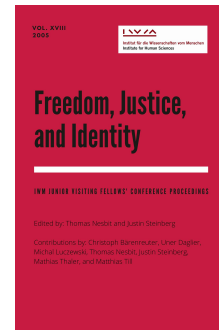


Positive Progress or the Crisis of Enlightenment

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In the following pages, I intend to examine—for lack of a better expression—the metaphysics of Mill’s faith in the future of scientific progress. To put it in another way, how optimistic was Mill on the coming of the age of reason? How confident was he that his arguments for free expression applied in practice? In order to develop a satisfactory answer to this excruciating set of questions, I will begin with proofs of Mill’s optimism, characteristic of the Enlightenment, regarding the gradual progress of reason over time. Afterwards, I will juxtapose these against other passages in “On Liberty” where Mill indicated his skepticism regarding the capacity of the people for rational thought. Then, I will further complicate things by bringing in Mill’s later attempt in order to introduce The Religion of Humanity. With this addition, the argument will move away from a mere consideration of the intellectual capabilities of the people towards a deeper criticism of modern philosophy. In this way my intention is to suggest that Mill was not at all unaware of the looming crisis of the Enlightenment.[A]

As I have just stated, I wish to begin with proofs of Mill’s faith in the progress of reason and science over time. This progress, of course, would not come about out of nowhere. Rather, freely expressed ideas and opinions would facilitate the way for new discoveries, or scientific progress. In the present article I will not expand upon the particular ways in which Mill thought that freely expressed ideas would contribute to the quest for truth. What I wish to examine here is how confident Mill was that his theory applied in practice. To put it in another way, how optimistic was Mill on the coming of the age of reason?

In “On Liberty,” in the context of a discussion on the relationship between rational skepticism and the advancement of civilization, Mill expressed his faith in the triumph of reason. He wrote,

Why is it, then, that there is on the whole a preponderance among mankind of rational opinions and rational conduct? If there really is this preponderance—which there must be, unless human affairs are, and have always been, in an almost desperate state—it is owing to a quality of the human mind, the source of everything respectable in man either as an intellectual or as a moral being, namely, that his errors are corrigible. He is capable of rectifying his mistakes, by discussion and experience. Not by experience alone. There must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted (Basic, 21-22).[1]

First, Mill argued that on the whole there is a preponderance of rational opinions and conduct in humanity. Even if things did not start this way—who can tell that with certainty—rationality was perpetually in the rise because human beings had the capacity to correct their errors. Mill defined this phenomenon as rational or constructive skepticism. Questioning minds would destroy the fortresses of falsity but only in order to build greater monuments of humanity upon solid foundations. Later critiques of the Enlightenment questioned the constructiveness of skepticism although by then it was too late.[2]

In another passage in “On Liberty,” in the context of a larger discussion on revitalizing the roots of knowledge by lively discussion, Mill very clearly pronounced his belief that with the passage of time more and more truths would be discovered, or established, in a conclusive fashion. He wrote,

As mankind improve, the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase: and the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested. The cessation, on one question after another, of serious controversy, is one of the necessary incidents of the consolidation of opinion; a consolidation as salutary in the case of true opinion, as it is dangerous and noxious when the opinions are erroneous. But though this gradual narrowing of the bounds of diversity of opinion is necessary in both senses of the term, being at once inevitable and indispensable, we are not therefore to conclude that all its consequences must be beneficial (Basic, 45).

The preceding passage is a rich source for commentary on Mill’s epistemology and his faith in scientific progress: First, beyond doubt it gives the sense that Mill had a notion of definitive truth. Someone who did not believe in the existence of truth would not have stated that more and more definitive discoveries would be made over time. Second, it reflects Mill’s optimistic belief that the future would be characterized by positive progress. It is true that Mill warned against intellectual complacency as a result of the ultimate triumph of science for two principal reasons: One, it was never advisable to assume infallibility as it took away from the motivation to question things. Two, in the absence of critical discussion, the foundations and the meaning of even what is certain to be true would be forgotten. In other words, criticism enlivens human understanding. However, these precautions should not overshadow Mill’s essential optimism regarding the future and progress.

Thus far, I have attempted to give a brief report on the nature of Mill's belief in the increasing prevalence of rationalism and the progress of science. Based on these, either human beings always had an aptitude for rational thought which was overshadowed by illusions born out of ignorance in the early stages of their existence as a species, or, less likely, Mill was hoping to modify human nature by calling attention to reason, and, thereby discouraging undue reliance upon his imagination.

These being said, in parts of his introduction to "On Liberty," Mill depicted a less than rational humanity. There he commented upon the various ways in which different societies had generated their customary principles for governing the limits between individual independence and social control. He clearly stated that the various solutions that societies developed in order to regulate the relationship between the self and the society were for the most part based upon subjective foundations. Had there been something called pure reason, the solution it conveyed regarding the tension between the desire for individual liberty and social restraint would have possibly differed on account of contextual variables. The application of reason could bring forth different solutions to the same problem when posed in different environments. However, when Mill remarked upon the diverse ways in which different societies responded to the question of social morality, I believe he had more in mind. He wrote,

No two ages, and scarcely any two countries, have decided it alike; and the decision of one age or country is a wonder to another. Yet the people of any given age and country no more suspect any difficulty in it, than if it were a subject on which mankind had always been agreed. The rules which obtain among themselves appear to them self-evident and self-justifying. This all but universal illusion is one of the examples of the magical influence of custom, which is not only, as the proverb says, a second nature, but is continually mistaken for the first (Basic, 7).

This was not the sole allusion Mill made in "On Liberty" to the relative and subjective characteristics of different cultures. Especially in its first half, one can find plenty of examples of it and the blind belief in the universality of particular creeds. In the following pages, I intend to discuss briefly how, according to Mill, if not by reason, people came to generate their customarily subjective positions.

In a long passage in his introduction to "On Liberty," Mill specified the various influences that factored in the formation of the mores governing the relationship between the individual and the society. Reason was simply one among many. He wrote,

Men's opinions, accordingly on what is laudable or blameable, are affected by all the multifarious causes which influence their wishes in regard to the conduct of others, and which are as numerous as those which determine their wishes on other subjects. Sometimes their reason—at other times their prejudices or superstitions: often their social affections, not seldom their antisocial ones, their envy and jealousy, their arrogance or contemptuousness: but most commonly, their desires or fears for themselves—their legitimate or illegitimate self-interest. Wherever there is an ascendant class, a large portion of the morality of the country emanates from its class interests, and its feelings of class superiority. The morality between Spartans and Helots, between planters and negroes, between princes and subjects, between nobles and roturiers, between men and women, has been for the most part the creation of these class interests and feelings: and the sentiments this generated, react in turn upon the moral feelings of the members of the ascendant class, in their relations among themselves. Where, on the other hand, a class, formerly ascendant, has lost its ascendancy, or where its ascendancy is popular, the prevailing moral sentiments frequently bear the impress of an impatient dislike of superiority. Another grand determining principle of the rules of conduct, both in act and forbearance, which have been enforced by law or opinion, has been the servility of towards the supposed preferences or aversions of their temporal masters, or of their gods. This servility, though essentially selfish, is not hypocrisy; it gives rise to perfectly genuine sentiments of abhorrence; it made men burn magicians and heretics. Among so many base influences, the general and obvious interests of society have of course had a share, and a large one, in the direction of the moral sentiments: less, however, as a matter of reason, and on their own account, than as a consequence of the sympathies and antipathies which grew out of them: and sympathies and antipathies which had little or nothing to do with the interests of society, have made themselves felt in the establishment of moralities with quite as great force (Basic, 8-9).

Reason and enlightened self-interest were included among the original influences in the formation of social morality but unenlightened self-interest, prejudice, superstition, jealousy, envy, arrogance, and contemptuousness were found in the list as well. Mill counted in class interests including the public's reaction to the higher classes. Thus, he referred to both rational and emotional influences. He continued with people's sincere desire to behave in light of the dictates of religion which for him was something other than the rational. In fact, the only example Mill gave of the influence of religion in shaping social morality was religious intolerance, and he particularly cited the burning of magicians and heretics. As for the influence of the general interests of society in forming morality, their influence was not direct but through the sympathies and antipathies which grew out of them. However, once born those sympathies and antipathies would become separate phenomena and would follow their own pattern of growth independent of and possibly in contradiction to the considerations derived from a regard for the enlightened interests of society. That is to say, Mill attempted to show that morality, or social morality, was an amalgam of various preferences, mostly arbitrary.[3] Reason was one of them, in competition with many others, and mostly its influence was indirect and in a distorted form.

The irrational, or the subjective, conception of customs and particularly of the traditional mores regulating social life and the unreasonable trust in them, all of these added to a climate of intolerance and hostility towards individuality, a priority for Mill. He wrote,

The effect of custom, in preventing any misgiving respecting the rules of conduct which mankind impose on one another, is all the more complete because the subject is one on which it is not generally considered necessary that reasons should be given, either by one person to others, or by each to himself. People are accustomed to believe, and have been encouraged in the belief by some who aspire to the character of philosophers, that their feelings, on subjects of this nature, are better than reasons, and render reason unnecessary. The practical principle which guides them to their opinions on the regulation of human conduct, is the feeling in each person's mind that everybody should be required to act as he, and those with whom he sympathizes, would like them to act. No one indeed, acknowledges, to himself that his standard of judgment is his own liking; but an opinion on a point of conduct, not supported by reasons, can only count as one person's preference; and if the reasons, when given, are a mere appeal to a similar preference felt by other people, it is still only many people's liking instead of one. To an ordinary man, however, his own preference, thus supported, is not only a perfectly satisfactory reason, but the only one he generally has for any of his notions of morality, taste, or propriety, which are not expressly written in his religious creed; and his chief guide even in the interpretation even of that (Basic, 8).

As the subjective yet total faith in custom was an impediment to free discussion, by the same token, it was ultimately a source of ill considered intolerance. Mill blamed so-called philosophers who discouraged rationality by impressing the notion of moral feeling, something which ideally rendered rational arguments and justifications unnecessary. According to Dale Miller, the philosophers in question the moral intuitionists.[4] Mill's problem was that what people just knew by intuition or moral feeling was what they just wanted to know to be true and/or good. In other words, trust upon moral feeling would lead to the confirmation of people's faith in their subjective preferences, as if that moral feeling was based upon a universal call. As long as subjective preferences were regarded as universal, reliance upon that feeling would be a firm foundation for intolerance. Mill argued that intolerance was not the less arbitrary when similar sympathies were shared by many rather than by few. The inherent moral sense in question might aptly be considered the subconscious expression of a whole group's customary heritage and/or traditional preferences. In contrast, a habit of rational discussion in deciding common matters would help people discover the arbitrariness of their values and, ultimately, pave the way for greater tolerance.

Thus far, then, my findings lead to diverse thoughts on Mill's faith in the triumph of rationality. As I have given a few indications in the preceding pages, throughout the body of "On Liberty" there is quite a bit of evidence of Mill's faith in the progress of humanity through the use of reason. In addition, Mill's consistent attacks against Christianity seem to indicate his enthusiasm for the ultimate triumph of rationalism in the battle for human hearts and minds. On the other hand, Mill's genealogy of social morality with its emphasis upon human vulnerability in the face of subjective influences leads to doubts as to the

possibility of a true age of reason. Or, better said, it shows the formidability of the obstacles on the way. Mill's observations and proposals in his "Three Essays on Religion" create further complications.

Mill's "Three Essays on Religion" was published posthumously in the year 1874. To some extent these were articulations of pre-existing Enlightenment arguments. For instance, in the first essay titled, Nature, Mill argued that given the evils and the disasters in the world, the Creator either had no designs for the benefit of humankind or that he was not omnipotent. Instead of deriving his standards of good and evil from nature, humankind had to rely upon his reason in order to improve and perfect it.

In the second essay titled, Utility of Religion, Mill expressed his thoughts about the idea of promoting religion for its alleged social utility, irrespective of the validity of its claims. In "On Liberty," writing on the quest for truth, Mill had taken up the issue by implication. He had written, "The truth of an opinion is part of its utility" (Basic, 24). What is interesting is that in his essay titled, Utility of Religion, Mill appeared different from his old unyielding self. He was open to the possibility of reconsidering his position on the connection between truth and utility. He wrote,

Neither, on the other hand, can the difficulties of the question be so promptly disposed of, as sceptical philosophers are sometimes inclined to believe. It is not enough to aver, in general terms, that there never can be any conflict between truth and utility; that if religion be false, nothing but good can be the consequence of rejecting it (Religion, 73).[5]

In other words, without naming himself, Mill found his former dismissal of the argument insufficient. With this in mind, Mill launched an investigation into the utility of religion. Near the end of this analysis, though, we find that his views are consistent with those advanced in "On Liberty." He wrote,

Belief, then, in the supernatural, great as are the services which it rendered in the early stages of human development, cannot be considered to be any longer required, either for enabling us to know what is wrong and right in social morality, or for supplying us with motives to do right and to abstain from wrong (Religion, 100).

Then, according to Mill, religion had more than achieved its social purpose. In the present stage of development, it was reduced to a relic of the past of humankind. Given the realities of the new times, it could no more shed sufficient light upon the choices humankind faced in realm of social morality. It was in this spirit that elsewhere Mill pronounced himself in favor of another standard, namely utilitarianism, or the principle of the maximum happiness of the most.

If the difference between the two Mill's on the utility of religion was so far only in tone, in other related issues the contrast was greater. Despite his zealous attack against Christianity in "On Liberty," in his essay titled, the Utility of Religion, Mill advocated a new religion called, The Religion of Humanity. However, Mill assumed his newly adopted role of a prophet in less than stereotypical fashion. I say this because with his technique he was bound to fail in gaining zealous followers, something perhaps which he never

sincerely hoped for. For one thing, he held fast to his habit of denigrating religion. He argued that it was not religious faith per se which exerted a good influence upon the people. Rather, people failed to appreciate the input of other influences that blended in with it. He wrote,

We have now considered two powers, that of authority, and that of early education, which operate through men's involuntary beliefs, feelings and desires, and which religion has hitherto held as its almost exclusive appanage. Let us now consider a third power which operates directly on their actions, whether their involuntary sentiments are carried with it or not. This is the power of public opinion; of the praise and blame, the favor and disfavor, of their fellow creatures; and is a source of strength inherent in any system of moral belief left here (Religion, 84).

Thus, what was really the result of the exertion of authority, early education, and the pressure of public opinion, people attributed to the good influence of religion because all those institutions worked in order to inculcate religious morality. If these were united in campaigning for some other teaching, its influence in forming the hearts and the minds of the people would appear equally strong.

Denigrating the old religion was not in itself a weak strategy for an aspiring prophet. In fact, as Nietzsche's Zarathustra suggested, in order to build, one must first destroy.[6] However, in Mill's case, the new message gave too little food for imagination and passion, and this was just the thing fit for the dignity of a rational skeptic prophet. Mill wrote, "History, so far as we know it, bears out the opinion, that mankind can do perfectly well without the belief in heaven" (Religion, 120). He gave the example of the glorious existence of the Greeks and the Romans.

The ancient Greeks and the Romans had highly sophisticated civilizations. With their example, Mill did not intend to mean that in its early stages of development humankind did not need a belief in the supernatural. According to Mill, with the advancement of the species morality could very well be grounded on the sentiment of pride or, preferably, on rational self-interest. In addition, he thought that once established, the rules of morality could stand on their own right, without the support derived from the aura of their supposed supernatural origins. I believe in this case he completely failed to predict the contemporary assault on morality based on the notion that "it's all relative." Rather he wrote,

But because, when men were still savages, they would not have received either moral or scientific truths unless they had supposed them to be supernaturally imparted, does it follow that they would now give up moral truths any more than scientific, because they believed them to have no higher origin than wise and noble human rights? Are not moral truths strong enough in their own evidence, at all events to retain the belief of mankind when once they have acquired it? (Religion, 97).

As Mill saw it, traditional religion had two sorts of appeals. One was for the vulgar and the other was for the noble specimens of humankind. I will begin with the first, about which Mill wrote:

We may now have done with this branch of the subject, which is, after all, the most vulgar part of it. The value of religion as a supplement to human laws, a more cunning sort of police, an auxiliary to the thief-catcher and the hangman, is not that part of its claims which the more highminded of its votaries are fondest of insisting on: and they would probably be as ready as any one to admit, that if the nobler offices of religion in the soul could be dispensed with, a substitute might be found for so coarse and selfish a social instrument as the fear of hell. In their view of the matter, the best of mankind absolutely require religion for the perfection of their own character, even though the coercion of the worst might possibly be accomplished without its aid (Religion, 95).

Mill considered the internal as well as external moral policing born out of religious consciousness to be coarse, or vulgar, because it was based upon humankind's most crude instincts. Cultivation by reliance upon the fear of hell, or punishment, reduced human beings to the level of creatures. Especially given the level of development at the time when he wrote, Mill argued that there were civic substitutes for the fear of hell worthy of the dignity of humankind for promoting moral conduct.

To make things clear, Mill did not exclude punishment or fear among the civic substitutes for religious morality. It appears that he simply regarded the fear of the supernatural to be vulgar from its very foundations. This means that the vulgarity of religion lied essentially in its threat against the free use and the development of the intellectual, or the moral, faculties of humankind. According to Mill, this happened in two principal ways. First, the faithful focused on the best and the logical aspects of religion at the expense of downplaying or even totally ignoring what appeared to be questionable. Mill wrote,

It is no doubt, possible (and there are many instances of it) to worship with the intensest devotion either Deity, that of Nature or of the Gospel, without any perversion of the moral sentiments: but this must be by fixing the attention exclusively on what is beautiful and beneficent in the precepts and spirit of the Gospel and in the dispensations of Nature, and putting all that is reverse as entirely aside as if it did not exist. Accordingly, this simple and innocent faith can only, as I have said, co-exist with a torpid and inactive state of the speculative faculties (Religion, 115-116).

Thus, the religious necessity to accept a belief system in full and not just in bits and pieces led to the voluntary suppression of the speculative faculties of the faithful.

Second, the force of religious customs thwarted attempts to adapt religious moral laws according to the rational demands of the new times. Mill wrote,

[T]here is a very real evil consequent on ascribing a supernatural origin to the received maxims of morality. That origin consecrates the whole of them, and protects them from being discussed or criticized. 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, unexceptional 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, 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 (Religion, 99).

In other words, the force of dogma led to the rise of both internal and external barriers to the free use of reason. Thus, in its most stereotypical form, religion appealed to the crude fears of humanity at the cost of alienating him from his unique faculty of reason. In this sense, Mill posed religion as a counterweight to both the moral dignity and the happiness of humankind.

On the other hand, Mill acknowledged that many saw in religion an inspiration for perfection. In the *Utility of Religion* he wrote, “The value of religion to the individual, both in the past and present, as a source of personal satisfaction and of elevated feelings, is not to be disputed” (Religion, 104). However, he gave the most comprehensive definition of the phenomenon in his third essay on religion titled, *Theism*. He wrote,

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. This idealization of our standard of excellence in a Person is quite possible, even when that Person is conceived as merely imaginary (Religion, 250).

In contrast to those driven by the fear of punishment, others filled with the love of a Divine Providence were nobly inspired for the highest excellence attainable by humankind. Modern critics of Christianity including David Hume regarded the passionate love of God as a state of melancholy equivalent to the ruin of one’s nerves, in other words, something to be fought against.[7] Mill of course, was no less critical of Christianity than Hume. He too wanted men to love the world.

Mill was not the first philosopher to come up with the notion of a Religion of Humanity. I think of Immanuel Kant, but, according to Alan Ryan, Mill was inspired by Auguste Comte.[8] As he saw it, The Religion of Humanity carried only the noble appeal of religion. Mill wrote,

The essence of religion is the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as of the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire. This condition is fulfilled by the Religion of Humanity in as eminent a degree, and in as high a sense, as by the supernatural religions even in their best manifestations, and far more so than in any of their others (Religion, 109).

In other words, for those who bought it, The Religion of Humanity promised the better of the two worlds. On the one hand, it did not have a vulgar appeal and it did not vulgarize its adherents by discouraging the free use of reason. On the other hand, it gave a meaning to their lives and elevated their aspirations.

The Religion of Humanity was a worldly religion. It had nothing to do with the love or the fear of the supernatural. It was a commitment to the world and to reality. Mill wrote,

When we consider how ardent a sentiment, in favourable circumstances of education, the love of country has become, we cannot judge it impossible that the love of that larger country, the world, may be nursed into a similar strength, both as a source of elevated emotion and as a principle of duty (Religion, 107).

Love life or love the world, these have been the message of some of the major critiques of Christianity in the modern times, stretching from Machiavelli to Hume, Mill, and Nietzsche, among others. It is easy to see why a worldly religion would not cause fear in the bosom of the people. But, wherein came its noble inspiration? In the absence of an ideal God, what would inspire humankind to perfection as it is supposed that the old religion did? Mill's answer was an attachment to humanity. He wrote,

But that because life is short we should care for nothing beyond it, is not a legitimate conclusion; and the supposition, that human beings in general not capable of feeling deep and even the deepest interest in things which they will never live to see, is a view of human nature as false as it is abject. Let it be remembered that if individual life is short, the life of the human species is not short; its indefinite duration is practically equivalent to endlessness; and being combined with indefinite capability for improvement, it offers to the imagination and sympathies a large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur of aspiration. If such an object appears small to a mind accustomed to dream of infinite and eternal beatitudes, it will expand into far other dimensions when those baseless fancies shall have receded into the past.

Nor let it be thought that only the more eminent of our species, in mind and heart, are capable of identifying their feelings with the entire life of the human race. This noble capability implies indeed a certain cultivation, but not superior to that which might be, and certainly will be if human improvement continues, the lot of all. Objects far smaller than this, and equally confined within the limits of the earth (though not within those of a single human life), have been found sufficient to inspire large masses and long successions of mankind with an enthusiasm capable of ruling the conduct, and colouring the whole life. Rome was to the entire Roman people, for many generations as much a religion as Jehovah was to the Jews; nay much more, for they never fell off from their worship as the Jews did from theirs. And the Romans, otherwise a selfish people, with no remarkable faculties of any kind except the purely practical, derived nevertheless from this one idea a certain greatness of soul, which manifests itself in all their history where that idea is concerned and nowhere else, and has earned for them the large share of admiration, in other respects not at all deserved, which has been felt for them by most noble-minded persons from that time to this. (Religion, 106-107).

Despite the shortness of individual human lives, Mill set forth the historical continuity of the human species and its capability for indefinite improvement as the prime sources of inspiration in his new order. Thus, while facing one's own mortality, individuals would find meaning to life, a source of emotional and intellectual elevation, and a reason for a struggle to improve both himself or herself and humanity in the potential for, and the actual greatness of, the species. As for the criticism that this sort of a consciousness might appeal only to a people with a certain degree of cultivation, he downplayed the prospect and said that if human improvement continued as it did, it would be the lot of all. He gave the example of the greatness of the Romans, and, thereby argued that his was more than an utopian design. His point was that there had been human greatness hand in hand with civic religion before. Those who could conceive of no socially useful religion but Christianity were simply narrow minded. With the advent of a few generations, the belief in the old faith and the expectation of the supernatural would be all the more forgotten. Finally, according to Mill, people with civic virtue were not powerless in the face of the appeal of supernatural religion, nor had they any reason to feel it inferior. The Jews had fallen from their religion, the Romans had not. Here, I believe the significance of Judaism was that it is the proto-typical Biblical religion. On the other hand, Mill's comparison between the strength of Roman religion, civic or pagan, and Judaism is incomplete.

Christianity which some commentators on history including Edward Gibbon had counted to be the prime cause of the decay and the fall of the Roman Civilization was inspired by a Jew and it was, so to speak, a development upon Judaism.[9]

Although The Religion of Humanity by its very name suggests a devotion to humanity, in Mill's vision this did not mean that legitimate individual liberties would be trampled upon for the sake of the interests of society. He described the new morality as, "A morality grounded on large and wise views of the good of the whole, neither sacrificing the individual to the aggregate nor the aggregate to the individual, but giving to duty on the one hand and to freedom and spontaneity on the other their proper province ..."

(Religion, 108). Hence, Mill's Religion of Humanity was not a retreat from his argument for freedom of expression and individual rights, but to what extent was it a retreat from his anti-religious zeal characteristic of the Enlightenment? The answer to this question lied in his third essay on religion.

In that essay titled, Theism, Mill sought to answer the question concerning the existence of God. His ultimate conclusion was that given the evidence at hand, Its existence could neither be denied nor confirmed. In this way, Mill attempted to distinguish the conclusions of his self described rational skeptic method of inquiry from unqualified atheism. He wrote,

From the result of the preceding examination of the evidences of Theism, and (Theism being presupposed) of the evidences of any Revelation, it follows that the rational attitude of a thinking mind towards the supernatural, whether in natural or revealed religion, is that of skepticism as distinguished from belief on the one hand, and from atheism on the other: including, in the present case, under atheism, the negative as well as the positive form of disbelief in a God, viz., not only the dogmatic denial of his existence, but the denial that there is any evidence on either side, which for most practical purposes amounts to the same thing as if the existence of a God had been disproved. If we are right in the conclusions to which we have been led by the preceding inquiry there is evidence, but insufficient proof, and amounting only to one of the lower degrees of probability (Religion, 242).

While there was no way to absolutely prove the claims on either side of the debate on the existence of God, Mill laid the burden of proof to the party who had come up with a positive claim, that is, it was the duty of the religious to prove the existence of God. As things stood, the existence of God was merely a lower degree of probability. But, if there was a God, Mill was certain that given the existence of so many evils in nature, he was either powerless against the forces in existence and/or he did not wish the best for his creatures. Mill wrote, "The notion of providential government by an omnipotent Being for the good of his creatures must be entirely dismissed" (Religion, 243). As I have suggested before, this last argument was typical among Enlightenment thinkers.

Mill's rational skepticism in the face of the question of God fit in well with his desire to establish The Religion of Humanity, in that it gave some room for belief. On the other hand, I have earlier in this essay stated that Mill's attempt was doomed to failure, at least

in the traditional sense. This was because the call of a rational skeptic prophet could be anything but passionate. In fact, in his essay called, *Theism*, one can notice Mill's carefree prophecy. He wrote,

But to any one who feels it conducive either to his satisfaction or to his usefulness to hope for a future state as a possibility, there is no hindrance to his indulging that hope (*Religion*, 210).

Elsewhere he wrote,

But when the reason is strongly cultivated, the imagination may safely follow its own end, and to its best to make life pleasant and lovely inside the castle, in reliance on the fortifications raised and maintained by Reason round the outward bounds. On these principles it appears to me that the indulgence of hope with regard to the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death, while we recognize as a clear truth that we have no ground for more than a hope, is legitimate and philosophically defensible. The beneficial effects of such a hope is far from trifling. It makes life and human nature a far greater thing to the feelings, and gives greater strength as well as greater solemnity to all the sentiments which are awakened in us by our fellow-creatures and by mankind at large (*Religion*, 249).

This meant that as long as strictly held in check by reason, there was no harm in holding religious beliefs. One needed not have those beliefs, but if people felt like it, there was no reason to hold them back, and, arguably there was some good in letting them follow their desires. The utility of rationally skeptical religious belief, or the utility of Mill's *Religion of Humanity*, was that it was only designed to provide noble inspiration for mankind. The vulgar methods of traditional biblical religion were out of the question. All of these meant that rather than engaging in poetry, the prophet of the *Religion of Humanity* remained a philosopher. If the weakness of its appeal to the imagination was one major reason for Mill's failure to develop a following, the other side of the coin was the increasingly skeptical times, a development to which Mill and his enlightened kin contributed. Roughly three fourths of a century later, the German existentialist Heidegger suggested that even if they wanted to, people were unable to believe. Enlightenment had more than accomplished its mission.^[10]

In sum, there are noticeable differences between Mill's "On Liberty" and his "Three Essays on Religion." In the former publication Mill blended his call for a society of rational skeptics with a heavy assault against Christianity, whereas in his "Three Essays on Religion" he favored the establishment of a new religion. The nature and the extent of the rift is subject to distinct interpretations. For instance, Gertrude Himmelfarb who noticed this rift wrote in her article titled, *From Liberty of Thought and Discussion* wrote,

When his old friend (and future biographer) Alexander Bain wrote that he thought *On Liberty* was meant to convert not the world but only an ‘intellectual aristocracy,’ Mill disavowed such an elitist intention. On the contrary, he said, he wanted to make ‘the many more accessible to all the truth by making them more open minded.’ But he then went on to say that if Bain’s remark applied only to the subject of religion, there was some truth in it: ‘On that, certainly I am not anxious to bring over any but really superior intellects and 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.’

The reservation was an important one—and appears nowhere in *On Liberty*. If religion enjoyed the special immunity Mill was now giving it, it could only have been because, whatever its other defects, it still functioned as a support for morality. But this implied that something less than the whole truth was more desirable than the whole truth, that a religion based upon intellectual error was preferable to an agnosticism which may have been intellectually sounder. The suggestion is so at odds with the entire argument of *On Liberty* that one can only attribute it to the ‘other Mill, a Mill who was sensible of the complexity of the moral life and was aware that prudence was as much a moral imperative as truth (Mill, 291-292).^[11]

I tend to disagree with Himmelfarb’s conclusions. If Mill gave any special immunity to religion at all, as he himself had claimed to in the aforementioned letter dated 1859, it was not because he regarded it as a support for morality. One should remember that Mill’s effort in his “Three Essays on Religion” at improving religion consisted of promoting the noble or inspirational influence of religion while at the same time eliminating its vulgar influence. This being said, Mill is not free from the charges of inconsistency. The preceding correspondence between Mill and Alexander Bain was incidentally written at the year of the publication of “On Liberty”. It is hard to believe that the very same year he wrote a book in order to campaign for free expression and an enlightened and skeptical society disillusioned with its traditional faith, in a private letter Mill would confess that he did not desire to cause people lose their religion but that he wanted to reform it. If Mill’s campaign for The Religion of Humanity was not in outright contradiction to the spirit of “On Liberty,” still no one well-versed in Mill’s argument for free expression could see it coming that Mill felt a void at the core of Enlightenment thought.

It was not only Himmelfarb who argued that Mill’s writings were characterized by inconsistencies. For instance, John Gray, a commentator on Mill, wrote the following passing remark:

On the received and conventional view, John Stuart Mill is an eclectic and transitional thinker, who is never able either to endorse or to abandon the classical utilitarian philosophy he inherited from his father, James Mill, and whose writings implement no research programme, exhibit no settled doctrine, but merely reflect his vacillations of mind (*Liberty*, vii).^[12]

Gray himself did not endorse these views but transmitted them in order to give an indication of Mill’s reputation in the wide world of scholarship. One can also mention C. L. Ten on the discrepancies in Mill’s thought.^[13] But, I suggest that a careful reading of his essays on religion can lead to the conclusion that there is a measured continuity

between the skeptical rational teaching of “On Liberty” and Mill’s carefree prophecy of The Religion of Humanity. Rather, what I find more troubling are the inconsistencies within “On Liberty:” On the one hand, Mill certainly glorified the critical spirit, longed for rational skepticism, and harassed Christianity. On the other hand, as I have shown in the earlier parts of this essay, he was well aware of the importance of subjective factors in shaping the thoughts and actions of humankind. If this was so, it remains a mystery for me how he found the courage to embark upon a mission to enlighten the masses. I believe, he took the irrational part of the human nature as something that could be improved upon or changed. And, to the extent that the Enlightenment accomplished the goals that it did, visionaries and dreamers like Mill proved to be correct in their optimism. In this context, I believe that Mill’s call for The Religion of Humanity was the recognition by a leading devotee of the Enlightenment of the irrational side of humanity. It was his tribute to the unbreakable will of the old enemy. Mill’s inspirational project was to fail. Although less than two decades later Nietzsche’s Zarathustra made a flamboyant attempt at prophecy with only partially similar intentions, he was to face similarly disappointing results.[14]

In the end, throughout the present inquiry, I attempted to capture the spirit of struggle between various currents in Mill’s thought. Specifically, I attempted to demonstrate Mill’s faith in positive or scientific progress despite its problematic aspects. On the one hand, he had faith in the gradual advancement of skeptical rationalism within the ranks of society; on the other hand, he had some doubts regarding the capacity of the people for rational thought. The issue got all the more complicated when Mill assumed the role of the prophet of The Religion of Humanity. For those who could not afford to face existence in its plain nakedness, he thought that religion would provide sufficient inspiration. In relation to this, I stress Mill’s growing suspicion of an inherent void in Enlightenment thought rather than the dubious capacity of the people for rational thought.

Mill’s inkling of the crisis of the Enlightenment brought me to a re-occurring pattern throughout my other writings, namely the connection between Mill and German existentialists, particularly Nietzsche and Heidegger. At this occasion, I meant to tie Mill’s Religion of Humanity to Nietzsche’s prophet Zarathustra and, I here add, Heidegger’s fascination with National Socialism.

Mill’s “Three Essays On Religion” was a work from the latter period of his career. On the one hand, it distinguished him from an earlier Mill and a classical Enlightenment thinker such as David Hume. On the other hand, there is no conclusive evidence in this or in any other of his works that Mill possessed a streak of intellectual and moral relativism characteristic of German existentialists. In fact, things appear to be on the contrary. In the spectrum of the history of ideas, Mill stands much closer to the philosophy of Enlightenment. Of course, in contradistinction to all of the aforementioned thinkers, he was staunchly committed to liberal politics.

Notes:

A. For the most part my argument in this article will be based upon selected passages from “On Liberty” and “Three Essays On Religion.”

1. Mill, John Stuart. *The Basic Writings Of John Stuart Mill: On Liberty, The Subjection & Utilitarianism*. New York: Random House, 2002.

2. Here I particularly have Heidegger’s criticism of the destructiveness of rational skepticism in mind. In his famous Der Spiegel interview he said, “According to our human experience and history, at least as far as I see it, I know that everything essential and everything great originated from the fact that man had a home and was rooted in a tradition. Present-day literature, for example, is predominantly destructive”. (Der Spiegel. “Only a God Can Save Us”. *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Richard Wolin. (New York: Columbia UP, 1991. 106. Elsewhere, in his 1933 article titled, “The Self-Assertion of the German University”, he wrote, “The much praised ‘academic freedom’ is being banished from the German university; for this freedom was false, because it was only negating” (Heidegger, Martin. “The Self-Assertion of the German University”. *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Richard Wolin. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. 34. The connection between Heidegger’s critique of skepticism, freedom, and his affiliation with the NSDAP, I leave it up to the reader.

3. I use the term “social morality” in order to define the mores governing the relationship between the self and the society. I am aware of the fact that it might be a redundant expression, especially if Mill’s distinction between self and other regarding virtues is to be seen as invalid.

4. Miller, Dale. Notes and Commentary. Mill, John Stuart. *The Basic Writings Of John Stuart Mill: On Liberty, The Subjection & Utilitarianism*. New York: Random House, 2002. 328.

5. Mill, John Stuart. *Three Essays On Religion: Nature, The Utility of Religion, Theism*. New York: Prometheus, 1998.

6. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book For None And All*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin, 1978.

7. Hume, David. *Essays: Moral, Political, And Literary*. Ed. Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985.

8. Ryan, Alan. *J. S. Mill*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974. 234-235.

9. Gibbon, Edward. *The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire*. Ed. Dero A. Saunders. New York: Penguin, 1985.

10. Here I return back to Heidegger’s Der Spiegel interview. As a response to the scientific revolution, the resulting mass society, mankind’s alienation from his own nature, and his inability to believe, Heidegger said,

Only a god can save us. The sole possibility that is left for us is to prepare a sort of readiness, through thinking and poetizing, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god in the time of foundering; for in the face of the god who is absent, we founder.

And the conversation continued in the following manner:

S: Is there a connection between your thinking and the emergence of this god? Is there in your view a causal connection? Do you think that we can think god into being here with us?

H: We can not think him into being here; we can at most awaken the readiness of expectation.

S: But are we able to help?

H: The preparation of a readiness may be the first step.

(Der Spiegel. "Only a God Can Save Us". *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Richard Wolin. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. 107.)

11. Himmelfarb, Gertrude. "From Liberty of Thought and Discussion". *Mill: The Spirit of The Age, On Liberty, The Subjection of Women*. Ed. Alan Ryan. New York: Norton & Co, 1997. 279-294.

12. Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Ed. John Gray. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

13. Ten, C. L. *Mill on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980.

14. I would like to thank Dr. Ludger Hagedorn for his judicious remark that Zarathustra's ideal disciples and their posterity would sharply differ from individuals inspired to perfection by Mill's Religion of Humanity on account of their amorality.

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