole thrust of 'Utility of Religion' is towards replacing supernatural religion with the Religion of Humanity. So far as 'Theism' is concerned there is no hint until its concluding section that Mill would wish to indulge supernatural hopes. The limited theism defended in his discussion of the marks of design is treated, in that discussion, as an explanatory hypothesis, not as a source of either consolation or inspiration. Against this background the remarks on hope come as a surprise. They do not follow from what has come before. Imaginative vision does not require, and need not pave the way for, speculative hope": "Mill on religion," 199. Millar's final position, then, is tantamount to a restatement of the original formulation of Himmelfarb's "two Mills" thesis as it
applies to Mill’s essays on religion. Accordingly, the reasons for our disagreement with Himmelfarb, developed over the course of the dissertation, explain equally well our disagreement with him. Of all the points made in the preceding quotation the most surprising one is that the final section of “Theism” is disconnected from the rest of the essay. As we have shown, Mill clearly displays sympathy for certain supernatural hopes in the third and fourth parts of the essay, and it is precisely to these hopes as well as the hope that God exists that remarks about supernatural hopes in the final part refer. Moreover, the connection is more than merely textual, it is in fact logical: only because in the second part of “Theism” Mill has established that science provides support, however meagre, for the hypothesis that a benevolent Deity of great but limited power exists, is he in a position in other parts, including the final one, to argue that indulging such supernatural hopes is reasonable, desirable and plausible. Such at any rate is, we contend, Mill’s own understanding of what he is about here. Perhaps there is yet another connection to be made, however—between Millar’s having missed all of this and his having elected, while analyzing “Theism”, not to delve into its third and fourth parts, and instead, incredibly, to confine himself to restating their primary points (177)!
Part III

*The Moral and Social Implications of the Quarrel Between Science and Religion*
We have disclosed Mill’s view of the nature and extent of the conflict between science and religion. Accordingly, we are now in a better position to seek a more complete understanding of his teaching about the key moral and social implications of that conflict. To attain such an understanding is the main purpose of the third part of the dissertation, which part comprises chapters nine (the present chapter) and ten.

The subject of this chapter is the case Mill makes for the usefulness in principle of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination. In the exploration of that case various moral and social implications of the quarrel between science and religion as Mill perceived them begin to come to light.

The necessity of hope and the imagination

Having concluded that the "domain of the supernatural", or what is left of it after close examination of all the relevant evidence, belongs in the region of mere or "simple hope", Mill makes the following statement:

It is now to be considered whether the indulgence of hope, in a region of imagination merely, in which there is no prospect that any probable grounds of expectation will ever be obtained, is irrational, and ought to be discouraged as a departure from the rational principle of regulating our feelings as well as opinions strictly by evidence.¹

But, the reader will likely ask, has Mill not already established that there are rational grounds for hoping that Platonic theism is true? If so, then what does he now propose to do that he has not already done?

¹ *Three Essays, CW, X, 483.*
As it turns out, only a few lines later Mill gives us a clearer indication of the issue he has in mind. For he says that what is needed now is an inquiry into the principles which ought to govern the cultivation and the regulation of the imagination—with a view on the one hand of preventing it from disturbing the rectitude of the intellect and the right direction of the actions and will, and on the other hand of employing it as a power for increasing the happiness of life and giving elevation to the character. . . .

Accordingly, we are not now asking whether there are grounds for hoping that Platonic theism is true (because, again, that question has already been answered in the affirmative). Rather, the issue is whether it would be reasonable or wise to indulge that hope and to feed it by cultivating the imagination, for instance, with the aid of a certain kind of poetry; and whether this can be done without overstepping the limits of reason or science as well as morality. It is a question of the reasonableness of fostering the Platonic theism of hope and imagination, but in a larger sense of the word reasonableness, one which comprehends both practical wisdom and consistency with scientific reason.

A useful way of restating the question which Mill raises at this point (a question which, we might add, continues to bedevil us) is this: Do reason and science suffice for the attainment of temporal happiness? Could scientific rationalism ever be adequate as the sole foundation of human life? If not, what else is needed?

Acknowledging the likelihood that thinkers will differ on this issue for a long time still, Mill predicts that the weight "for practical purposes" attached to the investigation of the principles to govern "the cultivation and the regulation of the imagination" in the supernatural domain will henceforth be considerable. In fact, he says it will increase "in proportion as the weakening of positive beliefs respecting states of existence superior to the human, leaves the imagination of higher things less provided with material from the domain of supposed reality."

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.
The preceding lines, it should be noted, show better than any other passage from Mill discussed thus far that in his view the belief in the divine as such is likely to continue to decline (presumably because of the continuing growth of science). They also remind us of his teaching in "Utility" that one of the functions of religion is to satisfy "the craving for higher things" inherent in human nature, thereby giving sustenance to virtue.

As Mill understands it, then, the problem which the decline of the "belief in a God or Gods" raises is that humankind is therewith steadily being robbed of "material", hitherto provided by traditional, dogmatic religion, for the imaginative creation of ideal objects to guide and inspire it. The progress of science, it seems, by undermining supernatural religious belief, threatens to impoverish the moral imagination to a degree prejudicial to virtue. And human life, "considered merely in the present" (that is, in its purely natural or "earthly" aspect), is too "small and insignificant" to check that impoverishment—indeed, will likely remain so even after "material and moral" progress "have freed it from the greater part of its present calamities."4

Consequently, some kind of substitute for traditional religion must be found which could provide the imagination with the aliment it needs to continue endowing life with a "wider range and greater height of aspiration for itself and its destination."

"Wisdom" dictates that we "make the most" of whatever assistance science can give us in finding that support. But as we have already seen, according to Mill (albeit he does not explicitly say so here) science permits us something in the supernatural domain, namely, a Platonic theism of hope. This the imagination may, and should, freely build on, as long as what it yields is compatible with "the evidence of fact."5

In short, Mill's answer to the fundamental question raised above is that the imagination, including of things supernatural, has a legitimate and necessary role to play

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
in the mental life of humankind. For him just as much as for Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle, George Eliot and Matthew Arnold, reason and science alone will never suffice for the attainment of happiness on earth. He would have agreed substantially with Dickens' censure in *Hard Times* of utilitarians for making of Reason not a "beneficent god, deferring to gods as great as itself", but a "grim Idol, cruel and cold, with its victims bound hand and foot, and its big dumb shape set up with a sightless stare, never to be moved by anything but so many calculated tons of leverage. . ."6 (It is, if anything, primarily over Dickens' failure to make clear that Bentham's position on poetry and the imagination generally is not intrinsic to utilitarianism that Mill might have quarrelled with him.) Furthermore, he insists that there is no danger that the cultivation of the imagination in the supernatural domain for the purpose of satisfying our non-material needs will have a perverse effect on the "judgment" or intellect, "provided it goes on pari passu with the cultivation of severe reason."7

**The need for cheerfulness and high-mindedness**

Mill then proceeds to support his view of the usefulness of certain exercises of the imagination with a few remarks about cheerfulness and high-mindedness.

The "cheerful disposition", he says, is the "tendency, either from constitution or habit, to dwell chiefly on the brighter side both of the present and of the future", and has always been considered "one of the chief blessings of life." Such a disposition may seem foolish, given the repulsive nature of much that we encounter in life. Yet it is so only if we assume that any aspect of reality, "whether agreeable or odious", should occupy the imagination to the degree to which it pervades reality. That assumption would be valid if the cheerful personality type should prove less prudent about or alive to the dangers and

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7 *Three Essays*, CW, X, 483.
pitfalls of life than the gloomy type. In Mill's view, however, the reverse is true, for a "hopeful disposition" (with which he now identifies the "cheerful disposition") tends to sharpen one's reasoning and perceptual abilities and to make one more energetic.8

To be sure, we ought not to forget that each of us must sooner or later die. But for Mill this does not mean that "we should be always brooding over death." Rather, we should think about it only as much as is needed to induce us both to act prudently and to fulfill those obligations under which the condition of mortality puts us. And even then, he adds, we should think much more about being prudent and fulfilling our obligations than about the "inevitable event." "The true rule of practical wisdom," says Mill,

is not that of making all the aspects of things equally prominent in our habitual contemplations, but of giving the greatest prominence to those of their aspects which depend on, or can be modified by, our own conduct.9

Dwelling not on inescapable evils, but on the more pleasing aspects of things as well as on evils we can eliminate or mitigate, is desirable for two reasons. First, it makes life itself more pleasant. Second, it induces us to work harder at bringing about the desired changes. All superfluous preoccupation with the evils of life—that portion of it which exceeds what is required by prudence and the performance of one's duties—is "at best a useless expenditure of nervous force", or a "waste of strength."10

Let us note that Mill here implies that death is one of life's principal evils, and that it is likely to remain so—for instance, by rendering the present life "small and confined" and insignificant—even after moral and material progress have freed life from the "greater part of its present calamities." The significance of this point will become clear later in the chapter, when we compare Mill's treatments of the problem of mortality and its solution in "Utility" and "Theism."

8 Ibid., 484.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
In Mill's view, a case similar to that for cheerfulness can be made for high-mindedness. As he sees it, the habit of dwelling on life's "meannesses and basenesses"--we shall call it "cynicism"--makes it impossible "to keep up in oneself a high tone of mind."

The imagination and feelings become tuned to a lower pitch; degrading instead of elevating associations become connected with the daily objects and incidents of life, and give their colour to the thoughts, just as associations of sensuality do in those who indulge freely in that sort of contemplations. 

Thus cynicism, like gloominess, hampers the growth of higher or nobler aspirations, such as the inclination to devote one's energies to the ennobling of humankind. (So much, at any rate, is implied by the parallel which Mill suggests can be drawn between cynicism and gloominess.) For this reason, one should, without losing sight of the baser, dwell more on the nobler, aspects of life, even if the former are more prominent.

The preceding remarks illustrate, as Mill says, "the principle that in the regulation of the imagination literal truth of facts is not the only thing to be considered." The proportions of the agreeable and the odious and of beauty and ugliness in the creations of the imagination need not, he implies, equal the proportions of these attributes in reality. As long as the "rational faculty", whose "province" is the truth, is "strongly cultivated", all aspects of the truth will be adequately taken account of in our practical deliberations. The imagination may then be permitted to do what it can, within the limits set by reason, to ennobles life and make it "pleasant and lovely."

Mill then suggests that one such "legitimate and philosophically defensible" exercise of the imagination is based on a certain "hope with regard to the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death." 

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11 Ibid., 484-85.
12 Ibid., 485.
13 Ibid.
explicitly identify the kind of theism he has in mind, it is in fact what he in "Utility" describes as the "Theism of the imagination and feelings" in a "Platonic" vein.\textsuperscript{14}

To restate the first, most fundamental part of Mill's argument in "Theism" for the reasonableness of a Platonic theism of hope and imagination, earthly life is so unsatisfying as to be for many of us incapable of sustaining by itself the cheerful and high-minded disposition we must have if we are to work vigorously for its improvement. Among other things, a scientifically indefeasible poetry of the supernatural is needed, because, by endowing the present life with a certain largeness and significance, it would make many of us more hopeful, cheerful and high-minded, and so strengthen our inclination to virtue.

**Science and poetry**

It is unfortunate that Mill makes no attempt in any of the essays on religion to justify his insistence on the possibility of harmonizing sentimental and intellectual culture. He does address the question of the relation between reason and imagination, or between science and poetry, in other writings, though. In the *Autobiography*, while discussing the practical conclusions he had drawn from his breakdown, among them that "cultivation of the feelings" through "poetry and art" is one of the "prime necessities of human well-being",\textsuperscript{15} he makes the following argument:

\[\text{[The] imaginative emotion which an idea when vividly conceived excites in us, is not an illusion but a fact, as real as any of the other qualities of objects; and far from implying anything erroneous and delusive in our mental apprehension of the object, is quite consistent with the most accurate knowledge and most perfect practical recognition of all its physical and intellectual laws and relations. The intensest feeling of the beauty of a cloud lighted by the setting sun, is no hindrance to my knowing that the cloud is vapour of water, subject to all the laws of vapours in a state of suspension; and I am just as likely to allow for, and act on, these}\]

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 425, 426.

\textsuperscript{15} *CW*, I, 147.
physical laws whenever there is occasion to do so, as if I had been incapable of perceiving any distinction between beauty and ugliness.\(^{16}\)

Thus, according to Mill, who in the preceding passage and elsewhere reminds us of some of Wordsworth's pronouncements on the subject,\(^{17}\) poetry and science are not necessarily mutually antagonistic. Each aims at a different aspect of truth or reality. Poetry is concerned with things as they really do "appear" to us together with our undeniably real emotional responses to these appearances, whereas science is concerned with things as they "are", hence also with their causes.\(^{18}\) It should therefore be possible to bring the cultivation of the feelings through the exercise of the imagination into perfect harmony with the cultivation of the intellect.

However, as Abrams points out, famous men of letters as diverse as Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Babington Macauley and John Keats saw the matter very differently. Bentham, for example, takes the position that poetry and science are mutually antagonistic. The poet's "business," he says, "consists in stimulating our passions, and exciting our prejudices." The "ornaments of his structures are fictions", and his works are filled with "false morals" and "fictitious nature." Thus "truth, exactitude of every kind, is fatal to poetry."\(^{19}\) Macauley, holding a very similar view of poetry, concludes that "as civilization advances [in which advance he includes the progress of science--BK], poetry almost necessarily declines."\(^{20}\)

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 157.


\(^{18}\) Cf. the preceding quotation from Mill's Autobiography with his "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," CW, I, 346, 347.

Keats' Lamia contains the following well known passage:

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine--
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.21

As Keats understands it, science—he calls it "cold philosophy"—seeks to explain all things in mechanico-mathematical terms, to "conquer all mysteries by rule and line." Science is also reductionist; that is, it attributes reality only to the "common things", elements with quantifiable properties, which it posits as the causes of all perceived phenomena. And since science is truth, it follows that the great variety of texture, colour, etc., exhibited by the phenomena, being wholly absent from those elements (wherefore the metaphor "dull catalogue of common things"), is mere illusion. Indeed, the appearances of things must in their entirety be considered illusory; as Keats says, "Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings" and "unweave a rainbow." But insofar as we are aware of their illusory character, we cannot help being somewhat contemptuous of them. Thus, given that poetry dwells in the realm of appearances, its survival must surely be threatened by the growth of that awareness. "The tender-person'd Lamia"—which, as Abrams says, together with her "phantom palace" appears to "symbolize the poet's view of the world" as opposed to the scientist's—must sooner or later "melt into the shade."22


22 The substance of our interpretation is to be found in Abrams, 306-08.

We suspect that here Wassily Kandinsky, one of the founders of modern art, would have sided with Keats, at least as regards art in its earlier, more naturalistic forms. Kandinsky appears to have held that the gradual but ultimately complete abandonment of "naturalism" and representationalism is a sine qua non of all true art (as distinguished from mere, soulless "picture-making") henceforth. Among the reasons
Such, at any rate, is the view of the relation of poetry to science antithetical to Mill's. If it is correct, then Mill's hope of harmonizing (at least in an essentially Wordsworthian fashion) the cultivation of feelings by poetry with the cultivation of the intellect by science may well be a vain one.

In the passages from his works quoted and referred to above Mill does not, in our judgement, adequately explain why the latter view should be judged incorrect. Now Abrams implies that we do not get from Mill a systematically and clearly worked out theory of poetry.23 Be that as it may, we do get from him other remarks on poetry which, though perhaps betokening a conception of poetry different from the one outlined earlier, seem more directly to confront the challenge posed by Keats and company. Take the following passage from Mill's Diary:

Those who think themselves called upon, in the name of truth, to make war against illusions, do not perceive the distinction between an illusion and a delusion. A delusion is an erroneous opinion—it is believing a thing which is not. An illusion, on the contrary, is an affair solely of feeling, and may exist completely severed from delusion. It consists in extracting from a conception known not to be true, but which is better than the truth, the same benefit to the feelings which would be derived from it if it were a reality.24

This passage suggests that poetry is, or can be, the play of intellectually untenable conceptions so contrived as to excite certain emotions. Elsewhere Mill makes it clear that

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Kandinsky cites for this necessity is that science has destroyed the solidity, the substantiality of the world of common sense and traditional belief: Concerning the Spiritual in Art, trans. Michael T. H. Sadler (London, 1914; New York: Dover, 1977), 1-20, 47, 52; and "Reminiscences," Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays, ed. Robert L. Herbert (Toronto: Prentice Hall Press, 1964), 25-27. This view is also expressed in Herbert Read, The Philosophy of Modern Art: Collected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 21, 93-94. Note too the following passage: "It seems to me that the old psychological theory of perception considered as a type of hallucination is the very type of the call to poetry... The first word of the philosophy of the sciences, today, is that science has no value except its effectiveness, and that nothing, absolutely nothing, constitutes an assurance that the external world resembles the idea that we form it. Is that a poetic idea? Anti-poetic, rather, in that it is opposite to the confidence which the poet, by nature, reposes, and invites us to repose, in the world. Let us say that it needs poetry to rise above itself; hence that it is an invitation to much poetry. It is an indirect way of being poetic": Jean Paulhan, as quoted in Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, ed. Milton J. Bates, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1990), 275.

23 The Mirror and the Lamp, 321.

24 CW, XXVII, 642, as quoted in Abrams, 323.
the sentiments he wants thus excited are such socially valuable ones as sympathy, the
love of beauty and the love of virtue. More important, the preceding quotation implies
that awareness of the falsity of these "conceptions" need not prevent us from being moved
by them.

As Abrams points out, manifest here is the influence of Coleridge. In his
literary autobiography Coleridge argues that a properly crafted poem containing
"supernatural, or at least romantic" notions induces us to approach them with a state of
mind he at one point calls "illusion, contradistinguished from delusion." He defines that
state of mind as the "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes
poetic faith." This "poetic faith", he claims, permits our feelings to be excited by such
notions to as high a degree as would be the case if these ideas corresponded to known
realities, whereas in its absence no emotional excitation would take place. To illustrate
the successful evocation of "poetic faith", Coleridge cites Wordsworth's Immortality Ode,
in which the poet avails himself of the theoretically questionable Platonic notion of "pre-
existence." (Abrams informs us that much later "Wordsworth himself protested against
the conclusion that he meant in [the Ode] to inculcate a belief in 'a prior state of
existence' ", or to do more than "make for my purpose the best use of [this notion] I
could as a Poet." )

25 See "Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews," CW, XXI, 253-56; and

26 The Mirror and the Lamp, 324.

27 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ed. George Watson, rev. ed. (Toronto: Everyman-Dent,
1975), 168-69, 256.

28 Ibid., 169.

29 Ibid., 168, 256.

30 Ibid., 267-68.

31 The Mirror and the Lamp, 325.
If Coleridge and Mill are right, then even if we should be compelled to regard everything within its domain as unreal, we would, it seems, still be capable of enjoying poetry and being profoundly affected by it. Perhaps we need not fear, as Keats and others did, its inevitable demise—at least not directly on account of the progress of science. At the same time neither, perhaps, need we worry that for poetry (whether of nature or of the supernatural) to flourish, science must languish.33

No attempt will be made here to settle the dispute over the relation between poetry and science adumbrated above. We leave it at having shown that Mill's position on this issue is one to be reckoned with seriously.

It is also worth remarking that Mill's belief in the independent and formidable power of poetry lends further credence to the view that for him the future of the Platonic theism of imagination and hope is not quite as bleak as certain earlier comments might suggest.

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32 William Wordsworth, Notes, The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, ed. Selincourt and Darbishire, IV, 464, as quoted in ibid. The passage cited by Abrams is worth quoting in its entirety, particularly as it does not unequivocally support his point: "I think it right to protest against the conclusion, which has given pain to some good and pious persons, that I meant to inculcate such a belief. It is far too shadowy a notion to recommend to faith, as more than an element in our instincts of immortality. But let us bear in mind that, though the idea is not advanced in revelation, there is nothing there to contradict it, and the fall of Man presents an analogy in its favor. Accordingly, a pre-existent state has entered into the popular creeds of many nations; and, among all persons acquainted with classic literature, is known as an ingredient in Platonic philosophy. Archimedes said that he could move the world if he had a point whereon to rest his machine. Who has not felt the same aspirations as regards the world of his own mind? Having to wield some of its elements when I was impelled to write the Poem on the 'Immortality of the Soul', I took hold of the notion of pre-existence as having a sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a Poet."

33 As Abrams suggests, it may well be because he accepted Coleridge's (and Mill's) distinction between illusion and delusion as applied to poetry that Matthew Arnold was at least cautiously optimistic about the future not only of poetry but also of religion. According to Abrams, Arnold hoped that those important salutary parts of traditional Christian teaching which had been found to be scientifically untenable would, on account of that distinction, continue to have a salutary effect when reinterpreted and appreciated as poetry: The Mirror and the Lamp, 334-35.

Nevertheless, although Abrams sees that Arnold was mistaken in judging Mill an "enemy of culture" (334), he appears not to realize the extent to which even on the religious question Mill's views resembled Arnold's.
Why not only a Religion of Humanity?

We have seen that in "Theism" Mill seeks to make a case for the desirability of a certain kind of theism. This is consistent with his admission in "Utility" that at least some of us may need theism so much that we would take it even in the severely truncated form which it must now assume. But as we have also seen, in "Utility" Mill attributes to the Religion of Humanity the capacity "of fulfilling every important function of religion. . . better than any form whatever of supernaturalism." Does not such high praise imply the sufficiency of the Religion of Humanity, or at a minimum its superiority even to the Platonic theism of hope and imagination, as a religion? If so, then why should there henceforth be any need at all for supernaturalism of any kind? Have we not here found a basic contradiction in Mill's religious thought? And what sort of person is it whose non-material needs Mill believes could not be satisfied except perhaps by some kind of theism, however much abridged?

Granted that in "Utility" Mill does not explicitly take up any of these questions. Yet he does raise them indirectly, as we shall now attempt to show.

After his remarks on the reasonableness of a poetic theism of the Platonic kind, Mill states that there is one advantage which "supernatural religions must always possess over the Religion of Humanity; the prospect they hold out to the individual of a life after death." He then justifies this statement in the following manner:

For, though the scepticism of the understanding does not necessarily exclude the Theism of the imagination and feelings, and this, again, gives opportunity for a hope that the power which has done so much for us may be able and willing to do this also, such vague possibility must ever stop far short of a conviction.

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34 *Three Essays, CW*, X, 426.

35 Ibid., 422.

36 Ibid., 426.
But the preceding passage suggests that since it permits at least the hope of immortality, in this respect even the Platonic theism of imagination and hope is superior to the Religion of Humanity in its pure, atheistic form. So we cannot help wondering whether, contrary to Mill's earlier claim that the Religion of Humanity would make a better religion than supernaturalism of any kind, we would not perhaps be better off with at least that Platonic theism.

It should therefore not surprise us that Mill now addresses the issue of how important the expectation--but also, by implication, the mere hope--of immortality is as an ingredient of "earthly happiness." He says forthwith,

I cannot but think that as the condition of mankind becomes improved, as they grow happier in their lives, and more capable of deriving happiness from unselfish sources, they will care less and less for this flattering expectation. It is not, naturally or generally, the happy who are the most anxious either for a prolongation of the present life, or for a life hereafter: it is those who never have been happy.37

These lines seem to capture the essence or thrust of the argument developed in the two long paragraphs at the end of the essay.38

Were one to read this the final part of the essay quickly and superficially, one might interpret its overall argument as follows: Those who have lived happily do not have difficulty parting with life and therefore do not need to believe in life after death. Hence the way to obviate the incapacity of the Religion of Humanity to offer even the mere hope of personal immortality is as much as possible to render all such hopes superfluous. This can be accomplished by, first, improving the material conditions of life and making everyone healthy and comfortable; and second, fostering the Religion of Humanity, thus enabling everyone to derive greater pleasure from such "unselfish sources" as the pursuit of the good of all humanity. Fear of death is not inherent in

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 426-28.
human nature, as is indicated by the fact that Buddhism, which currently enjoys a greater following than either Christianity or Islam, promises to the virtuous "annihilation; the cessation, at least, of all conscious or separate existence." Furthermore, the experience of the Greeks and Romans, whose idea of life after death made it unattractive, shows that it is possible to enjoy life and do well without the belief in some blissful afterlife. It is only the selfish who are excessively attached to life, but they can be helped by the above measures. Accordingly, the Religion of Humanity should be sufficient for the satisfaction of our religious wants in the future.

Some such way of construing the argument of the final part of "Utility" as the above is, we believe, at least implicitly subscribed to by a number of commentators, including those who hold that in "Utility" (if not also in "Theism") Mill argues that we can dispense with theism altogether--for instance, Morley, Bain, Nakhnikian, Himmelfarb, Britton, and Devigne, and possibly also Cowling and Hamburger.39 We shall now attempt to expose the inadequacy of this interpretation, particularly as regards the future of theism.

The fear of death and other philosophers

As the brief quotations given in the last paragraph indicate, Mill says a number of things that seem directly to bear out the foregoing interpretation of the essay's final argument. Yet it is unlikely that the argument so interpreted would have gone unchallenged by all of his most illustrious predecessors.

39 See Krook, 191-93. See also Morley, "Mr. Mill's Three Essays," 194-201; Bain, 134; George Nakhnikian, xxiii-xxviii; Himmelfarb, editor's Introd. to Mill, Essays on Politics and Culture, xxiv; Himmelfarb, On Liberty and Liberalism, 88-90; Britton, "John Stuart Mill on Christianity," 22-23; and Devigne, 245. As for Cowling and Hamburger, there remains a degree of uncertainty regarding how they would interpret the passage in question. To repeat, both of them hold that in Mill's view some form of theism is needed, even if only temporarily; however, neither of them says explicitly that Mill puts this view forward in "Theism" but not in "Utility."
Lucretius, for example, says in his philosophical poem, "natus enim debet quicumque est velle manere in vita, donec retinebit bland a voluptas"—"Whoever is born necessarily wants to remain in life, as long as smooth pleasure retains [him in it]"—implying that no one who continues to enjoy life would willingly or easily part with it. This unlimited desire or "unchanging thirst of life" ("sitis aequa vitai") with which nature seems in his view to have endowed us can be explained by the insatiability of the soul's desire for good things. As Lucretius sees him, the philosopher, the happiest of human beings because free of care and fear, far from taking death lightly, spends most of his waking time preparing for "eternity" or, in the words of Socrates later made famous by Montaigne, "getting ready to die." If his own example and that of Epicurus are any indication, Lucretius would have understood getting ready to die to mean being engaged in a rigorous, sustained, perhaps even lifelong, inquiry into the nature of things, including the nature and causes of death. For he holds the fear or hatred of death (the reverse side of humankind's "unchanging thirst of life") to be at the root of virtually everything we do, feel and think, including religion, with all of its terrors. And, he suggests, only through a sedulous investigation of the nature of things can we arrive at the recognition of the inevitableness of death needed to purge our minds of that fear. Even so, Lucretius'
description of his teachings about the soul, death, etc., as "wormwood" (which, he intimates, not many could stomach\(^{48}\)) makes one wonder whether it is possible thus "to get ready to die", to vanquish all such fears, without becoming "gloom-weighted, morbid."\(^{49}\)

Aristotle claims that life has a "natural sweetness" which makes the wretched continue to want to live inspite of their wretchedness, not, as Mill seems to say, because of it.\(^{50}\) He thus seems to imply, as does Lucretius after him, that it is in our nature to fear or loathe death.

Although as cheerful as any philosopher is likely to be, Hume too appears to believe that "nature inspired us with an aversion toward [death]", or that the "horror of annihilation" is an "original passion." At any rate, he gives us fairly solid grounds for holding this view: the "human species could not be preserved" if nature had not made us fearful of death.\(^{51}\)

With the possible exception of Hobbes, Schopenhauer argues more explicitly and at greater length than any other philosopher with whom we are acquainted that the "fear of death" or "annihilation" is "inborn" in all animate beings. Every animal, he claims, is driven by a powerful "will to live" to which life seems the "highest good", hence will strive to protect itself, its body or organism from destruction even when its life is filled with pain and misery. Death being the "destruction of the organism", it is natural for all living things to fear it. As Schopenhauer says at one point, "this fear of death is \(a\ priori\) only the reverse side of the will to live, which indeed we all are."\(^{52}\) To be sure, insofar as

\(^{48}\) Ibid., iii. 417-24.


he is also a knowing being, a man has the potential to overcome his natural terror of annihilation. For honest and sustained self-reflection combined with the study of the natural sciences discloses two basic truths. The first is that our essence or innermost being—the will to live—is immortal, and death is merely the casting off of the dross of individuality, which in the case of human beings includes consciousness. The second is that life truly is not worth caring about. But it takes a strong intellect to attain the understanding of these truths required for a whole-hearted acceptance of death.53

La Rochefoucauld agrees with Schopenhauer on many points, but holds that even the philosopher can never truly overcome his fear of death.54

Love of life and the desire for immortality

A closer reading of the final two paragraphs of "Utility", however, suggests that Mill's own understanding of this matter is more complex, that the distance between himself and some of the thinkers just mentioned is not as great as the interpretation of his argument with which we began would have one believe.

In the first place, several lines below the last quotation from "Utility" set off above35 Mill says that he is "now speaking of the unselfish", thereby indicating that the argument he has just made (that is, in the first part of the penultimate paragraph) may be false when applied to the selfish. We also note that his earlier point about the happy—which now turns out to be about the happy "unselfish"—is that they are "not the most anxious" either for a prolongation of the present life or for a life hereafter, rather than that they are not at all anxious for either of these things. It would seem to follow that in Mill's

53 ibid., 116-23, 130.
55 See 238 above.
view even the happy among the "unselfish" are not necessarily completely free of ill feeling about death.

The preceding conclusion is supported by Mill's very next sentence, in which he states not that the unselfish who have led happy lives can part with life easily, but that they "can bear to part" with it, implying that they may not be able to do so with ease. Further support is forthcoming from the sentence after--"When mankind cease to need a future existence as a consolation for the sufferings of the present, it will have lost its chief [emphasis added--BK] value to them, for themselves." 56 Clearly the suggestion here is that life after death will by no means have lost all of its value even to the happy unselfish.

Turning now to the selfish, 57 Mill says that unless they believe in personal immortality, they find it hard if not impossible "to keep up any interest in existence." According to him, they tend to look upon the "present life" as "too insignificant to be worth caring about", especially when they get older. The implication would seem to be that among those who "have had their happiness" it is only the selfish who are inordinately attached to life and have difficulty coming to terms with death. 58 Mill then adds that

... if the Religion of Humanity were as sedulously cultivated as the supernatural religions are (and there is no difficulty in conceiving that it might be much more so), all who had received the customary amount of moral cultivation would up to the hour of death live ideally in the life of those who are to follow them: and though doubtless they would often willingly survive as individuals for a much longer period than the present duration of life, it appears to me probable that after a length of time

56 Three Essays, CW, X, 426.

57 Mill regards as selfish all those "who are so wrapped up in self that they are unable to identify their feelings with anything which will survive them, or to feel their life prolonged in their younger contemporaries and in all who help to carry on the progressive movement of human affairs": ibid. Thus in his view one of the distinguishing features of "the best"—"the superior natures", as he in one instance describes them (421)—is precisely their "unselfishness."

58 Ibid., 426.
different in different persons, they would have had enough of existence, and would gladly lie down and take their eternal rest.59

Given that Mill has just spoken of the undesirable tendency of selfish people who do not believe in life after death to become contemptuous of earthly life, one might expect the preceding passage to suggest a way of mitigating or negating that tendency. And indeed it can be read as doing so. A "sedulous" moral education in line with the Religion of Humanity, it appears to say, would go far toward bringing about the selfish individual's full identification with the future generations of humankind, and so would temper his immense desire for "another selfish life beyond the grave."60

However, a problem arises here. This second lengthier quotation recommends that a moral education grounded in the Religion of Humanity comparable in intensity and comprehensiveness to that grounded in the traditional supernatural religions be given to all alike, not merely to the selfish. It would seem to follow that with respect to the desire for life after death the distinction between the selfish and the "unselfish" is not so easily made as Mill's earlier remark about the selfish suggests.

Our interpretation is further supported by Mill's assertion about those having been thus educated (which assertion appears in that second quotation) that "they would often willingly survive as individuals for a much longer period than the present duration of life." Let us substitute for the first three words in this assertion, they would often, the words many of them, thereby sharpening its meaning. We can now more easily recognize that the "many of them" alluded to here are not unambiguously said by Mill to be exclusively or even predominantly of the selfish sort.

The same kind of ambiguity characterizes the next clause—"it appears to me probable that after a length of time different in different persons, they would have had enough of existence, and would gladly lie down and take their eternal rest." Mill does not

59 Ibid., 426-27.
60 Ibid., 426.
clearly state that it is necessarily only the most selfish who would have to have the longest lives to be capable of accepting death more readily. In fact, the distinction between selfish and unselfish seems simply to have been dropped here.

All of this adds up to the conclusion that the unselfish can be just or almost as attached to life, or can be just or almost as desirous of "a future life", as the selfish, even if the reasons for so being are different for each type.

What is more, the second passage set off above, read carefully, is striking in its suggestion that even the "seducious" cultivation of the Religion of Humanity will not necessarily suffice to make all human beings less desirous of life after death. Here for the first time Mill intimates that also needed is a substantial lengthening of the natural life-span, by different amounts for different persons, for many individuals both selfish and unselfish, if they are to be capable of accepting death. (To repeat, Mill does not unambiguously indicate that they would all necessarily be of the more selfish type.) He seems to make substantially increased longevity a *sine qua non* of a fully happy life for most everyone. This stipulation is tantamount to yet another significant qualification of the thrust of some of his earlier statements—for example, the first passage set off above, especially its opening sentence.

As if to underscore just how much more demanding the requirements of true happiness are—and therefore how much more difficult overcoming the need to believe in a future existence will be—than his initial remarks would lead us to suspect, in the very next sentence Mill uses the parenthetical phrase *without looking so far forward.*61 This phrase clearly bears on the second lengthier passage cited above, and tacitly suggests that it may be a very long time before genuine universal happiness is attained. No mention is made earlier of that contingency.

The foregoing ambiguities and complexities of Mill's argument can be explained as follows. Perhaps the selfish would need a more intense and more thorough-going education in line with Religion of Humanity than the unselfish. But it does not follow that the latter would need none at all. First, the distinction which Mill makes between selfish and unselfish is not an absolute but a relative one. It is not as though we are either completely one or the other. Rather, as Mill points out in "Nature", we are each of us selfish or egoistic to a degree, and the relevant distinction is between those in whom other-regarding sentiments such as benevolence and sympathy are by nature strong relative to egoism, and those in whom they are relatively weak. The former can be said to be "unselfish", and the latter, "selfish". Accordingly, insofar as the unselfish are not completely free from selfishness, an education in the spirit of the Religion of Humanity could be of considerable benefit to them too. Such an education would render them even "more capable of deriving happiness from unselfish sources" than they are already, tilting the balance between unselfish and selfish tendencies in their souls still further toward the former.

Furthermore, it may be that the selfish would on average need to live longer than the unselfish to be capable of accepting death. But this does not preclude the possibility of the latter wanting a substantially longer life than is generally possible at present, or of them wishing for life after death. Recalling in the Autobiography the last months of his father's life—the elder Mill had been suffering from "pulmonary consumption"—the younger Mill says that although his father derived pleasure from contemplating "what he had done to make the world better than he found it", he regretted not being able to live longer so as "to do more." Other "unselfish" reasons for wanting a longer life or a life hereafter for oneself besides devotion to the good of humankind can be imagined, for

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62 CW, X, 394-95.

63 CW, I, 211.
example, the pleasures of friendship and the pursuit of knowledge. A little later in "Utility" Mill speaks of the "hope of reunion" with one's deceased beloved as a possible factor in the desire for a future life. At no point does he suggest that this hope can be attributed to selfishness; if anything, he suggests the contrary when he implies that the "more sensitive natures" depend on it the most. And in the Autobiography he seems to hold that consciously devoting one's life, without regard for one's own happiness, to any noble or useful "object"—be it another's happiness, science, art or some "pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end"—is as good an instance of disinterestedness or "unselfishness" as devoting it to the "improvement of mankind."

For that matter we can imagine nobler persons who are convinced of the soul's mortality becoming despondent about life and ceasing to work for its improvement just as easily as we can selfish ones. One need not be an inordinately selfish person to be persuaded that the problem of "earthly happiness" is insoluble, hence that without the promise of fulfillment or redemption in another life as a reward for virtue in this one there is no point in caring about life. Mill himself suggests that the despondency into which he fell at the age of twenty was precipitated by such thoughts as these. He seems even to have considered suicide, and others in a similar situation might be inclined to agree with an idea which appears in the writings of the poet-philosopher Novalis—that the only way out of "this sorrowful condition" and "frightful imprisonment" is for humankind to commit a "universal simultaneous act of Suicide." As demonstrated by his mention of him in Utilitarianism, Mill is aware that the "German Pascal" (as Carlyle admiringly describes Novalis) had considered this idea.

64 Three Essays, CW, X, 427.

65 CW, I, 145, 147. The difficulty even the most generous among those who have led happy and full lives would have identifying completely with the Grand Etre and coming to terms with death is movingly explored in the poetry of George Eliot: see Poems. The Writings of George Eliot (Boston, 1907; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1970), XIX, especially: The Legend of Jubal, 1-39; "Self and Life," 245-49; "The Death of Moses," 257-62; and "O may I join the choir invisible," 271-73. She has been described—with good reason—as the "poet of positivism": editor's Introd. to Poems, viii.
Only inward disunion among the powers of Nature has preserved men hitherto; nevertheless, that great epoch cannot fail to arrive, when the whole family of mankind, by a grand universal Resolve, will snatch themselves from this sorrowful condition, from this frightful imprisonment; and by a voluntary Abdication of their terrestrial abode, redeem their race from this anguish, and seek refuge in a happier world, with their ancient Father.67

And although Mill appears not to take Novalis's "recommendation" too seriously, neither does he dismiss it as a morbid manifestation of excessive selfishness.68 At the very least such a person might, as Mill's remark about Epicureanism earlier in "Utility" suggests, conclude that the sole reasonable alternative to suicide is to lead a purely private, Epicurean way of life, snatching from the jaws of death as many pleasures as niggardly Fortune permits.69 What is more, this need not be a contemptible way of life, one devoted entirely to bodily pleasures. One could conceivably become an adherent of that refined version of a-political hedonism exemplified in antiquity by Lucretius, or of that very different but also highly refined version of it so eloquently propounded in Mill's time by Walter Pater.70 Clearly Mill himself was aware of the former if not also of the latter alternative.

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67 Novalis, as quoted in Carlyle, "Novalis," Essays, II, 211.

68 Utilitarianism, CW, X, 214-15. Our overall argument here is corroborated by what Mill says in the next paragraph (215-16): "Next to selfishness, the principal cause which makes life unsatisfactory, is want of mental cultivation. A cultivated mind—I do not mean that of a philosopher, but any mind to which the fountains of knowledge have been opened, and which has been taught, in any tolerable degree, to exercise its faculties—finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it; in the objects of nature, the achievements of art, the imaginations of poetry, the incidents of history, the ways of mankind past and present, and their prospects in the future. It is possible, indeed, to become indifferent to all this, and that too without having exhausted a thousandth part of it; but only when one has had from the beginning no moral or human interest in these things, and has sought in them only the gratification of curiosity." In other words, not only are the more selfish among unbelievers capable of sliding into despondency; often so too are the less selfish ones. Perhaps only an education in history, art, music and poetry that awakens and fosters "moral and human interest in these things"—an education of the sort called for by the Religion of Humanity—can keep these noble individuals from despairing of life. Nevertheless, Mill hints, even that approach might not always work.

69 CW, X, 420.
Inasmuch as it could strengthen their commitment to virtue, therefore, surely the expectation or hope of life after death would be almost as beneficial to many if not all of the unselfish or "the best" few as it would be to the selfish many. To the former it may even matter more that others have a future life than that they have one. Mill seems to intimate or at least leave open this possibility earlier, when he says about generous natures who live happily that the prospect of a future existence loses "its chief value to them, for themselves [emphasis added—BK]": they might still value it as a prospect for others.  

We can safely assume, then, that in Mill's view not only substantial moral and economic progress but also a marked prolonging of the human life-span must take place if men and women not solely of the selfish kind are to stop caring so much about a life hereafter. To repeat, the assiduous cultivation of the Religion of Humanity alone will not suffice for this purpose. Indeed, one must question whether Mill really does believe that the Religion of Humanity could begin to take hold and stand on its own before the economic aspect of life has been noticeably upgraded and the human life-span appreciably lengthened. Perhaps these improvements at the very least would have to appear within reach.

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71 Three Essays, CW, X, 426. In his Diary entry of 14 Feb. Mill, fearing the imminent demise of his wife, expresses a deep yearning for life after death, primarily for her sake: CW, XXVII, 654.

72 That Mill considered the advent of the Religion of Humanity—not as a mere cult engaging small pockets of individuals here and there, but as a universal religion—a distant future prospect at best is also evident from Auguste Comte, CW, X, 324-27, 358-59. Mill's main argument (325-26), although ostensibly aimed at Comte's moral and social doctrines, applies equally well to his own Religion of Humanity. The argument runs essentially thus: To become the universal religion, the Religion of Humanity must "obtain...universal assent." But no such assent will be forthcoming until there is virtually perfect "accordance of opinion among sociological inquirers." The well educated lay public will defer to the opinion of the experts on any given matter only if the latter are essentially of one mind about it. On the other hand, the science of society itself would have to be at least close to completion for unanimity among social scientists to be attainable. Now the science of society is at present at a very primitive level of development. Even disputes over questions of method have not yet been settled, much less those over questions of its application. The subject matter of sociology is of staggering complexity, and the judgement of the sociologist is in far greater danger of being prejudiced by "personal or class interests and predilections" than, say, that of the chemist or physicist. The new synthesis is "sure to come: but after an unknown duration of hard thought and violent
The fear of death and the desire for immortality

Immediately following the second long passage from "Utility" set off above, Mill abruptly and without warning changes the point. Having dealt briefly with the love of life as one possible cause of the desire for a future existence, he turns now to the fear of death as a second possible cause. He asserts that "those who believe in the immortality of the soul, generally quit life with fully as much, if not more, reluctance, as those who have no such expectation." It is, he says, not so much being dead as it is the act of dying, with all of its "lugubrious accompaniments", that is frightening; and we are all afraid of it because we all have to go through it, regardless of what we expect to happen afterwards. That is why according to him believers and non-believers in a future existence alike give up life reluctantly. "The mere cessation of existence," Mill adds, "is no evil to anyone. . ." If we find the prospect of being dead frightening, it is only because of an "illusion of imagination" which consists in our imagining ourselves after death as though we were somehow alive and feeling ourselves dead.73

The last argument would seem to imply that the fear of death in the sense of the "cessation of existence" will in time cease to be a factor in humankind's desire for life after death. People need only be properly apprised of Mill's argument to recognize that there is nothing to dread here.

The claim that being dead "is no evil to anyone" is, we note, one of the points Mill makes in the final two paragraphs of "Utility" which encourage the simplistic interpretation of their overall argument outlined earlier. What is more, the analysis of the "illusion of imagination" on which Mill bases that claim is not without force; indeed, something like it can be found in Lucretius, Montaigne and Schopenhauer.74

73 *Three Essays, CW, X, 427.*
Nevertheless, we are not entirely convinced. Mill's contrary observation notwithstanding, our own experience suggests that those who do not believe in personal immortality tend to fear death more than those who do. That tendency (assuming it exists) could be explained as follows. The former, if they have given the matter some thought, probably believe that what comes after death is oblivion or non-being or loss of self-awareness or consciousness--forever. They might be inclined to liken being dead to a dreamless, dark slumber from which one is destined never to wake up. And they could find this prospect terrifying. By contrast, believers in immortality approach death with the comforting hope that however painful the act of dying is, there will be something rather than nothing on the other side of it. Therefore they have, it seems, less reason to fear death than non-believers.

To be sure, the non-believer who finds the prospect of being dead daunting may be labouring under the "illusion of imagination" identified by Mill, but it is not at all clear why that should always be the case. Even if it were, how can we be certain that merely identifying and understanding that illusion is enough to free one from its grip? And how are we to understand the fear of being dead in those non-believers who have not fallen prey to that illusion?

We do not know what Mill's answer to the first question would be. His answer to the second would probably be that insofar as it exists, that fear is at bottom nothing other than, or merely derivative from, either an unquenched but potentially quenchable thirst for life or extreme selfishness. And he might well be right, in which case all that need be said on the matter he has already said, apparently.

Yet it is hard to suppress the feeling that although the little he says goes a long way Mill has not exhausted the subject.

Take La Rochefoucauld, for example, who seems less sanguine about the fear of death than Mill. According to him, "amour-propre" or "self-love" is, admittedly, the cause of the fear of death, but it is a self-love we all harbor. Owing to the ubiquity of this sentiment, "every man who knows how to see [death] as it is" and does not "shun envisaging it with all its circumstances"--for instance, destruction of self and "not being able to live eternally"--"finds that it is a dreadful thing", indeed, "the greatest of all evils." Consequently no one, not even the philosopher, can ever be truly indifferent to death. "The pain one takes," says La Rochefoucauld, doubtless with Montaigne in mind, "to make [the opinion that death is no evil] convincing to others and to oneself shows well enough that the undertaking is not easy." In fact he doubts that "any person of good sense has ever believed" that opinion. It seems safe to conclude that whatever its relation to the love of life, the fear of death is for La Rochefoucauld an ineradicable aspect of human nature.75

Now Mill may very well have disagreed with the French duke's view, but what he says does not suffice to refute it. Neither could the appearance of disagreement be dispelled by the rejoinder that La Rochefoucauld has proven only that what we all fear is the act of dying, a point Mill has already conceded. Certain dreadful "circumstances" or aspects of death to which La Rochefoucauld alludes--especially "not being able to live eternally", which is equivalent to eternal non-being--are clearly not reducible to the act of dying.76

We cannot help wondering whether Mill himself did not consider his treatment of the nature and causes of the fear of death less than exhaustive. Perhaps its brevity was meant to be understood in light of the rule of practical wisdom set down in "Theism"

75 Reflexions ou Sentences et Maximes diverses, ed. Lafond; Maxims, trans. Tancock, 504. Tancock's translation of the lines from La Rochefoucauld quoted here has been revised slightly.
76 Ibid.
which we have already noted—the rule that we should not brood over the inescapable evils of life, and should think of them no more than is required by self-interest and duty.

The hope of reunion with one's deceased beloved

Further credence is lent to our last suggestion by what follows in the text of "Utility." Mill once again abruptly and without warning changes the point. The reader's attention is now drawn to a third possible factor in the human desire for life after death—the consolation provided by the expectation or "hope of reunion with those dear" to us who are deceased. Mill explicitly and unequivocally admits that this expectation, together with the solace it brings, is lost to non-believers in a future life. That loss, he says, "is neither to be denied nor extenuated", and "[in] many cases it is beyond the reach of comparison or estimate." In fact, so strong is the sense of that loss in "the more sensitive natures" that it "will always suffice to keep alive" in the rational skeptics among them at least the "imaginative hope" of a life hereafter. The preceding admission is nothing if not disheartening. To use Lucretius' metaphors, it is the "wormwood" of the essay's last section (if not of the essay as a whole), compared with which everything else in that section tastes like "honey." Even so, by making it concisely at the end of the penultimate paragraph—roughly the middle of the section—and surrounding it with more pleasing arguments, Mill is able to soften its blow. Nobody would accuse him of giving rein here to brooding and despair.

77 Three Essays, CW, X, 427.

78 According to Dorothea Krook, in making this admission Mill openly concedes that there is a "serious gap" in the Religion of Humanity's doctrine of immortality which (traditional) Christianity is able to fill, thereby demonstrating once again his "scrupulousness and disinterestedness in the pursuit of truth": Three Traditions of Moral Thought, 194.
Mill's historical evidence

In the ensuing "more pleasing argument" Mill adduces historical evidence for the claim that "mankind can perfectly well do without the belief in a heaven", another of those statements which seems to encourage the simplistic interpretation of the essay's last main argument outlined earlier. The Greeks, for example, had a repugnant notion of the afterlife. "Achilles in the Odyssey," says Mill,

expressed a very natural, and no doubt a very common sentiment, when he said that he would rather be on earth the serf of a needy master, than reign over the whole kingdom of the dead.\(^{79}\)

But the revulsion they felt when contemplating the future life did not prevent the Greeks from enjoying life as much as any other people; nor, according to Mill, did they "[fear] death more."\(^{80}\)

Nevertheless, it is an established fact that the Olympian religion was gradually replaced or supplemented by various cults linked to more appealing ideas of the afterlife, for example, the Eleusinian mysteries. But then why would such beliefs and cults have emerged if, as Mill says, the Greeks "enjoyed life" and could "perfectly well do" for hundreds of years without them? Did they emerge because the Greeks, not enjoying life fully enough, developed a longing for a completely fulfilling future life, or rather because, enjoying the present life immensely, they came to resent the necessity of giving it up?

Mill, far from answering it, fails even to pose the question. We have difficulty believing that ignorance of those cults is the reason, especially given the rich and nuanced knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman history and culture displayed by him in such writings as "Macauley's Lays of Ancient Rome" and his reviews of George Grote's History of Greece.\(^{81}\) Mill instead refers to the "address of the dying emperor Hadrian to

\(^{79}\) Three Essays, CW, X, 427.

\(^{80}\) Ibid.

\(^{81}\) CW, I, 525-32; XI, 273-305, 309-337.
his soul" as evidence of how little the popular conception of the afterlife had changed across the centuries.82 Yet even if he knew nothing whatsoever about the Eleusinian cult, he was surely aware that Christianity had been on the rise for approximately a century by the time of Hadrian's death in 138 A.D. He must also have been aware that this fact casts doubt on the suggestion that never in the history of the Romans did the expectation or hope of some kind of happy future life have a significant bearing on their well-being. Perhaps that is why he actually does not make any such allegation about the Romans.

However, rather than confront the doubts and questions raised by his use of the Greeks and Romans thus far, Mill moves on to another historical example--Buddhism, which he claims enjoys a larger following than either Christianity or Islam. He cites the Buddhist belief that the reward for a life of virtue is "annihilation", or "the cessation... of all conscious or separate existence" (his interpretation of Nirvana), as further proof that death understood as annihilation is "not really or naturally terrible."83 But he is silent about another key tenet of Hinduism and Buddhism--the belief that life is inherently utterly wretched and worthless--though he could hardly have been ignorant of it. So, on the one hand we have the fact, of which Mill was surely aware, that over the centuries a large part of humanity has been taught, apparently with considerable success, to strive for Nirvana as an escape from the pain and misery of life. On the other we have Mill's earlier statement that it is the miserable and down-trodden who crave a future existence the most. How Mill might have reconciled this statement with that fact is far from clear.

What, then, is to be made of Mill's historical evidence, full as it is of ambiguities and anomalies? We are not suggesting that it actually contradicts Mill's claim about humankind's ability to "do without the belief in heaven" which it is apparently intended to support. But we can safely say that that support is not as unequivocal or unambiguous as

82 Three Essays, CW, X, 427.
83 Ibid., 427-28.
a more casual reading might incline one to think. At best Mill's historical evidence shows that some individuals or peoples have been able to do without the belief in a blessed future life. Who they were, what sort of character they had, how they lived and, above all, how happy they were (for to say that we can "perfectly well do [emphasis added—BK] without the belief in heaven" is not necessarily to say that we can do perfectly well without it84)—these are among the questions either unsatisfactorily answered or left unanswered.

Mill's closing comments

The last point may help to explain why Mill ends the final part of the essay, and therewith the essay as a whole, with the following remarkable, and ultimately highly revealing, passage:

Surely this [Buddhist belief] is a proof that the idea [of annihilation] is not really or naturally terrible; that not philosophers only, but the common order of mankind, can easily reconcile themselves to it, and even consider it as a good; and that it is no unnatural part of the idea of a happy life, that life itself be laid down, after the best that it can give has been fully enjoyed through a long lapse of time; when all its pleasures, even those of benevolence, are familiar, and nothing untasted and unknown is left to stimulate curiosity and keep up the desire of prolonged existence. It seems to me not only possible but probable, that in a higher, and, above all, a happier condition of human life, not annihilation but immortality may be the burdensome idea; and that human nature, though pleased with the present, and by no means impatient to quit it, would find comfort and not sadness in the thought that it is not chained through eternity to a conscious existence which it cannot be assured that it will always wish to preserve.85

Perhaps, as Mill says, the Buddhist idea of Nirvana is such a proof. Nevertheless, he indicates more explicitly and clearly here than at any earlier point that as a rule human beings will be capable of whole-heartedly accepting death when and only when they are

84 See 257, n. 86 below.

85 Three Essays, CW. X, 428.
satiated with life. They must first have enjoyed all the good things in life so completely that no new pleasures remain to be tasted.

It should by now be clear that the standard or ideal of happiness Mill invokes in this concluding passage is far higher, far more demanding than any of his earlier statements in the final part of the essay would lead one to believe. The happiness required for humankind to be capable of approaching death without fear and regret is of a kind and degree which few if any—maybe only some philosophers—have ever attained. It certainly has been, is, and for a long time will be, beyond the reach of the majority, and perhaps even of most of the non-philosophers among "the best." Mill is therefore not so much describing a condition of human life that has always been attainable (albeit not by everyone everywhere) as he is one that humanity will have attained only at some very distant point in the future. He is, to use his own words, "looking far forward" now, to a time—call it "the end of history"—when the degree of our mastery over nature greatly exceeds that at which even the most "civilized" societies to date have operated.

86 That may explain why in his earlier comment on the Greeks' capacity to "perfectly well do" without the belief in a blissful afterlife, Mill looks for his exemplar of that capacity not to Socrates but to Achilles. In his discussion of the question of the Homeric poems' authorship in "A Review of the first Two Volumes of 'Grote's History of Greece' " (CW, XI, 290-97), Mill displays an intimate knowledge of the Iliad as a whole, and of Achilles' character in particular. For this reason especially it is hard to believe Mill would have regarded the life of Achilles— wrathful, brooding and fiercely resentful of death as the Achaian hero was—as exemplifying the ideal of happiness he adumbrates in the concluding passage of "Utility."

That Mill knew the Greeks at the height of their civilization were generally far from indifferent to death is also suggested by the following passage from a letter he wrote to his wife while in Greece in the spring of 1855 (which passage describes the sculptures he saw inside the temple of Theseus in the Athenian Acropolis): "The interior [of the temple] has been made a museum for the sculptures they occasionally dig up & I was not at all prepared for their extreme beauty; there is one statue very like, & I think equal to, the Mercury of Antinous of the Vatican, & a number of sepulchral groups in which grace & dignity of attitude & the expression of composed grief in the faces & gestures [emphasis added—BK] are carried as far as I think mortal art has ever reached": John Mill to Harriet Mill, 19 Apr. [1855], CW, XIV, 426.

87 In "Nature" Mill suggests that the advance of civilization is coextensive with the mastery of nature. "All praise of Civilization, or Art, or Contrivance," he says, "is so much praise of Nature; an admission of imperfection, which it is man's business, and merit, to be always endeavouring to correct or mitigate": Three Essays, CW, X, 381. Mill's Baconian conviction that the scientific-technical conquest of nature is critical to the attainment of universal happiness is cogently expressed in Utilitarianism, CW, X, 216-17, and Principles of Political Economy, CW, III, 756-57. Nevertheless, as is made clear in Principles (ibid.), he doubted that "mechanical inventions" substantially more beneficial to humankind in general than those now at our disposal will be made before the "stationary state" is attained. It should be pointed out that Mill uses the term stationary state to describe the state or condition of an economy which has reached the natural limit of its capacity to accumulate capital and hence to expand. In a society in that condition, since even the
As for Mill's historical "proofs", understood properly, that is, in light of his concluding comments, they are not so much proofs as they are reasons for hoping that at the end of history we will be capable of facing death with unwavering equanimity. To be more precise, insofar as it proves that in an imperfectly happy "condition of life" certain segments of humanity could "perfectly well do without the belief in heaven", past history permits the hope, though no more than the hope, that in a "happier condition" most everyone and not only philosophers will do perfectly well without it. It is perhaps because the past provides grounds only for hope that in the very last sentence Mill speaks of the acceptance of death in the future as "probable", not certain, and when making his prediction, uses more tentative words like may and would instead of the more confident-sounding will.

It follows from the last point that even in the happiest of all possible conditions of life certain individuals—not necessarily all selfish—might still love life or loathe or fear death enough to need at least the "imaginary hope" of a life hereafter. Again, Mill himself concedes as much toward the end of the penultimate paragraph, when discussing the "hope of reunion with those dear" to one who have passed away.

Thus, the distance between Mill's views and those of Lucretius and company concerning the love of life and fear or hatred of death is after all not as great as it appeared to be initially. Although Mill doubts that our love of life is insatiable, he agrees with the others that most of us would want to live longer. Moreover, at times the others, particularly Lucretius and Schopenhauer, seem receptive to the idea that humankind does not crave unending life, whereas Mill is by no means altogether closed to the contrary view.88

lower classes enjoy a fairly high material standard of living, "getting on" is, according to him, inevitably replaced as the dominant concern by "mental culture", "moral and social progress", and "improving the Art of Living" (752-57). An important implication of all this would seem to be that the Religion of Humanity could not begin truly to take hold until well after the stationary state had arrived.

Let us for the sake or argument grant that in post-historical civilization, with nature well under human control and the Religion of Humanity firmly ensconced, the vast majority of humankind, able to live as long as they like and to enjoy fully all of life's pleasures, including those of benevolence, are so accepting of death that they no longer need to believe in or even hope for a future life to be happy. But what will happen to all the intervening generations of humankind?

Apparently unlike Marx, Mill has not forgotten about them. The implication of Mill's last word on the matter seems to be that, like their predecessors, they—that is, virtually all of the selfish but also many of the unselfish among them—shall love life or loathe death, and therefore shall desire life after death, albeit less and less as time passes. And as he acknowledges at the outset, no godless Religion of Humanity, but only some form of theism will appease them.

Consequently, according to Mill, the completion of the grand historical task of ameliorating human existence might eventually render supernaturalism per se superfluous (though this eventuality is far from certain); however, in the intervening decades or centuries some form of it would still be highly beneficial, especially to the non-philosophers, including those with "superior natures." In fact Mill intimates as much early in the penultimate paragraph when (assuming that moral and material progress will continue) he predicts a gradual decline in humankind's desire for a future life rather than a sudden and precipitous one.

Yet as we have seen, the only kind of theism which has any chance of surviving in the age of science is the Platonic theism of hope and imagination. Admittedly, since it holds out merely the "imaginary hope" rather than the promise of a future life, this intellectually and morally most acceptable of theisms, should it ever take hold, would likely be less effective than traditional religion in allaying the fear or hatred of death. Nevertheless, Mill implies, for the vast number of individuals living in the intervening, "historical" period who have difficulty coming to terms with death—and, to repeat, it is
not only the selfish who have this difficulty—that hope would be better than none at all. It would presumably still be enough to inspire the new theism's adherents, especially the best among them, to work for the improvement of humanity with an energy and enthusiasm which the Religion of Humanity alone could not evoke. In this way it would contribute significantly to the preservation and progress of civilization. Accordingly, the Platonic theism would seem better suited than the Religion of Humanity to perform the offices of religion, especially for the rest of history, so much so as to urge upon us the conclusion that for the next while we should put our time and energy into it more than its godless counterpart.

The interpretation of Mill's argument in the final section of "Utility" with which we began, then, is not so much false as it is simplistic. The questions addressed in this section are more complex, and the answers more nuanced and tentative, than is allowed for by that interpretation. Again, according to a more complete interpretation of that argument, the Religion of Humanity might be sufficient in the post-historical period, but it is unlikely to be of much help long before then. For at least the remainder of the historical period the Platonic theism of hope and imagination would in principle be highly beneficial, and not only to the selfish but also to many of the unselfish. If Mill refrains from labouring such complexities and dubieties in "Utility", it is, we surmise, because labouring them would likely defeat one important practical purpose of the essay, which is to promote the Religion of Humanity. Yet neither does he simply ignore them. He merely indicates them in a highly succinct and subtle manner, at times "teaching by implication", so that anyone who reads the final part of the essay slowly and reflectively should be able to discern them.89

89 We cannot here undertake a comprehensive comparison between Mill's and Beauchamp's treatments of the question of religion's usefulness. It suffices to highlight the key differences between them which throw into relief the non-Benthamic or Coleridgean character of Mill's treatment of this question in "Utility." To begin with, Mill's approach to the problem takes into account historical development, whereas Beauchamp's argument is entirely sub specie aeternitatis. Thus Mill is able to consider seriously the hypothesis that traditional religion, though perhaps of no value now, was at one time a great boon to the West, and remains so in other parts of the world, even if it can never be proven true. Beauchamp, by contrast, can make no
The reasonableness of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination in "Theism"

The question is: How consistent is the treatment of the problem of mortality and its solution in "Utility" with its counterpart in "Theism"? At first one gets the impression that the view of death held in "Utility" is less dire than the one held in the "Theism", and that in the latter he argues for a permanent role for the Platonic theism of hope and imagination, as opposed to the merely transitional one apparently favoured in the former.

Indications of inconsistency

To recall, early in the final chapter of "Theism" Mill seems to say that death is one of life's principal evils, and that it will likely remain so—for instance, by rendering life "small and confined" as well as insignificant—even after moral and material progress have freed life from the "greater part of its present calamities." Here he does not, as he does in "Utility", attempt to take the sting out of death by arguing that once life has been ameliorated, humankind will likely cease regarding death with fear and revulsion.

But there is more. After making his general argument for the reasonableness or desirability of a Platonic theism of hope and imagination, Mill lists the main "beneficial effects" which the new theism would presumably have: First, it would make "life and

such relativistic distinction, but must decide one way or the other—and decides against the utility of religion. Again, Mill thinks some form of theism of hope and imagination, hence a theism consisting largely of poetry, will be necessary both to the happiness of the individual and to the cultivation and pursuit of virtue as an end in itself, at least for the duration of the age of transition. Beauchamp, on the other hand, sees no value in theism of any kind. Even the possibility of using poetry and art—whether apart from or as part of a Religion of Humanity—to strengthen especially in "superior natures" the love of virtue for its own sake is not given any thought. For that matter, Beauchamp seems not at all concerned about the disinterested pursuit of virtue. Evidently in his view rational self-interest is completely sufficient for the attainment of temporal happiness. All these differences between Mill and Beauchamp are attributable to the "Germano-Coleridgean" aspect of "Utility", of which not a trace can be found in Beauchamp's work. Cf. Philip Beauchamp, Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind, with Mill, "Utility of Religion," in light of: Autobiography, CW. I, 169, 171; "Bentham," CW. X, 94-96, 113-114; and "Coleridge," CW. X, 125, 131-41, 145-46.

We agree with Himmelfarb regarding the Benthamic spirit of Harriet Mill's outline of "Utility." But whereas Himmelfarb attaches considerable importance to the fact that it was Harriet Mill who prompted Mill to write the essay and first formulated its theme, we on the other hand are more impressed by the extent to which Mill deviated from that formulation.

90 CW. X, 483.
human nature a far greater thing to the feelings." Second, it would give "greater strength as well as greater solemnity" or gravity to other-regarding sentiments like benevolence. Third, it would "allay" the painful sense of "that irony of Nature" whereby the lives of wise and noble individuals are often cut short before their promise of benefit to humankind has been made good. Fourth, it would check the depressing effect which the awareness that *vita brevis, ars longa* ("life is short, art long") can have on the employment of art "in improving and beautifying the soul"; for we would be permitted the hope of reaping the harvest of all our efforts at self-improvement in the future life if not in this one. Fifth, it would to some extent free our "loftier aspirations" from the constraint put on them by the "disastrous feeling of 'not worth while'" which springs from "a sense of the insignificance of human life." 91

Mill then asserts that the "gain obtained" from the additional impetus given by these effects to the lifelong effort to improve one's character is "obvious." Clearly humankind as a whole would be the ultimate beneficiary. What is perhaps less obvious but still worth pointing out is that the individual on whose character Mill says the Platonic theism would have such "beneficial effects" would not be exclusively of the selfish type. Indeed, it is hard to imagine certain of those effects, especially the third one, being felt by a narcissist.

More important, all those effects point to death as the fundamental problem. Death, Mill seems to say, is not only evil insofar as it means parting unwillingly with life and its pleasures. It is also evil because of the morally and socially injurious effects which the consciousness of it (if it is believed to be final) can have. Mill clearly indicates that that awareness can make people, particularly the more thoughtful and sensitive among them, gloomy or cynical and apathetic, thereby rendering them incapable of working energetically for the amelioration of the human condition. With many of our

91 Ibid., 485.
best and brightest thus enervated, progress could eventually grind to a halt, hence society
could begin to stagnate, perhaps even to decay. Again, in Mill's view the future of a
society so afflicted is far from certain.

In addition, here too Mill does not explicitly say that the problem of mortality is
strictly of a historical or temporary nature. He appears, instead, to allude to the Epicurean
challenge brought up in "Utility", and to contradict the argument he makes there that the
Religion of Humanity can successfully meet that challenge.

The conclusion one seems forced to draw is that according to "Theism" the
Platonic theism of hope and imagination will be highly desirable if not obligatory both
from now to the end of history and in the post-historical era. Perhaps, then, in their
treatments of the problem of death and the solution to it, the two essays do contradict
each other after all. Perhaps Mill changed his mind in the interim, finally positioning
himself closer to orthodoxy, as Himmelfarb and maybe Morley and Bain hold.92

Helen Taylor's view

Even so, a different interpretation is possible. Helen Taylor, Mill's stepdaughter,
argues in her introduction to the Three Essays that a "really careful comparison between
different passages" from them will show that their teachings are "fundamentally
consistent." All apparent "discrepancies" among them, she says, can be explained either
by the last essay's comparatively unrefined state, Mill having been deprived by death of
the opportunity to polish it as much as he would have wanted; or by differences of "tone",
and of "apparent estimate of the relative weight of different considerations", which are
bound to arise when the scope or approach changes from one treatment of a given subject
to the next.93 We shall attempt to prove that her view is substantially correct.

92 See Morley, "Mr. Mill's Three Essays," 200-01, 213; Bain, John Stuart Mill, 136; Himmelfarb, editor's

93 Helen Taylor, "Introductory Notice" to Three Essays, CW, X, 371-72.
Explaining the "inconsistencies"

Let us return to those potential beneficial effects listed above. Two questions arise here: First, will each of these benefits always be obtainable exclusively from theism? Second, will we always want to avail ourselves of them? On one plausible interpretation Mill answers both questions in the affirmative in "Theism", hence contradicts the predominantly negative answers to them implicitly given in "Utility." But in actual fact the text of "Theism" does not require that interpretation, and another one can be given which would help to dispel the appearance of inconsistency between the two essays.

Take the third and fourth benefits. The argument of "Utility" seems to imply that both are transitory. At the end of history, the human life-span having been sufficiently lengthened and external nature mastered, the saying *vita brevis, ars longa* will presumably no longer hold. And the painful sense of "that irony of nature" whereby the living flame of genius and nobility of soul is prematurely snuffed out will have little if anything on which to subsist. The first, second and fifth benefits—giving greater strength and gravity to the other-regarding sentiments, "making human nature and life a greater thing to the feelings", and encouraging "loftier aspirations"—might be needful only for the remainder of the historical period. But even if they are needful afterwards, in the post-historical era, according to "Utility" we should be able to obtain them to a sufficient degree from the Religion of Humanity. Certainly the discussion of these benefits in "Theism" does not preclude that possibility.

94 That we are correct in attributing such expectations to Mill is confirmed by *Utilitarianism*, CW, X, 216-17.

95 Admittedly, in the chapter on immortality Mill does acknowledge the "disagreeableness of giving up existence, (to those at least to whom it has hitherto been pleasant)"; *Three Essays*, CW, X, 463. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement should not be taken to mean that he now believes the love of life is by nature insatiable. A few pages later (466) he clearly precludes any such conclusion by suggesting that only "some of us" desire "a boundless extent of life"—which, to recall, is essentially what he argues in "Utility." Probably for this reason Mill tacitly indicates early in the final chapter of "Theism" that not everyone in the Christian world will need the hope that a Deity exists who through Jesus Christ has revealed Himself to us and promised us eternal life (483). Regarding the love of life or fear of death, therefore, and the theistic
A similar argument can be made concerning the other potential benefits of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination mentioned in the last essay: the edifying influence of a "Divine Person" held up as an embodiment of moral perfection and a "model for imitation"; and the quickening effect of the "feeling" awakened in us of being God's indispensable auxiliaries in the war against evil. Of neither beneficial influence does Mill say that it will always be needful. In fact, Mill gives us reason to think otherwise. Regarding the former he states explicitly that its "most valuable part" is attributable not to God but to Jesus Christ, who can continue to exert that salutary influence even when he has been deprived by "rational criticism" of everything except his human reality and virtue. It follows that, as Mill argues in "Utility", we are or should eventually be able to do without God as our prime model of virtue. The implication of what Mill says about the latter benefit would seem to be that once the war against evil has been won, God will no longer need humankind's help--and neither will humankind any longer need God's.

Nevertheless, we can imagine someone objecting, "Let us take a closer look at a particular passage in 'Theism' which you have more than once brought to our attention:

To me it seems that human life, small and confined as it is, and as, considered merely in the present, it is likely to remain even when the progress of material and moral improvement may have freed it from the greater part of its present calamities, stands greatly in need of any wider range and greater height of aspiration for itself and its destination, which the exercise of imagination can yield to it without running counter to the evidence of fact; and that it is a part of wisdom to make the most of any, even small, probabilities on this subject, which furnish imagination with any footing to support itself upon.96

96 Ibid., 483.
Surely this passage contradicts the teaching of "Utility" that the Religion of Humanity has the potential adequately to perform all the important functions of religion, like satisfying the "craving for higher things." 

In our opinion it does not. Yes, Mill does imply that we need some form of theism, but he does not explicitly and unambiguously say that we will always need it, and that the Religion of Humanity will never be able adequately to meet our religious needs. In fact, in saying that (earthly) life is "likely" to remain "small and confined" even after moral and economic progress have freed it from the "greater part" of its current difficulties, Mill tacitly suggests that at some future time it might cease to be "small and confined", especially when still further moral and economic progress have been made. Should humankind's potential for happiness and nobility ever be fully realized, the need to use the imagination to elevate and enlarge life might then vanish. At the very least it might diminish to the point where the Religion of Humanity would perhaps be sufficient.

Furthermore, Mill says at the end of "Theism" that he "cannot entertain a doubt" that the Religion of Humanity is "destined, with or without supernatural sanctions, to be the religion of the Future." The seeming certainty with which he makes this prophecy strongly suggests that he had no very grave doubts regarding the godless religion's ultimate adequacy either.

**Indications of the Platonic theism's transitional role**

But then if our interpretation is correct, why is Mill not more explicit about the transitional nature of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination?

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97 Ibid., 489.

98 "Strongly suggests", perhaps, but not "proves." Later on (285-88) we shall consider other possible reasons for that show of confidence. Suffice it for now to point out that those reasons will be seen to apply equally well to his show of confidence in the Religion of Humanity's ultimate sufficiency in "Utility."
Practically speaking, Mill could not openly say, "What we need now is some transitional or provisional form of supernaturalism." People can hardly be expected to take seriously a new prophecy if they are told it will serve only as a stopgap. Besides, Mill might not have been entirely certain that the Platonic theism's role should be merely transitional. Under these circumstances, the best he could do without being misleading was to say simply that we need that theism.

Even so, there are in "Theism" several clear indications that he saw it primarily as a transitional or temporary form of worship. While analyzing cheerfulness and high-mindedness with a view to proving the desirability of certain uses of the imagination, he lauds these dispositions because of their usefulness in a condition of life far inferior to what it can and perhaps eventually will be. Clearly he is talking about the present and foreseeable future rather than the rest of time. In fact, the main practical issue here, as it is throughout the chapter, is how to motivate people to work with energy and enthusiasm for the improvement of humankind--people, that is, who live in societies that have as yet much economic and moral progress to undergo, who are thus still solidly "in" history.

Take also the following quotation from the final paragraph of "Theism":

One elevated feeling this form of religious idea [the Platonic theism of hope and imagination] admits of, which is not open to those who believe in the omnipotence of the good principle in the universe, the feeling of helping God--ofrequiting the good he has given by a voluntary cooperation which he, not being omnipotent, really needs, and by which a somewhat nearer approach may be made to the fulfillment of his purposes. The conditions of human existence are highly favorable to the growth of such a feeling [emphasis added--BK] inasmuch as a battle is constantly going on, in which the humblest human creature is not incapable of taking some part, between the powers of good and those of evil, and in which every even the smallest help to the right side has its value in promoting the very slow and often almost insensible progress by which good is gradually gaining ground from evil, yet gaining it so visibly at considerable intervals as to promise the very distant but not uncertain final victory of Good.99

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99 CW, X, 488.
Not only does the preceding passage, which reminds us of a potential benefit already
spoken of in "Utility", show that Mill is here concerned primarily with the non-physical
needs of the remaining portion of history. It also strongly suggests that the Platonic
theism of hope and imagination is especially well suited to that period. For, to reiterate a
point Mill evidently invites us to infer, once the war against evil has been won and history
has come to an end, it is by no means clear why God should have any need of us or we of
Him.101

The closest Mill comes to acknowledging explicitly the chiefly transitional nature
of the Platonic theism's role is at the very end of "Theism." Although at the start of the
final paragraph Mill says that this theism is "excellently fitted to aid and fortify" the
Religion of Humanity—and he does so without denying to it some such auxiliary function
even in the post-historical period--he closes with the following:

[That the Religion of Humanity] is destined, with or without
supernatural sanctions, to be the religion of the Future I cannot entertain
a doubt. But it appears to me that supernatural hopes, in the degree and
kind in which what I have called rational skepticism does not refuse to
sanction them, may still contribute not a little to give to this religion its
due ascendancy over the human mind [emphases added—BK].102

That is to say, even if it could help the Religion of Humanity gain ascendancy, the
Platonic theism itself might eventually fade into oblivion.103

100 Ibid., 425; see also "Nature," ibid., 389-90.

101 According to Mill's theology, at the end of history we might still need God, but perhaps only if we
continue to desire life after death and God has the power both to satisfy and to frustrate that desire. As
should by now be clear, in Mill's view quite possibly none of these conditions will obtain.

102 CW, X, 489.

103 Our interpretation of the view of the future role and prospects of both the Platonic theism of hope and
imagination and the Religion of Humanity put forward in "Theism" gains a measure of indirect support
from John Morley. In his essay "The Death of Mr. Mill", Morley recalls the highlights of a day he spent
with Mill at his own home in the country shortly before the latter's death. Evidently they discussed a wide
range of issues, and the following is Morley's recollection, based on some "rough notes" on the events of
that day "written at the time in a letter to a friend", of a portion of what was said on the topic of religion:
"Spoke of the modern tendency to pure theism, and met the objection that it retards improvement by turning
the minds of some of the best men from social affairs, by the counter-proposition that it is useful to society,
apart from the question of its truth,—useful as a provisional belief, because peoples will identify serviceable
Rhetorical differences between "Utility" and "Theism"

"Utility" and "Theism", then, are fundamentally in agreement as regards both the problem of mortality and the future role of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination. The former essay is really more open than it appears to be at first glance to the possibility that this theism will always be useful to humankind, the latter, to the possibility that its utility will be temporary only. Each essay in its own way brings out the importance of the Platonic theism for the immediate and foreseeable future without categorically denying to it any lesser value, any minor or auxiliary function in the post-historical era.

There are, to be sure, rhetorical differences between the two essays, owing chiefly to the fact that their main purposes are different. If "Utility" appears to put less "weight" on the theistic element than does "Theism", that may well be because, in Helen Taylor's words, it "takes a wider view and includes a larger number of considerations." Another likely reason is this. "Utility", we recall, seeks to promote the Religion of Humanity, to help establish it as the religion of the future. Perhaps Mill believed that he was more likely to succeed, moreover without resorting to deception, if he indicated implicitly instead of stating openly that it might be a long time before the Religion of Humanity could begin to take hold, and if he gave minimal attention to the Platonic theism of hope and imagination. As should be clear from our analysis, that is what Mill does in "Utility."

On the other hand, Mill's practical aim in "Theism" can be said to be the promotion of the Platonic theism primarily, though not exclusively, as a transitional form of worship.

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ministry to men with service of God. Thinks we cannot with any sort of precision define the coming modification of religion, but anticipates that it will undoubtedly rest upon the solidarity of mankind, as Comte said, and as you and I believe. Perceives two things, at any rate, which are likely to lead men to invest this with the moral authority of a religion; first, they will become more and more impressed by the awful fact that a piece of conduct to-day may prove a curse to men and women scores and even hundreds of years after the author of it is dead; and second, they will more and more feel that they can only satisfy their sentiment of gratitude to seen or unseen benefactors, can only repay the untold benefits they have inherited, by diligently maintaining the traditions of service": Nineteenth-Century Essays, ed. Stansky, 109-10.

104 Our sense of this agreement is reinforced by the silence in "Theism" about the one reason suggested in "Utility" for attributing a permanent utility to the Platonic theism—the "hope of reunion with those dear" to ourselves who are deceased.

105 Helen Taylor, "Introductory Notice" to Three Essays, CW, X, 372.
Again, if in the latter essay the point that that theism might prove to be only temporarily useful is conveyed by implication, it may be because Mill judged that making the point explicitly would defeat his purpose. But the existence of such rhetorical differences spells no trouble for the view that Mill's "manner of thinking had undergone no substantial change" from the one essay to the other.

**Concluding remarks**

Let us sum up what we have learned in this chapter. According to Mill, reason and science by themselves cannot satisfy all of our moral and spiritual needs; cultivation of the feelings and the imagination is indispensable to temporal happiness. However, the ongoing march of science, by undermining traditional religion, threatens to impoverish the moral imagination to an extent detrimental to virtue. A substitute for traditional religion must be found which is scientifically admissible and which can provide the moral imagination with much needed aliment. The Platonic theism of hope and imagination, Mill suggests, could well be that substitute. It would be useful, firstly, in dealing with the problem of mortality. By holding out the hope of life after death, it would help to enlarge or dignify earthly life and allay the "unbearable lightness of being." It would give us the hope that the suffering and pain encountered in the present life will be at least partially requited in the future life, and that we will be reunited with our deceased loved ones. It would strengthen and make more solemn such other-regarding sentiments as benevolence and sympathy. In these various ways the Platonic theism would presumably counteract the enervating and demoralizing effect which the belief in the finality of death often has, at the same time bolstering our desire to work for the improvement of humankind. Furthermore, it would give additional impetus to virtue by assigning to humankind the role of God's auxiliaries in the war of good against evil. And it would provide us with a morally coherent and thus wholly salutary Divine model of virtue. Hence Mill's opinion that it would be wise to foster this form of theism in the age of science.
True, many of these benefits could be obtained in a higher degree from a more
dogmatic kind of theism. Nevertheless, Mill avers, no such theism can survive close
scientific scrutiny. A probabilistic, poetic theism alone is scientifically admissible and
therefore at all feasible now, and we can only hope that for those “in need of gods” it
would be sufficient.

Moreover, in Mill’s estimation the usefulness of the Platonic theism of hope and
imagination would perhaps be greatest in the remaining part of history, although it could
possibly extend to the post-historical era. The Religion of Humanity might well become
sufficient as we approach the end of history; but in the meantime most men and women,
possibly even the majority of those with superior natures, will need the supernatural.
Again, Mill hopes that the Platonic theism will go far towards satisfying that need—
especially for the best among us. For their commitment to virtue will thus be
strengthened, and the future of civilization secured.

Having followed Helen Taylor’s advice and made a "really careful comparison
between different passages" from "Utility" and "Theism", we have concluded that Mill's
treatments of the problem of mortality and the theistic aspect of its solution in these two
essays are "fundamentally consistent." The differences between them we have found to
be mainly rhetorical. If our argument is correct, then a further step has been taken in
establishing the inner coherence and unity of his political philosophy, as well as in
demonstrating the necessity of a still more careful and receptive, though no less probing,
examination of that philosophy.

Nevertheless, although Mill believed that the Platonic theism of hope and
imagination would in principle be useful at least as a transitional form of worship, as has
already been noted, he seems to have had considerable doubts regarding its viability or
potential efficacy even in the short run. His handling of this as well as other, related
issues is the main subject of the ensuing chapter.
10/ THE PROBLEM OF THE PLATONIC THEISM OF HOPE AND IMAGINATION

In this chapter we attempt to explain why, although he makes a persuasive case for the Platonic theism of hope and imagination in theory, and does what he can to promote it, Mill believes that in practice we must ultimately bank on the Religion of Humanity as the religion of the future. We also attempt to explain how in his view the progress of science has necessitated this strategy, and thereby further to illuminate the social and moral implications of the quarrel between science and religion as he understood them.

Why promote a theism of doubtful issue?

To recall, a key question dealt with in the preceding chapter is this: If the Religion of Humanity can perform the most important functions of religion better than any form whatever of supernaturalism, then why concern ourselves with the Platonic theism of hope and imagination? Is there not a contradiction between that concern and Mill's assertion of the Religion of Humanity's superiority to all forms of supernaturalism?

As it has unfolded thus far, the answer in short is that probably only at some distant future time might a godless religion be capable of fully satisfying humankind's religious needs, and that at least until then these needs might be better met by the Platonic theism of hope and imagination.

However, this will not quite suffice as an answer--especially since the Platonic theism as Mill pictures it promises every benefit promised by the Religion of Humanity
plus a few more, hence seems potentially no less beneficial than its godless counterpart.\footnote{So much, at any rate, should be clear from the comparison made in the preceding chapter between the Religion of Humanity's possible benefits and those of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination. See 261-63, 264-66 above.} Given all its possible benefits, if that theism can see us through the rest of history, then why not, one wonders, simply stay with it afterwards instead of promoting the Religion of Humanity?

We have seen that according to Mill the scientific support for the Platonic theism is so meagre as to permit only the mere hope that it is true. As he points out in several places, a theism based solely on hope, no matter how superior its conception of God to that of traditional, dogmatic Christianity, is bound to be less influential than the latter was in its prime, say, in the Middle Ages.\footnote{Three Essays, \textit{CW}, X, 486-87, 488. In his article "John Stuart Mill on Christianity" Karl Britton probes this shortcoming of a theism founded on "imaginative hope" as Mill conceives it. Although he acknowledges that Mill knows a theism of hope and imagination "cannot have the power over men that an actual transcendental belief would have" (\textit{James and John Stuart Mill: Papers of the Centenary Conference}, ed. Robson and Laine, 32), like Walter Pater ("Art and Religion"), Britton appears to overestimate the viability and durability Mill attributes to the former. (He states, for instance, that according to Mill it is possible not merely to wish but actually to "hope for something that altogether transcends experience" [33]. The implication—which by its falsity proves the falsity of his statement—is that in Mill's view the Platonic theism of hope and imagination can survive even the confirmation of the Darwinian hypothesis.) The reason for the overestimation may well be his opinion that "to deny that we can now have any evidence for it is, on Mill's final account, irrelevant to what we may hope" (32). Yet as has already been shown, Mill ties hope to evidence and holds that where there is no supporting evidence there is no hope—even in the absence of grounds for denial. And it is because the evidence for it is meagre and ultimately uncertain that Mill has, as we hope to have made abundantly clear by the end of this chapter, little confidence in the future of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination. We should also note that Britton overlooks the very last sentence of "Theism", in which Mill declares that the Religion of Humanity "is destined to be the religion of the future" and then tacitly indicates that the Platonic theism might have little or no bearing on the final outcome: Three Essays, \textit{CW}, X, 488-89.} This consideration alone seems reason enough to be skeptical about the future prospects of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination. And from Mill's point of view the fact that the Darwinian hypothesis cannot be dismissed and might eventually be confirmed does nothing to dispel such doubts. No wonder, therefore, if he should have difficulty imagining that theism as the religion of the future.

Yet the foregoing considerations seem good reasons for doubting the efficacy of the Platonic theism not only in the distant but also in the nearer future. How, it might be
asked, could Mill be certain of that theism's capacity to sustain us through the remainder of the historical period?

In our opinion Mill was not certain. Nowhere does he say that he is. Let us look once more at what he says at the end of "Theism":

But it appears to me that supernatural hopes, in the degree and kind in which what I have called rational scepticism does not refuse to sanction them, may still contribute not a little to give to [the Religion of Humanity] its due ascendancy over the human mind.3

This passage clearly implies that the Platonic theism might end up contributing hardly at all to the rise of the Religion of Humanity, hence that it might play an insignificant role even in the interim. Mill was indeed highly uncertain.4

For that matter, Mill's claim that the Religion of Humanity can perform the most important functions of religion better than any form whatever of theism cannot be adequately understood except in light of his uncertainty about the future of the Platonic theism. To repeat, his argument in the final chapter of "Theism" strongly suggests that the Platonic theism of hope and imagination is in principle at least as beneficial as the Religion of Humanity--maybe even more beneficial. If such is in fact his view, then Mill can make the above claim about the latter without contradicting himself only because he has grave doubts concerning the former's efficacy and appeal.

But if the future of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination is for Mill so uncertain, why, again, is he not more candid about this fact? Why even bother trying to

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3 Three Essays, CW, X, 489.

4 A further indication of Mill's uncertainty is given in his statement in "Utility" that he has "known [the Platonic theism] to be devoutly held by at least one [emphasis added--BK] cultivated and conscientious person of our own day": ibid., 425. There is, we suggest, a hint of irony in this statement. Mill was surely aware that explicitly specifying such a low number of adherents was unlikely to make for perfect confidence in that theism's growing power. Not surprisingly, he withholds that information in "Theism", quite possibly because he is more concerned to promote the Platonic theism there than he is in "Utility."

Incidentally, the fact that Mill, while claiming to know of at least one subscriber to this irreproachable form of theism, gives no indication of ever having been a subscriber himself, or of ever having suffered from pangs of guilt for not subscribing, lends additional credence to the conjecture that he was a complete atheist.
promote something of such doubtful issue? And how does one induce people in the modern age to accept and take seriously a new set of ideas about the supernatural which, as Mill says explicitly, they can merely hope to be true?

To labour the tenuousness of the Platonic theism's prospects would only be to exacerbate the difficulty. Mill need do nothing more than what he does, that is, indicate its tenuousness implicitly, especially if he is concerned to promote that theism as best he can without recourse to deception.

Moreover, from Mill's point of view it may as well be promoted. Evidently we have nothing to lose and possibly something to gain by the effort. To restate Mill's argument, humankind is far from ready for something as radical as a godless religion, although the seeds of one have been planted. Perhaps for a long time yet no such religion will be able to meet our religious needs. We will nonetheless need something, some form of supernaturalism, to sustain us in the interim. Since the Platonic theism of hope and imagination is morally unobjectionable and scientifically still acceptable, and because in promoting it we would at the same time be laying the foundations for the Religion of Humanity, wisdom dictates that we make the attempt.

Mill's tactics for promoting the Platonic theism

As for Mill's tactics for inducing people to accept and take seriously the Platonic theism of hope and imagination, we can gather what they are from the following passage, which comes at the end of the penultimate paragraph of "Theism":

When to [the preceding point] we add that, to the conception of the rational sceptic, it remains a possibility that Christ actually was what he supposed himself to be—not God, for he never made the smallest pretension to that character and would probably have thought such a pretension as blasphemous as it seemed to the men who condemned him—but a man charged with a special, express and unique commission from God to lead mankind to truth and virtue; we may well conclude that the influences of religion on the character which will remain after rational criticism has done its utmost against the evidences of religion, are well worth preserving, and that what they lack in direct strength as compared
with those of a firmer belief, is more than compensated by the greater truth and rectitude of the morality they sanction.5

That by religion Mill here means Christianity is evident from the first part of the passage. Nevertheless it is not the traditional Christianity of Catholics or Protestants but a new and "improved" Christianity that he has in mind, a Christianity transformed by scientific criticism.

To be sure, in the chapter on the attributes of God Mill makes it clear that the conception of God he finally settles on is (or most closely resembles) the one which in both "Utility" and "Nature" he calls Platonic.6 But here, rather than acknowledge that fact, he chooses to have us think of the "religion" in question as Christian, however far removed it is from the established forms of Christianity.

Improving Christianity

Indeed, in all of the final chapter of "Theism" Mill identifies only Christianity by name. Upon completing his explanation of how "supernatural hopes" can counteract the enervating effects of the awareness of death, he says,

There is another and a most important exercise of imagination which, in the past and present, has been kept up principally by means of religious belief and which is infinitely precious to mankind, so much so that human excellence greatly depends upon the sufficiency of the provision made for it. This consists of the familiarity of the imagination with the conception of a morally perfect Being, and the habit of taking the approbation of such a Being as the norma or standard to which to refer and by which to regulate our own characters and lives.7

And he adds that although this standard can be embodied in an imaginary person and still be effective, since the origin of Christianity we have been taught to believe that the ideal of perfect wisdom and goodness is exemplified by a real Divine Being. Mill then

5 Ibid., 488.
7 "Theism," CW, X, 485-86.
reminds us of a point he has already argued—that the traditional Christian conception of God as both perfectly good and omnipotent is fraught with morally and intellectually pernicious anomalies. He also reminds us that the conception of the "Creator" held by "those who take a more rational view" of the matter is free of all such anomalies, hence provides a "far truer and more consistent" standard and model of perfection than those yielded by the traditional belief in an omnipotent God. However, here too he refrains from calling that more rational conception "Platonic." The impression we get is that he is not so much substituting the Platonic for the Christian conception of the Divine as he is revising and "improving", in keeping with the latest results of scientific enquiry, the traditional Christian conception. Although he ends up very close to Plato, he once again refrains from explicitly acknowledging this fact. It is as though he wished to be, or to be seen to be, within the ambit of Christianity.

The appearance of revising and improving Christianity as opposed to replacing it with something very different is reinforced by the sequel. "Above all," Mill avers,

the most valuable part of the effect on the character which Christianity has produced by holding up in a Divine Person a standard of excellence and a model for imitation, is available even to the absolute unbeliever and can never more be lost to humanity. For it is Jesus Christ, "God incarnate, more than the God of the Jews or of Nature", whom believers have been taught to look up to as the "pattern of perfection for humanity", and who has exerted such a "great and salutary" influence on the moderns. Even if, in addition to rejecting the belief in his divinity, we cease to believe in his divine

8 Ibid., 486.
9 Ibid., 487.
10 Ibid.
11 Mill tacitly indicates that no such belief can survive "rational criticism." He also says that Jesus Christ himself never claimed to be God. At any rate there is, he suggests, no evidence of Christ's having done so in any of the authentic, original portions of the Gospels: ibid., 487, 488.
inspiration, the true, historical Christ can still serve as a model of moral perfection. "It is of no use to say" that the "historical" Christ might not have done and said all the admirable things ascribed to him in the Gospels, particularly in their authentic parts. His disciples, Mill argues, being simple fishermen, were incapable of fabricating those sayings and deeds. The "early Christian writers" could not have invented them either, because as they themselves recognized, whatever good was in them which might have formed the basis of such fabrications was itself derived completely from him. Nor could Paul, whose character was markedly different from Jesus', have invented them. Furthermore, the "originality" and "profundity" of what Jesus allegedly did and said were so great as to have made him utterly unique and thus impossible to invent except by someone essentially like him. But of this kind of genius there are no examples known to history other than his. Thus, Mill implies, we need not fear that the Gospel portrait of Jesus Christ has little historical foundation, especially if, as he says (once again bringing to mind Matthew Arnold), "we abandon the idle expectation of finding scientific precision where something very different was aimed at."

To digress briefly, it must come as a surprise to the reader to find this last utterance, with its insinuation that the scientific investigation of the "life and sayings" of Jesus is pointless and inappropriate, in a professedly scientific work by a leading "positive" thinker. We can agree with Mill that one should not approach the Gospels as one would a scholarly, scientifically rigorous biography. Nevertheless, unless they are to be understood as making no factual claims at all, which understanding Mill cannot insist on without contradicting himself, surely from his larger scientific perspective it would be appropriate to inquire into the evidence for and against the factual claims they do make.

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 487-88.
The fact that, as Mill says, they do not aim at scientific precision would seem to be a reason not to exempt the Jesus of the Gospels from rigorous scientific scrutiny but rather to subject him to it—if the strict truth about the historical Jesus is what is being sought. Yet the effect of Mill's treatment of the issue is to discourage any further inquiry of this sort. How, then, are we to explain Mill's apparent antagonism to or unease with the scientific criticism of the Biblical account of Christ?

We must briefly postpone attempting an answer to the latter question and instead pick up where we left off before digressing. Mill then says that so great a "moral reformer" and such an "ideal representative and guide of humanity" was the real Jesus Christ that "even now [it would not be] easy, even for an unbeliever, to find a better translation of the rule of virtue from the abstract into the concrete, than to endeavour so to live that Christ would approve our life."15 Furthermore, rational skepticism must concede the possibility that Christ truly was what he took himself to be: "not God", says Mill (thus vitiating his earlier show of agreement with the popular belief in Christ as "God incarnate"), but the Messiah, or in Mill's words, "a man charged with a special, express and unique commission from God to lead mankind to truth and virtue."16

What Mill appears to be about here is putting forward a Christology consistent with the Platonic theism of hope and imagination—a skeptical Unitarian Christology—and then merging the two, thereby giving that theism a more pronounced Christian bent. His implicit thought is this: We have reason to hope that a Divine Being exists who is both good and powerful (although not omnipotent). Given the unique and irreducible greatness of Jesus Christ, we may also hope that he really was charged by God with a mission to lead us to "truth and virtue", or putting it in Matthew Arnold's terms, to the perfect union of "Hellenism" and "Hebraism."17 But if science should in the end falsify

15 Three Essays, CW, X, 488.
16 Ibid.
our hope that God as conceived by Plato exists, then we shall be forced to let go too of
the hope that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. Even so, Jesus will still be available to us as
a model of virtue, and therefore could be incorporated into the pantheon of the Religion
of Humanity. (In being thus incorporated he would help the latter gain ascendancy as the
religion of the future, as has already been suggested.) The understanding of Jesus Christ
adumbrated here is, again, entirely in keeping with the logical requirements and practical
role of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination, and when merged with that theism,
endows it with a Christian character, though of a decidedly unorthodox kind.

**Why “improve” rather than oppose Christianity?**

But why is Mill intent on forging as close a link as possible between Christianity
and the Platonic theism of hope and imagination? Mill's remark in "Coleridge" that no
"philosophy will be speedily received in this country, unless supposed not only to be
consistent with, but even to yield collateral support to, Christianity" is still apposite.18
However much religious belief has weakened in recent years, Christianity remains the
religion of the day and of the immediate future. Only by "improving" Christianity
through amalgamation with it can the Platonic theism have any impact at all on human
affairs—even the minimal one of paving the way for the Religion of Humanity.

Thus, if Mill has undergone any significant change of mind from "Utility" to
"Theism", it is with regard to the nature and usefulness of Christianity. In "Utility" Mill
makes the following categorical claim:

But there is one moral contradiction inseparable from every form of
Christianity, which no ingenuity can resolve and no sophistry can explain
away. It is, that so precious a gift, bestowed on a few, should have been
withheld from the many: that countless millions of human beings should
have been allowed to live and die, to sin and suffer, without the one thing

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17 For Arnold's explanation of "Hellenism" and "Hebraism", see his *Culture and Anarchy* and *Friendship's Garland* (New York: MacMillan, 1924), 109-127.

18 *CW*, X, 160.
needful, the divine remedy for sin and suffering, which it would have cost the Divine Giver as little to have vouchsafed to all, as to have bestowed by special grace upon a favored minority."19

Although Mill does not say so, this "contradiction" presupposes that also "inseparable" from Christianity as such is the belief in God's omnipotence. Nevertheless, in "Theism" Mill appears to assume that the doctrines of predestination and election by grace and of the omnipotence of God can be separated from Christianity after all. These separations help to explain why in the later essay Mill is not averse from merging Christianity with the Platonic theism of hope and imagination (thereby giving the latter a modicum of respectability), whereas in the earlier essay he feels compelled to keep them apart.20

The problem of science and Christology

Yet for Mill's tactics to work, the cluster of issues surrounding the historical Jesus must be handled by scholars with the utmost delicacy.

To recall, he earlier argues that an ideal of excellence embodied in a real being is potentially more influential than one embodied in a merely imaginary one. He would thus

19 Three Essays, CW, X, 424.

20 One possible factor in Mill's change of mind might have been the "ingenuity" or "sophistry" of Matthew Arnold. Already in St. Paul and Protestantism Arnold argues that the heart and soul of Christianity properly understood is its moral doctrine of salvation through righteousness as exemplified by Jesus Christ, and that its other "teachings", which when taken sensu proprio are scientifically untenable, should where possible be interpreted sensu poetico.

If certain we cannot be, it nevertheless seems reasonable to suppose that Mill read Arnold's St. Paul and Protestantism, moreover that he did so before completing the extant draft of "Theism." He doubtless had both incentive and opportunity, the most relevant part of St. Paul and Protestantism, the original essay bearing that title, having been published in the fall of 1869 (R. H. Super, editor's Critical and Explanatory Notes to CPW, VI, 418-19), while Mill was working on "Theism." (Helen Taylor, who was in the best position to know, says he worked on "Theism" from 1868 to 1870: "Introductory Notice" to Three Essays, CW, X, 371.) There are, furthermore, similarities between Mill's treatment of Jesus in "Theism" and Arnold's in St. Paul which suggest that the latter had some bearing on the former. First, like Arnold (CPW, VI, 39-56), Mill extols Jesus as the model of moral perfection. As far as we know—and on this point we would appear to be supported by John Morley (see "Mr. Mill's Three Essays on Religion," 206-10)—in none of his other published writings does Mill come as close to matching Arnold's very high estimation of Jesus's moral worth as he does in "Theism." Second, Mill and Arnold (CPW, VI, 42, 47-49) share the view that people must go on believing in the historical reality of the Biblical Jesus if his great salutary influence on morals is to continue unabated. Third, Mill agrees with Arnold (CPW, VI, 26-27, 32-33, 39-40, 43) that the character of Paul was substantially different from that of Jesus. Fourth, he and Arnold both hold that something other than scientific precision was aimed at in the Gospels.
have agreed with Matthew Arnold that for the great salutary influence of Jesus Christ's teaching and example on human conduct to continue undiminished, the popular belief in the historical reality of the Biblical Jesus must remain intact.

It is in light of the preceding consideration that we must understand Mill's evident unease with the scientific criticism of the Biblical account of Jesus Christ. Mill might really have meant it in the strictest sense when instead of "It is simply not true. . ." he wrote "It is of no use to say [emphasis added—BK] that Christ as exhibited in the Gospels is not historical. . ."21

Admittedly, as we have seen, he does give reasons for judging the latter claim simply not true rather than merely of no use to make. Yet, though plausible, those reasons can hardly be thought decisive: Mill may be right to say that the early Christian writers could not have invented the Biblical Jesus, but his being right would prove nothing about the historical reality of the "source" of their virtue. Concerning the argument from the difference between Paul's and Jesus' characters, Mill must surely have been aware that, as Carlyle says, the character of a great poet like Homer or Goethe cannot be inferred from that of any of his human creations, hence that the two need not, indeed cannot, be identical.22 Was it not possible for Paul to take Jesus the real man and idealize to the utmost degree the virtues he did in actuality possess, assuming these to have been of a rather high order but not nearly as pure and perfect as the Scriptures suggest? In addition, we should note Mill's point in "Utility" that many of Jesus' teachings once thought to have originated solely with him can be found in the writings of men as far as we know not influenced by Christianity, among them the Stoic philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius.23 This consideration deprives the argument from the unique

21 *Three Essays*, CW, X, 487.


23 *Three Essays*, CW, X, 416. Mill makes the same point even more forcefully in *On Liberty*, CW, XVIII, 236.
originality of Jesus' teachings of much of its force. Could not a highly intelligent and erudite person well acquainted with the different schools of philosophy in vogue at the time--a person like Paul--have adapted and embellished certain Stoic teachings and then attributed their discovery to someone with no connection to the Stoic sect?

Very likely Mill himself did not regard those reasons as decisive. The mere admission that "something very different [from scientific precision] was aimed at" in the Gospels indicates an openness on his part to the hypothesis that the Biblical Jesus is largely or wholly fictive or mythical. What is more, David Strauss purportedly adduced a mass of evidence or arguments in support of that hypothesis, and it would surely have been unreasonable of Mill to think that he could so easily dispose of Strauss's case.

Perhaps, then, the full meaning of Mill's it is no use to say statement is this: It would not at present be socially advantageous to press the question of the historical reality of the Biblical Jesus, at least not directly and openly in public, however weighty the scientific, historical grounds for doing so. The reasons for supposing that the authentic Biblical account of Jesus' life and teachings is essentially true are plausible even if not scientifically unassailable. Given the paucity of scientifically relevant evidence pertaining to this matter--which paucity stems in part from the Gospel writers' lack of concern with evidence of this kind--any attempt to put that account on a scientific footing is likely to raise more questions than it answers. Historians may never be able to reach agreement on all the issues. And yet, especially if the issues and the controversies

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25 That Mill read and was thoroughly versed in the arguments of Strauss's The Life of Jesus is evident from his letter to Gustave D'Eichtal, 10 Jan. 1842, CW, XIII, 496.
surrounding them are aired constantly, such inquiries could lead to widespread confusion about Jesus and a loss of confidence in the Biblical account of him among the non-expert majority. The end result (as Strauss points out\(^\text{26}\)) would be a corresponding decline in the salutary influence of Jesus as a model of virtue.

Probably Mill did not believe he had lain to rest forever the rigorous scientific, historical investigation of the character, life and teachings of Jesus. That might not even have been his intention. Perhaps he aimed above all to set an example of tact and reserve for those planning further inquiries of this kind to follow when publishing their findings. In so doing he would have been acting in accordance with his statement in "Utility" that certain opinions may be "morally useful without being intellectually sustainable."\(^\text{27}\) And perhaps he could have done nothing more to hold the line.

Thus it appears that Mill here discloses yet another problem which science poses for religion. As the example of David Strauss suggests, further progress particularly in the historical sciences could undercut the belief not only in the greatness of Jesus but even in his identity or existence. The transition from traditional Christianity to the Religion of Humanity would in consequence become more difficult and precarious.

**Summing up Mill's strategy and objectives**

To sum up, Mill did everything he apparently believed he could do short of resorting to deception to bolster a certain set of supernatural hopes for at least the remainder of the historical period—including merging them with Christianity and understating the fact that further scientific testing of the Darwinian hypothesis may, even as we speak, be undercutting those hopes. He nonetheless seems to have feared that his efforts might in the final analysis prove futile, owing primarily to what he perceived as the frequently retarded but never arrested progress of science. The Religion of Humanity,


\(^{27}\) *Three Essays*, CW, X, 405.
on the other hand, was in his view not similarly vulnerable to scientific progress. Its object, the *Grand Etre*, is not simply hypothetical or imaginary; it is both ideal and real. That may well have been the most important reason Mill thought it necessary to promote the Religion of Humanity rather than the Platonic theism of hope and imagination as the religion of the future.28

**Mill's rhetoric of certainty**

It remains for us to reconsider, and to offer another, more convincing explanation of, Mill's rhetoric of certainty about the viability and adequacy of the Religion of Humanity as the religion of the future.

In an essay which deals with the question of the future of religion, Leslie Stephen, certainly with Comte but possibly also with Mill in mind, spiritedly criticizes the whole business of predicting the advent of a new religion. At one point he suggests that those who make such predictions are not always as convinced as the air of certainty with which they often make them would lead us to believe.29

We suspect Mill was one of "those." In none of his essays on religion does he give reasons for the apparent confidence with which he pronounces the Religion of Humanity the religion of the future. And, to repeat, when in "Utility" he asserts the practical superiority of the humanistic religion to all other forms of supernaturalism, it is

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28 Curiously, in Eisenach's most recent essays on Mill cited above, the Religion of Humanity either fades into complete insignificance, or is tacitly identified with Christianity in its latest "revelation"—liberal, progressive, "Broad Church" Protestantism. The former reading of those essays is in our opinion too difficult to reconcile with the text of Mill's works to merit serious consideration. If the latter reading of them is, as we surmise, the right one, then in this instance Eisenach's interpretation of Mill turns out to be similar to Devigne's. Devigne, it will be recalled, argues that in "Theism" Mill "proposes reconciling the Religion of Humanity with aspects of Christianity." (Would that he had said more about that "reconciliation.") In that case, we suggest, Devigne and Eisenach are both at fault for blurring the distinction which Mill draws between Christianity—even in the substantially modified form it assumes when merged with the Platonic theism of hope and imagination—and the Religion of Humanity. On this issue Hamburger and Cowling would appear to be closer to the mark.

in part because of his grave doubts not about the moral tendency of the Platonic theism of hope and imagination, but about its efficacy.

Granted, Mill attributes many beneficial tendencies to the Religion of Humanity. Nevertheless, as we have sought to demonstrate, his endorsement of it is not unqualified. Supernaturalism, he subtly shows, even of the weakest kind, like the Platonic theism of hope and imagination, enjoys a certain advantage over the Religion of Humanity in dealing with the problem of death.

Again, according to Mill it is in principle possible to negate this advantage—by transforming human and non-human nature so that death eventually ceases to be a problem in need of a theistic solution. Such a negation would have the desired effect of significantly enhancing a godless religion's ability to be not only practically superior to all forms of supernaturalism, but eventually also entirely sufficient for our religious needs. (It should be noted that to say that the Religion of Humanity is practically superior to supernaturalism in all its variants is not to say that it will suffice for the satisfaction of all our religious needs. With one exception, nowhere does Mill explicitly make the latter claim.30 For that matter, as we argue earlier, he subtly indicates that the Religion of

30 In Utilitarianism he states that Comte has proven that the Religion of Humanity would not be "insufficient": CW, X, 232. But by sufficient Mill here very likely means sufficiently strong, ascendant or authoritative to bring about the desired identification of the individual with humankind. He does not mean sufficient for the satisfaction of every non-physical need, such as the need for consolations in the face of death. Our interpretation is further confirmed by Mill's claim in Auguste Comte that the Religion of Humanity is "capable of gathering around it feelings [such as love and the feeling of duty] sufficiently strong" or "sufficiently powerful to give it in fact, the [supreme] authority over human conduct to which it lays claim in theory": CW, X, 332-33.

True, as Hamburger points out ("Religion and On Liberty," 163), in his Diary entry of 24 Jan. 1954 Mill says, "[There] is no worthy office of a religion which [the Religion of Humanity] does not seem adequate to fulfill. It would suffice both to alleviate and to guide human life": CW, XXVII, 646. But here too Mill does not exactly say that in principle the Religion of Humanity has the capacity, for instance, by itself to allay the fear or resentment of death as effectively as any form of supernaturalism which admits at least the hope of life after death. Yet even if that is what he means here, the possibility should not be ruled out that while writing "Utility" in March 1954 Mill began to have second thoughts on the matter. As Hayek informs us, both John Stuart and Harriet Mill having already been stricken by consumption, "doubts whether they will live to complete any of their plans creep [into their correspondence] more and more" from late January on, and in March the former's health appeared to take a dramatic turn for the worse. Indeed, at times Mill believed his own death to be imminent. This state of affairs is reflected in his Diary entries for that month, in which entries death is meditated upon much more frequently than in all those for January and February put together: cf. ibid., 641-58 and 658-65: see F. A. Hayek, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor: Their
Humanity may never be entirely sufficient in that sense. Indeed it will not be, unless, perhaps, by lengthening the normal life-span we succeed in taking the sting out of death for most everyone, or possibly unless the Religion of Humanity is impressed upon us to the point of stifling our "freedom and individuality." But the former development can hardly be thought inevitable. And the latter development Mill clearly would have deplored, and in any case regarded as almost certainly self-defeating.31

Even so, as Mill tacitly indicates, we cannot now be absolutely certain that the endeavour to transform human and non-human nature will yield the desired result, or that the Religion of Humanity will ever be able completely to satisfy our religious needs. Concomitantly, neither can we be certain that it will be the religion of the future. It would fly in the face of Mill's empiricist or experientialist philosophy of history to claim otherwise. As Leslie Stephen argues, our knowledge of both the relevant circumstances and the causal laws governing historical change, especially in the area of religion, is too deficient to permit certainty.32

The latter consideration could hardly have escaped Mill's notice. Accordingly, when he declares that he "cannot entertain a doubt" that the Religion of Humanity is

Correspondence and Subsequent Marriage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), 183-205. (Mill's Diary, it should be noted, covers the period 8 Jan.-15 Apr. 1854.) Particularly striking is the Diary entry of 14 Feb. (CW, XXVII, 654), where Mill, fearing the imminent demise of Harriet, expresses a deep yearning for life after death, primarily for her sake.

31 In Auguste Comte Mill criticizes Comte's version of the Religion of Humanity for, among other things, aiming at a degree of altruism and social unity so high as to make it a threat to individuality and individual liberty: CW, X, 335-40; cf. Utilitarianism, CW, X, 232; and On Liberty, CW, XVIII, 226-27. One of the key considerations he adduces in support of that criticism reads as follows: "Our conception of human life is different [from Comte's]. We do not conceive life to be so rich in enjoyments, that it can afford to forego the cultivation of all those which address themselves to what M. Comte terms the egoistic propensities. On the contrary, we believe that a sufficient gratification of these, short of excess, but up to the measure which renders the enjoyment greatest, is almost always favourable to the benevolent affections." This passage from Auguste Comte (339) suggests that the Religion of Humanity is bound to fail if it leaves no room for individuality and egoism.

In their writings cited above, Devigne, Eisenach, Hamburger, Megill and Vernon attempt, each in his own way, to show how Mill sought to reconcile the claims of freedom and individuality defended in On Liberty with the requirements of virtue, religion and social cohesion set forth in Three Essays on Religion and elsewhere.

"destined", possibly even "without supernatural sanctions, to be the religion of the Future", we are inclined to see him as engaging in rhetorical exaggeration. Probably he hopes in this way to help bring to pass the very development he ostensibly predicts: his assumption may be that the closer people are to being convinced that the advent of a new creed is inevitable, the sooner are they likely to accede to the creed, especially if there is much to recommend it. Perhaps, then, that declaration is best understood as a would-be self-fulfilling prophecy.

But why is this kind of rhetoric necessary? Mill's implicit answer is, we think, this: The Religion of Humanity, even if it should prove less than perfect, is our all round best hope for the distant future. Precisely because we cannot be certain it will become ascendant, we must do what we can to see that it does. Evidently we have no choice, except to be without religion altogether, and therefore—at least in the case of most of us, those of us with "superior natures" not excluded—to be susceptible to cramping egoism, vulgar hedonism or despair. This clearly would be good neither for the individual nor for society.

Making a virtue of necessity

One final point. If it is in fact his opinion that we have no reasonable alternative but to pin our hopes for the long term on a godless religion of whose complete adequacy we cannot be certain, Mill, nevertheless, does not say as much explicitly. He seems instead to have preferred making a virtue of necessity or putting the best possible face on a rather precarious situation—possibly in order to minimize the chances of people losing heart.

There is, to be sure, no denying his hopefulness about the ultimate adequacy of the Religion of Humanity. But as should by now be clear, a careful reading of his essays on

33 Three Essays, CW, X, 489.
religion reveals that he also saw some dark clouds on the horizon. Mill appears to have wondered whether, alas, a scientifically supportable and morally unobjectionable theism might not have been better. In this respect he differed profoundly from Jeremy Bentham, George Grote and many other Benthamites. Although Walter Pater perhaps goes too far in describing those essays as "gloomy", they do evince a degree of pathos, and we find more than a grain of truth in Carr's characterization of Mill as a "reluctant sceptic."34

Concluding remarks

It would be helpful at this point to summarize Mill's teaching about the moral and social implications of the conflict between science and religion.

As we have seen, according to Mill, science refutes all forms of supernatural religious belief, polytheistic and monotheistic. Even Platonized Christianity in its dogmatic form is not spared. It can survive only in the form of a theism of imagination and hope, which is to say, in a form that can be neither refuted nor corroborated by science. Thus, as science advances, the different forms of supernaturalism ranging from fetishism in antiquity to deism in the present are sooner or later, each in its turn, eroded by it (although, of course, there are other forces at work here as well, such as technological progress). In the end we are left only with a theism which, because it can survive only as a theism of imagination and hope rather than as a theism of belief, is

34 Carr, "The Religious Thought of John Stuart Mill: A Study in Reluctant Scepticism," 475-95. Although we would quarrel with much of the detail of his argument, a substantial portion of it seems right to us. Carr hits on an important truth with his statement that by the end of Mill's religious development we recognize in him a distinct "reluctance... to rest in complete [religious] scepticism" (475). Nevertheless, Carr holds that Mill became a "reluctant sceptic" when he realized how inhospitable scepticism, the logical consequence of science, was even to the theism of hope and imagination, a type of theism which he thought would at least for some time to come be indispensable as a support for virtue and happiness. We, on the other hand, are inclined so to describe Mill because in our interpretation he worried that the Platonic-Christian theism of hope and imagination, despite being the only kind of theism compatible with scepticism, would prove largely ineffectual even for the shorter term, to the detriment of virtue and happiness. Furthermore, we agree with Carr that in Mill's final view theism of a certain unconventional kind would be useful at least as a transitional form of worship, but we differ with him over the extent to which that view is anticipated in earlier writings. Perhaps because he does not subject any of the essays as a whole to close analysis but dwells only on selected parts of each, Carr overlooks the evidence of Mill's having already taken that position in "Utility."
unlikely ever to have a large influence. Yet even that most attenuated form of theism might be short-lived, particularly if the Darwinian theory of evolution should ever be stamped with the scientific seal of approval.

The development just now described is not all to the bad. The received monotheistic religions helped teach humankind certain principles of public morality. But once these principles were learned the religions ceased to be needed for that reason. They were also found to contain a number of fundamental moral anomalies and contradictions which have had the effect either of stunting the intellect or of perverting the moral sense. And the intellectual expense of trying to keep them standing increased as science continued to progress. Eventually the price became so high as to give cause to consider whether they should not simply be allowed to crumble.

True, traditional supernatural religion provides other important benefits as well, in the form of consoling and edifying beliefs and hopes necessary to the fostering of moral virtue in the individual as well as to his happiness. In this respect it is good for both society and the individual. Although those benefits can in principle be obtained from a secular source, the Religion of Humanity, the latter would not be able to take hold for perhaps a long time to come. Some form of theism would still be necessary, probably at least for the foreseeable future.

The difficulty is that science appears to preclude any reliable, effective theistic solution to this problem of transition. Again, the only form of theism admissible by science would likely be of little use, and should the Darwinian hypothesis be corroborated, even that alternative would in Mill's opinion be lost to us. It would also perhaps be lost to us if unremitting scientific and historical criticism of the Bible were to have the unfortunate effect of undermining popular belief in the historical reality of the Biblical Jesus.

In either event the transition from traditional Christianity to the Religion of Humanity would be made more difficult and precarious. Were we to make a clean sweep
of theism before the Religion of Humanity had been capable of taking root, virtue would be bereft of its chief support. Vulgar epicureanism and despair might spread, even among "the best", leading eventually to the cessation of progress or social stagnation, and probably even to social decay. It is not necessary for Mill to dot the i and explicitly say that the survivability of a society afflicted by widespread hedonism and despair, stagnation and decay is very much in doubt.

On the other hand, if the transition is made successfully, there is a good chance that the Religion of Humanity will be capable of meeting our religious needs. But although we may hope, we cannot be certain it will. The progress of science thus forces humankind to try in the end to make do with a religion which may ultimately prove not quite sufficient. The end of history might be a condition suffused with melancholy or a muted sense of futility.

In sum, it is Mill's view that the corrosive effect of the progress of science on religion is morally somewhat ambiguous. So far that effect may have been mostly beneficial, but the potentially harmful aspect of it is far from negligible. As hopeful as Mill was about the future of humankind, one can discern in his writings an undercurrent of apprehension, if not of foreboding. That apprehension sets him apart from many of his Enlightenment forbears. Perhaps it also marks the beginning of the decline in self-confidence of progressivism.
CONCLUSION

We have seen that Mill too gave a great deal of thought to the relation between science and religion, or as we said earlier, between Hellenism and Hebraism. Like so many others before and after, Mill construed that relation as one of conflict or strife. Admittedly, he strove to reconcile the two tendencies, but he waged his campaign of reconciliation entirely on Hellenism's turf. He expected the result of his and other such efforts to be the total or near total eclipse of Hebraism. At some indeterminable point in the future, he reckoned, only an earthly vestige or simulacrum of Hebraism would perhaps remain.

The first and, needless to say, most important question to arise here is whether or not Mill's notion that theistic belief and science are essentially irreconcilable is valid.

Clearly, this is too large a question for us to attempt a serious response to now. A number of prominent thinkers after Mill—William James, Karl Barth, Jacques Maritain, C. S. Lewis, Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, Richard Swinburne, Leszek Kolakowski, to name a few—have argued either that science provides evidence for or no evidence against the belief in the existence of God, or that the issue lies altogether outside the domain of science.1 Although it would be unfair to tax Mill for not having anticipated all of their arguments, it goes without saying that a definitive assessment of the overall merit of his view would have to take them into account. But in Mill's own time, Cardinal Newman sought to provide the belief in God with a foundation invulnerable to criticism from the scientific quarter. It is regrettable that Mill did not see fit to confront Newman's arguments directly and explicitly. This fact does not preclude the possibility of finding in

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1 For Maritain and Swinburne, see their works cited below, for the rest, their works cited above.
Mill an implicit answer to Newman. Only a thorough investigation of Newman's Grammar of Assent side by side with Mill's Logic and "Theism" would enable us to disclose it in its entirety and weigh its cogency. All of which adds up to another, far larger undertaking.

Nevertheless, let us for the sake of argument grant Mill that (traditional theistic) religion must face yet cannot survive close scientific scrutiny. Questions also arise about Mill's understanding of the various moral, social and political ramifications of that supposed fact.

In treating of the conflict between science and religion Mill implicitly assumed it to be of two kinds, epistemic and existential, or alternatively, theoretical and practical. He must also have assumed that the practical conflict was caused not only by the progress of science (hence by the epistemic conflict) but also by the accompanying diffusion of scientific knowledge among the non-scientific many. This last point is of particular importance, for it permits the conjecture that if science could somehow have been allowed to progress but without being generally or widely disseminated, then the practical conflict would never have arisen. At the very least it might have been greatly attenuated, especially if men like Mill had withheld their views about the paucity of scientific support for the socially most beneficial form of theism. One cannot help wondering, then, how Mill understood the link between the progress of science and its diffusion, and how he defended publicly expressing his doctrine of the epistemic incompatibility of science and religious belief in the posthumously published Three Essays.

Mill evidently believed that scientific progress is necessarily connected to the general diffusion of science.² He had also observed that "we are in an age of weak belief." So he might have thought he could justify eventually going public with the above doctrine on the grounds that the demise of theistic belief was both imminent and

² See, for example, the passage from his Autobiography quoted above, 44, n. 59.
unavoidable. Yet as far as we know, nowhere in his writings does he mount a persuasive argument for the existence of any such necessary connection. Novalis, Goethe, Tocqueville and possibly at one time Nietzsche seem to have thought that it does not exist. A close examination of the teachings of Francis Bacon regarding these matters will likely show that on this matter he would have sided with the latter group. We surmise that Bacon, like Mill, saw the belief in the existence of a providential God as irreconcilable with science (though he conveyed this aspect of his teaching more indirectly than did Mill). Moreover, it seems he fully self-consciously chose to promote enlightenment to a limited degree, but not because he thought it was inseparable from the advancement of learning, and not because he wanted to undermine entirely the belief in God. Rather, he did it because he was convinced this was the only way to free science and philosophy from the stranglehold a politically entrenched Christian theology had on them. If Bacon was right, then Mill made a mistake in not being more reserved about the paucity of scientific support for theism, especially when it came to the form of theism he regarded as socially the most beneficial. With his greater candour he might have contributed more than was necessary or desirable to the further decline of useful religion, whereas he ought to have done what he could with his personal prestige and moral authority to bolster it.


4 See, for instance, Bacon, New Atlantis, Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis, especially 237, 246, 247.

5 For an elaborate and compelling defence of this reading of Bacon, see Paterson, "On the Role of Christianity in the Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon," 419-42.

6 Probably the main reason the popularization of science could be dispensed with in Bensalem was that there science ruled religion instead of being ruled by it, as was the case in Europe even in Bacon's lifetime.
We may grant that Mill took the popularization of science to be inseparable from scientific progress. But evidently he also held that in the present phase of history it was for a number of reasons highly desirable, even if it meant renouncing certain benefits of religion earlier than would otherwise have been necessary. One of those reasons, we suspect, was the prospect of giving further impetus to the project of conquering nature through science and technology. Moreover, apparently Mill was persuaded that in the West especially a way of life surpassing all others in freedom, virtue and happiness had by then become a reasonable aspiration. In his view the key to the attainment of this way of life was a certain kind of education, one that included as rigorous as possible a training in science, accompanied by liberty of thought, discussion and individuality. Mill was doubtless more optimistic than Bacon about both the possible extent and the potential benefits of enlightenment. By contrast with Bacon, he seems to have thought that reserve or dissimulation in philosophy and science, if necessary in the past, was gradually losing its point and eventually could perhaps be dispensed with altogether. If his optimism was on the whole justified, then whether or not he misconceived the relation between the progress and the diffusion of science, Mill had solid grounds for being so frank about the scientifically untenable nature of theistic belief.

Nevertheless, Mill's optimism may well have derived in large part from his confidence in the capacity of the Religion of Humanity to perform the offices of religion in the future. The question is, how well founded was that confidence?

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7 It can be argued that Mill's chief intention in writing "Nature" was to undermine the traditional theological underpinnings of the old belief in Nature as the "rule or standard of what ought to be", and thereby to break down all remaining religious barriers to the scientific-technological project: see, for instance, Three Essays, CW, X, 379-83, 386-87. Mill's preference for Platonic over traditional Christian theism can then be further justified on the grounds that the former, far from constraining the project after the fashion of the latter, would actually give it additional impetus: see ibid., 388-91.

8 See, for instance, On Liberty, CW, XVIII; and Inaugural Address, CW, XXI.

Certain leading lights of the twentieth century, among them Thomas Mann, Carl Jung, Wallace Stevens and Raymond Aron, have held that a purely humanistic religion is the only possible alternative to theism. The fact that, as Wright informs us, Comte's institutionally highly elaborate form of the Religion of Humanity has failed to take root does not imply the failure of the Religion of Humanity per se. A more informal version of it, like Mill's, might still be feasible. At the start of the century Irving Babbitt noted that "[with] the decay of the traditional faith this cult of humanity is coming more and more to be our real religion." And current public rhetoric concerning moral and social issues such as the well-being of street people and poverty in the Third World continues to be informed by a humanist sensibility. Self-styled humanist groups exist even today, some of them with highly developed organizations and their own periodicals.

Yet there are, it seems, formidable obstacles to the growth of a robust Religion of Humanity. Running through much of this century's artistic and intellectual endeavours is a strong current of anti-humanist thought and feeling; at any rate we are more confused than perhaps we have ever been about what it is and means to be a human being. Of the various possible factors at work here, let us briefly consider two.

The first is the tendency in environmentalist thought frequently referred to nowadays as "deep ecology." Reminiscent of early nineteenth-century romanticism, this


11 Religion of Humanity, 273-77.

12 Literature and the American College (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), 34-35.
tendency is radically opposed to the modern project of mastering nature through science and technology, and "has inspired the ideology of movements such as Greenpeace and Earth First."13 According to Luc Ferry, not only are these movements often vehemently "anti-science", but insofar as they understand that project to be grounded in a humanist conception of humankind's relation to nature, some of them have also explicitly repudiated the humanist standpoint.14

The second factor is of a more diffuse and pervasive nature than the first. The modern mind, observed T. E. Hulme some time ago, harbors a deep-seated prejudice in favour of the "principle of continuity."

When any fact seems to contradict that principle, we are inclined to deny that the fact really exists. We constantly tend to think that the discontinuities in nature are only apparent, and that a fuller investigation would reveal the underlying continuity. This shrinking from a gap or jump in nature has developed to a degree which paralyses any objective perception, and prejudices our seeing things as they really are.15

Quite possibly this prejudice was begotten by the progress and dissemination of modern science.16 As Hans Jonas argues, the dominant tendency in modern science has been reductionism, which postulates that all apparent qualitative change is in principle explainable in quantitative terms.17 (To restate this postulate in the terms used in its original formulation by Galileo, unreal or secondary qualities such as colour, taste, sound and texture are reducible to quantifiable "real" or "primary" qualities or entities such as


14 Ibid., 59-81. For a brief explanation of the humanist point of view, see n. 26 below.


matter, shape, motion and velocity.\(^{18}\) Scientists in the nineteenth century, suggests Nietzsche (evidently not with complete disapproval), were animated by the faith that science would sooner or later be able to explain even human phenomena in terms of the chemico-physical processes invoked to explain non-human biological phenomena, that the human could be assimilated to the non-human.\(^{19}\) This faith gained further strength from Darwin's extension of the principles of Newtonian physics to the evolution of all forms of life, including humankind.\(^{20}\) And it was arguably this same faith that inspired the work of Sigmund Freud. The common-sense understanding of human things, which posits for humankind a nature essentially distinct from the natures of other natural beings, and upon which traditional philosophy and religion for the most part turn, was thus bound to be called into question.\(^{21}\) More and more the universe came to seem as though there was no place in it for those things we ordinarily associate with human life, such as free will, morality, virtue and beauty, as if these were mere epiphenomena, or illusions engendered by the deception-prone operation of the senses and imagination. The history of the metaphysics of science from Galileo to the twentieth century has been characterized by one philosopher as the progressive "reading of man quite out of the real and primary realm."\(^{22}\) Others have spoken equally apocalyptically of the "death", "abolition", "passing away", "dehumanization" and "metaphysical neutralizing" of man.\(^{23}\)


\(^{20}\) Krutch, The Modern Temper, 40-41. See also Jonas, 69-70.

\(^{21}\) Jonas, 63, 64, 66-67, 69.


At the very least it must be admitted that owing in large part to the new science, 'the difference between the "lower" species and man became blurred,' as Czeslaw Milosz puts it, and we have been "deprived...of a valid image of man" for which we have thus far not found an adequate substitute. That such is indeed the case is attested by a number of developments in the last four or five decades. The rise of the animal liberation movement; the popularity in the West of such radical anti-humanist intellectuals as Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault; the increasing recourse to psychiatric evidence in courts of law; the promotion--"beyond freedom and dignity"--of behaviorist techniques of education; the tendency to prefer the rehabilitative to the punitive approach in dealing with repeat offenders; the attempted reduction of social science to biology, as in sociobiology; the growing fascination, even amongst the lay public, with artificial intelligence and attempts to assimilate human intelligence to it, as evidenced in the enormous popularity of the television series Star Trek: Next Generation (whose cast of main characters, unlike that of the original Star Trek, includes a highly affable anthropoid named Data) and films like Bladerunner--all these developments would appear to have originated in, and in turn to reinforce, the science-begotten skepticism as to the essential distinctiveness and dignity of humankind that more and more pervades the popular mind. A further possible outgrowth of that skepticism is the current widespread mood

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26 Peter Singer, a well known advocate of animal liberation, himself acknowledges that his views on that subject owe a great deal to modern science, including the Darwinian theory of evolution. His main point about modern science is that it rightly casts doubt on the "humanist" tendency of ancient Greek, medieval Christian, Renaissance and much modern European thought. (Humanism is defined by Singer as a way of thinking based on the principle that humankind is fundamentally distinct from and of a higher dignity than other species of animals.) Nevertheless, he remains ambiguous as to how radically it questions the
of self-loathing and despair, which may well be the psychological root of the "rapacious consumerism" prevalent in the West today, and which is the theme of much serious twentieth century literature. If thinkers like Jacques Maritain, Ortega y Gasset, Thomas Mann, Wyndham Lewis, William Barrett and Czeslaw Milosz are to be believed, modernist art and music too, with their bold experimentalism, abstractionism, iconoclasm and nihilism, are expressions of an essentially anti-humanist habit of mind to which modern science (whether directly or via modern philosophy) has helped give rise.

Now Milosz suggests (although he puts a religious twist on this point) that certain more recent developments in science—especially quantum mechanics and the principle of uncertainty—have cast doubt on reductionism and therewith given new life to the humanist idea.

The theory of quanta, independently of conclusions drawn from it, is anti-reductionist, for it restores the mind to its role of a co-creator in the fabric of reality. This favors a shift from belittling man as an insignificant speck in the immensity of galaxies to regarding him again as the main actor in the universal drama—which is a vision proper to every religion (Blake's Divine Humanity, Adam Kadmon of the Cabbalah, Logos Christ of the Christian denominations).

Assuming one of the claims being made here is that the principle of uncertainty implies an idealistic metaphysic akin to Berkeley's, or that it explodes determinism and

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27 See Milosz, 18, 20-21.


30 Milosz, 23.
rehabilitates the belief in "free will", Milosz could not reasonably deny that many philosophers and scientists would take issue with him.\textsuperscript{31} And as Oxford philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne observes, many scientists and philosophers today continue to subscribe to materialist monism, together with its anti-humanist implications.\textsuperscript{32}

To return to the main point, however, suppose we are right about the growing strength of anti-humanist thought and feeling in the West. It is hard to see how a purely humanistic religion could thrive in such a climate, permeated as the latter is by self-doubt, self-loathing, debunking and despair.

What, we wonder, would Mill say about all of this? The closest he comes to addressing the issue explicitly is in the passages of the Autobiography in which he discusses his first mental crisis and subsequent bouts with depression. Allan Nelson's searching analysis of those passages indicates that this wave of depressions was brought on largely by Mill's recognition and deepening understanding of the dehumanizing and nihilistic implications of the new science.\textsuperscript{33} But only a careful examination of key works by Mill like the Logic, Comte and Hamilton together with the Autobiography would enable us to determine his conception of the precise nature and extent of the problem. Such an examination cannot be undertaken here.

\textsuperscript{31} For instance, Albert Einstein, Karl Popper and, more recently, Paul Forman would have agreed with Bertrand Russell that it might still be possible to "discover laws regulating the behaviour of individual atoms" and thereby refute the claim that indeterminacy is built into the very stuff of reality. Were such a law to be found, the Berkeleyan or idealist metaphysical conclusions drawn from quantum mechanics by Werner Heisenberg, John Archibald Wheeler and others would, it seems, for that reason alone if for no other, have to be renounced. See Bertrand Russell, The Scientific Outlook (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1931), 103-108; Religion and Science, 151-62; Stewart Richards, Philosophy and Sociology of Science: An Introduction (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 73-76; and J. W. Groves, In Defence of Science: Science, Technology and Politics in Modern Society (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 15-21.

\textsuperscript{32} Is There a God? (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 39-40, 73, 77. William Barrett makes much the same point: "Yet, with all its inherent paradoxes, scientific materialism was to become de facto the dominant mentality of the West in the three and a half centuries that followed. It ruled not so much as an explicit and articulate philosophy, but more potently as an unspoken attitude, habit, and prejudice of mind. And in this unspoken form, it is still regnant today. The bulk of our research money is still channeled along the paths that accord with this materialism": Death of the Soul, 7; see also 37, 57, 75.

Even so, Mill's own conviction that music, literature and especially Wordsworth's poetry in no small way helped him to climb out of these depressions suggests a plausible hypothesis about what he regarded as a major component of the solution to that problem.

In his classic "Study of Poetry", published in the last year of his life, Matthew Arnold makes the following astonishing statement:

We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more lightly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear incomplete without it. For finely and truly does Wordsworth call poetry 'the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science;' and what is a countenance without its expression? Again, Wordsworth finely and truly calls poetry 'the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge:' our religion, parading evidences such as those on which the popular mind relies now; our philosophy, pluming itself on its reasonings about causation and finite and infinite being; what are they but the shadows and dreams and false shows of knowledge? The day will come when we shall wonder at ourselves for having trusted to them, for having taken them seriously; and the more we perceive their hollowness, the more we shall prize 'the breath and finer spirit of knowledge' offered to us by poetry.\(^{34}\)

Mill, we think, would have largely agreed with Arnold's estimate of the importance hereafter of poetry for the well-being of humanity. Indeed, he might even have ascribed the same importance to other fields of art as well. He held the future of the Religion of Humanity to be bound up with the future of art. In his address at St. Andrews University Mill states that the love of virtue—which we realize is the heart of the Religion of Humanity, even though Mill, probably out of considerations of prudence, chooses not to make this connection explicit—should be nurtured in everyone. (When the old religion is dead and gone) only by dedicating oneself to such "noble aims and endeavours" as art,

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science or the improvement of humankind can one hope to invest one's otherwise "miserably small" and "insignificant" life with nobility and dignity. Since the majority of people are incapable of fruitfully devoting themselves to art or science, they are left only with virtue as the way to fulfill that hope. But poetry, music and the plastic arts turn out to be a principal means of cultivating the love of virtue, and that for two reasons: first, art strengthens such "unselfish" aspects of human nature as sympathy and the desire of unity, thereby "[predisposing] us to the reception of anything which comes before us in the shape of duty"; second, by fostering in us a vivid sense of the "Beautiful", art nourishes our "desire to realize" virtue, which is a "type of perfect beauty in human character," in our own lives. Hence the enormous significance of poetry and the other arts for Mill, and hence also his Schilleresque contention that aesthetic education is every bit as essential as scientific education.35 For that matter, he probably would have agreed with Arnold that the importance of poetry grows in proportion as the authority of religion wanes.

What is more, like Coleridge, Wordsworth and Arnold, and in contradistinction to Bentham, Keats and Macauley, Mill appears not to have worried that the progress and diffusion of science meant the eventual death of poetry. Nor, it seems, did he fear that music and the plastic arts were endangered.

In a sense he was right not to, but perhaps only partially right. Art has survived, yet roughly since the start of the century it has tended to assume an abstract, arcane character which has made it well nigh inaccessible to the vast majority of the lay public. And by no means is it clear that the few who have presumed to appreciate it have been able to get from it the solace and inspiration to virtue Mill and Arnold counted on art to provide.36 At the same time, perhaps art was, as Kandinsky argued, compelled to take an


36 On these aspects of modern art, see Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art" and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature, especially the title essay itself, 3-54.
abstract turn if it was to survive and flourish, this necessity having been imposed on it partly by the progress of science. All of which makes one wonder whether in the age of science art would be, in keeping with Mill's hopes, capable of serving as a vehicle for the Religion of Humanity.

These and other questions pertaining to the feasibility of the Religion of Humanity remain to be answered. Perhaps a more thorough study of the entirety of Mill's works, particularly Hamilton and the Logic, will yield the conclusion that adequate answers to all these questions were not proffered by Mill. It may be that if he had thought through the implications of the dehumanizing tendency of science more fully, and if he had also not been so convinced that the progress of science was inseparable from its general diffusion, he would have perceived an even greater need to promote some form of theistic belief. Perhaps he would have found it necessary to be a good deal more reserved in his way of treating the question of the scientific grounds for theistic belief than he in fact was. In light of these two key considerations we would do well to consider whether Bacon (like Goethe and Tocqueville later) was not the wiser of the two for being less optimistic--and for being that much more reserved.

Then again, even when all the scholarly spadework has been done, the problem investigated from all the different vantage points afforded by Mill's monumental ouvre, it might still be necessary to admit that in the end Mill had no choice but to do as he did. Granted, he might have said to us, that the truth about religion could originally have been withheld, it was not, and particularly in a liberal society such as ours the proverbial cat is too much out and about to be stuffed back into the bag. So we should accept the fact and

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37 Which hopes, we suspect, were largely shared by Pater: see, for instance, his Greek Studies: A Series of Essays (London: Macmillan, 1920), especially the essay "The Age of Athletic Prizemen: A Chapter in Greek Art," 269-99.
seek instead to make the most of a situation which, though fraught with danger, is yet full of promise.  

Nevertheless, to close with a rejoinder, we must first have a clear, comprehensive understanding of the moral and spiritual risks inherent in the modern scientific-technological project. Now Mill may not have had the last word, but this dissertation has, hopefully, demonstrated that valuable light can be shed on the subject by a careful study of his writings—not least of all his essays on religion.

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38 Early in May of 1972 Mill received a letter from Edwin Arnold; enclosed in the letter was an "undated clipping of a newspaper leader commenting on a speech by the physicist John Tyndall" delivered "on May 4 at an anniversary dinner of the Royal Academy": Francis E. Mineka and Dwight N. Lindley, eds., *Later Letters, CW, XVII*, 1893, n. 3. Herewith an excerpt from that leader: "Never again can men think and believe as they once did. The march of science and of thought has left behind institutions which are dead without knowing it, and burdens of the human mind, which seem still borne only because the ache of the place where they pressed is still felt... But men must have something to believe, something to explain to them the beauty of Nature as well as her order and her truth—something to restore to them in the new world opening outside the little old-fashioned universe their faith in a Source of all that beauty, and in a Centre of all that love and worship, the endless insatiable hope and aspiration which will not be satisfied with 'force and matter.' The cry of humanity today to the men of science is, 'Give us back something to believe,' in return for that which has been taken away. Science ought not to respond with a cold refusal to care for anything but facts. Emotions, affections, aspirations, as Professor Tyndall himself said, are 'part and parcel' of human nature; and there must be a religion—there must be a morality and a creed—to satisfy such desires": ibid., 1893-94, n. 3. In his letter of reply to Arnold dated 13 May 1872, Mill responded by reaffirming what we have called the Platonic theism of hope and imagination: "The article inclosed [sic] in your letter (which was sure to be as you say it was, attacked and misrepresented) certainly does express a very general & most natural 'longing' among those who have outgrown the old forms of religious belief. I myself have more sympathy with the aspiration, than hope to see it gratified, to the extent of any positive belief respecting the unseen world: but I am convinced that the cultivation of an imaginative hope is quite compatible with a reserve as to positive belief, & that whatever helps to keep before the mind the ideal of a perfect Being is of unspeakable value to human nature. Only it is essential, to prevent a perversion of the moral faculty, that this perfect Being, if regarded as the Creator of the world we live in, shd [sic] not be thought to be omnipotent": CW, XVII, 1893-94. One should not rush to the conclusion that in responding thus Mill was being imprudent or unfeeling. Perhaps he sincerely believed that, with the Tyndalls, Cliffords and Huxleys of the world regularly and publicly defending agnostic or atheistic views on allegedly scientific grounds, no response other than a scientifically credible one was feasible.
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