
Mill's Religion of Humanity: Consequences and Implications

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One of the more remarkable, if controversial, developments in Anglo-American society over the past century has been the transformation of liberal politics from a commitment to limited government toward the progressive expansion of governmental direction of the social process. John Stuart Mill was a pivotal figure in that transformation. His self-avowed "eclecticism" allowed him to retain something of a commitment to classical liberalism, and he never completely abandoned the belief in a limited political sphere that characterizes that outlook. But Mill muddied the waters of classical-liberal philosophy and practice by his conviction that the end of government is the all-encompassing "improvement of mankind" and not the preservation of individual liberty-under-law, as well as by his self-conscious embrace and advocacy of the "social" moral ideal. Moreover, Mill's ambition to replace the theologically oriented society of the Western tradition with one grounded in and oriented exclusively toward Humanity necessarily entailed a departure from classical liberalism. For individual liberty-under-law, as historically understood in the West, is crucially and inseparably wed to the belief in a law higher than the enactments of mankind, as well as to the sanctity of the person that derives from his or her source in God. In short, Mill's attempt to replace God with Humanity not only eviscerates the higher-law tradition crucial to the preservation of individual liberty and limited government but

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their spiritual foundation as well. For it is the transcendent spiritual purpose of each human being that, historically and existentially, engendered and sustains resistance to the pretensions of merely political power. When “Humanity” is elevated to the ultimate source and end of value, the political rulers become, in effect if not in name, the new gods.

*Humanity to
replace God.*

Mill’s influence on the development of the liberal tradition, then, is crucially bound up with his religious views and related thought. Mill’s successful incorporation of the doctrines associated with French Radicalism into the Anglo-American liberal tradition is bound up with the transformation of liberalism from classical-liberal constitutionalism to “advanced-liberal” progressivism. This in turn is related to the tension in Mill’s thought created by his lingering commitment to a classical-liberal defense of individual freedom and limited government and his even more passionate commitment to the establishment of an intramundane social religion. As Maurice Cowling has suggested, in the end a proper evaluation of Mill’s thought turns on the question of whether his apparently “libertarian” politics are not in fact “subordinate to the religious Mill.”¹ Benthamite/Millian utilitarianism was in continuity with the attempt of various French thinkers to create a secular, social, or political religion to provide the spiritual substance thought to be essential to the maintenance of social unity and political order. It should not be forgotten that the precursor of Millian Humanitarianism was the religious skepticism of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* and the radical anti-Christianity of the French Revolution. Through Mill’s influence this rampant hostility to traditional religion was incorporated into the Anglo-American tradition. In short, Benthamite/Millian utilitarianism should be regarded as a less virulent manifestation of the anti-theological impulse that impelled revolutionary forces in eighteenth-century France to overthrow Christianity in the name of the Goddess Reason and Humanity. Mill’s goal, like that of his predecessors, involved the implicit divinization of Humanity as well as the elevation of “service to Humanity” to the *ultimate* end of religious aspiration. It also involved the equally important, if less dramatic, insinuation of Benthamite/Comtean “altruism” and its notion of

¹ Maurice Cowling, ed., *Selected Writings of John Stuart Mill* (New York: New American Library), 11.

the superiority of “social” to personal morality into modern Anglo-American consciousness.

Mill’s attempt to weave the “social”-ist aspirations of the Continental thinkers into the essentially individualist tradition of Anglo-American liberal thought accounts for much of the notorious inconsistency of his corpus, for the two traditions and ideals are essentially irreconcilable.² The actual result of his unsuccessful attempt to knit together the incompatible elements of individualism and socialism was the curious and unstable hybrid of “modern liberalism,” which attempts to promote the socialist moral ideal of collective service to Humanity through expansive, activist government and this in the name of the very individual freedom classical liberalism was concerned to secure. It is not surprising that Mill’s views are most vigorously championed by modern liberals who advance such a view, for the spiritual and moral ethos he championed is that which has impelled the rise of modern-liberal collectivism. Mill, in perhaps his most important incarnation, is the first “modern liberal.”

*“The Meeting of the English and the French Mind”³:
The Transformation of Liberalism*

*Mingling of
two liberal
traditions.*

F. A. Hayek is one of the chief proponents of the view that modern liberalism is an incoherent and unstable hybrid engendered by the conflation of two essentially distinct and opposing traditions, namely, what he, with Mill, refers to as Continental and Anglo-American Liberalism.³ At the age of 14, Mill was sent to spend a year in France with the family of Sir Samuel Bentham, Jeremy’s brother. To this experience, Mill said, he owed not only a command of the language but also “. . . a strong and permanent interest in Continental Liberalism, of which I ever afterwards kept myself *au courant*, as much as of English politics: a thing not at all usual in those days with Englishmen, and which had a very salu-

² Modern-liberalism and its notion of the “mixed economy,” or, in contemporary jargon, the “Third Way,” attempts to promote the collectivist ideal of “social justice” by employing, in a qualified way, the classical-liberal means of individual freedom and the market. This is an inherently contradictory and self-defeating task. For a thorough discussion of why this is so, see F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) and *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (1973-79), in three volumes.

³ Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*.

tary influence on my development, keeping me free from the error always prevalent in England, and from which even my father with all his superiority to prejudice was not exempt, of judging universal questions by a merely English standard.”⁴

Opinions may differ with respect to the salutariness of the Continental influence on Mill’s development. There is no question, however, that Mill played a significant role in the mingling of the two “liberal” traditions and must receive a prominent place in any future research that attempts to disentangle them. He was a close student of French political developments and wrote a series of weekly articles on French politics for *The Examiner* during the 1830s, eventually establishing himself as the contemporary English expert on French affairs. He wrote extensively on Armand Carrel, Michelet, Guizot, and Alfred de Vigny, as well as on the French Revolution (Mill had originally planned to write its history, but eventually turned over all his material to Carlyle, whose book on the subject established his reputation, with Mill’s considerable assistance). Mill ran to Paris at the outbreak of the 1830 July Revolution, impelled by apocalyptic expectations—he thought the Time of Man had arrived. In 1848 he responded to Tory critics of French developments with his “Vindication of the French Revolution of 1848.”

Mill’s correspondence with Auguste Comte indicates that a merger of what Mill himself regarded as the essentially competing traditions of English antirationalism and French rationalism was one of his, as well as Comte’s, explicit goals. In 1842 he wrote to Comte about “another idea to which, almost alone among my compatriots, I have always adhered: like yourself, I am thoroughly convinced that the combination of the French and the English spirit is one of the most essential requirements for our intellectual renewal. . . . The French spirit is necessary so that conceptions may be generalized; the English spirit to prevent them from being vague.” Mill found the “lucidity and systematic spirit which are truly French” more to his taste than the plodding practicality of his English compatriots.⁵ What Mill himself loved was “abstract

⁴ J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. John M. Robson (New York: Penguin Books, 1968 [1865]), 51 (hereinafter cited within the text as *Auto*).

⁵ Oscar A. Haac, ed. and trans., *The Correspondence of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 60 (hereinafter cited within the text as *Corr*).

speculation," which he identified with French thought. He often reproached the English for their lack of interest and sympathy toward French speculative thought, and especially toward the philosophies of history developed by such Continental thinkers as St. Simon and Comte and which played such a prominent role in Mill's own thought. For Mill, his fellow Englishmen, fouled as they were by the "stench of trade," were little more than a dead weight on his soaring rationalist-Romantic spirit.⁶ And, perhaps most importantly, Mill was the chief carrier of the—illiberal—ideas of the St. Simonians and Comte into Anglo-American society. St. Simon is widely understood as a fountainhead of the totalitarian ideologies that flourished in his wake, and even Mill would finally renounce Comte's schemes as "spiritual despotism."⁷

*Mill as
alienated
intellectual.*

We have suggested that the conventional characterization of Mill as the last great spokesman for the classical-liberal tradition is misleading. Victorian England did of course represent the heyday of classical liberalism. Moreover, Mill's deep immersion in that tradition, as well as his self-conscious eclecticism, insured that his philosophy and outlook were informed by various authentically liberal elements. Nevertheless, as Hayek has said and as Mill himself acknowledged, Mill was very far from representative of his age and tradition and, indeed, was often in violent opposition to them. As Mill wrote to Comte in 1846, ". . . I have stood for quite some time in a kind of open opposition to the English character, which arouses my animosity in several respects; and all in all, I prefer the French, German or Italian character . . ." (*Corr*, 365). Leslie Stephen described Mill as "an alien among men of his own class in English society."⁸ Hayek thinks Mill "acquired . . . contempt . . . for English society, [as well as] . . . for contemporary development of English thought."⁹ Joseph Hamburger identifies Mill as the prototype of the modern "alienated intellectual," as hostile to the false consciousness of the bourgeoisie as any latter-

⁶ Mill to Carlyle, March 9, 1833, *Collected Works of J. S. Mill*, 12: 144 (hereinafter cited as CW).

⁷ George Iggers, *The Cult of Authority: The Political Philosophy of the Saint-Simonians, a Chapter in the Intellectual History of Totalitarianism* (1958).

⁸ Leslie Stephen, *The English Utilitarians*, Vol. 3, 16 (1950 [1900]).

⁹ Hayek, Preface, *The Spirit of the Age*, vi-vii (1942).

day Marxist. Mill's contempt for his English compatriots was truly profound. In the *Autobiography* Mill condemns

the . . . low moral tone of what, in England, is called society; . . . the absence of high feelings which manifests itself by sneering depreciation of all demonstrations of them, and by general abstinence . . . from professing any high principles of action at all; [and] . . . the absence of interest, . . . among the ordinary English, . . . of things of an unselfish kind. . . . [All of this] causes both their feelings and their intellectual faculties to remain undeveloped . . . ; reducing them, considered as spiritual beings, to a kind of negative existence.

The English scarcely had reality for Mill.

Mill was as laudatory of the French as condemnatory of the English.

Compare this with the French! whose faults, if equally real, are at all events different; among whom sentiments, which by comparison at least may be called elevated, are the current coin of human intercourse, . . . and are kept alive by constant exercise, and stimulated by sympathy, so as to form a living and active part of the existence of great numbers of persons. . . . [In France, in contrast to England, one finds the] . . . general culture of the understanding, which results from the habitual exercise of the feelings, . . . carried down into the most uneducated classes of several countries on the Continent, in a degree not equalled in England among the so called educated. . . . [In France, the] . . . general habit of the people is to shew, as well as to expect, friendly feeling in every one towards every other. . . . (*Auto*, 62-63)

And so on.¹⁰

Henry Reeve, the one-time editor of the *Edinburgh Review* who knew the Mill family for more than fifty years, drew portraits of John and Harriet Taylor Mill entirely in keeping with the image of the alienated intellectual sketched by Hamburger. Over the years Mill became increasingly reclusive, generally shunning social intercourse, even with his own family. Both the Mills preferred to avoid close contact with a society they regarded as vulgar and

¹⁰ Mill grew to love France, or at least his romantic idealization of it, above all other places; he and his wife, Harriet, planned to resettle in that country after Mill's retirement from India House. During one of their trips to France, Harriet died, suddenly and unexpectedly. Mill purchased a cottage near her grave in Avignon, where he lived out his final years, in company with his step-daughter Helen Taylor. Upon his death in 1873 he was buried next to Harriet in their beloved Avignon.

contemptible.¹¹ One result of their self-imposed quarantine, as well as of Mill's peculiarly isolated upbringing, was that, as Reeve put it, Mill was "totally ignorant . . . of English life" and society. His dissertations on the English character and society were not derived from thoroughgoing immersion in the social life of his time but from an imaginative comparison with his perfectionist ideal. Human beings, English or otherwise, were always something of an abstraction for Mill. As Reeve put it,

Mill never lived in what may be called society at all. . . . In later life he affected something of the life of a prophet, surrounded by admiring votaries, who ministered to him largely that incense in which prophets delight. . . . [M]ankind itself was to him an abstraction rather than a reality. He knew nothing of the world, and very little of the play and elasticity of human nature. It would have been of incalculable value to his philosophy if he had condescended to touch the earth, and to live with men and women as they are; but that was a lesson he had never learned, a book he had never opened.¹²

Mill himself acknowledged that existing human beings did not figure largely in his scheme of things. As he said in *Auguste Comte and Positivism*: "As M. Comte truly says, the highest minds, even now, live in thought with the great dead, far more than with the living; and, next to the dead, with those ideal human beings yet to come, whom they are never destined to see"¹³

Mill's
revolutionary
aspirations.

Mill's alienation from liberal Victorian society was not the only factor that places him outside the classical-liberal tradition. Equally significant is the towering reach of his ambition, that is, his aspirations for the *total transformation* of not only English political institutions, but the English mind and thus society. Mill was at various points in his career a true revolutionary—socially, culturally, politically, religiously. Although some allowances must be made for his youth, Mill's remarks in a letter to his friend John Sterling (written in 1831 when Mill was about 25) certainly portray Mill in a rather different light than the image of studied mod-

¹¹ As Hayek put it, the effect of Mill's relationship with Harriet Taylor was that "he entirely withdrew from social life and become the recluse he remained for the rest of his life" (Hayek, Preface, *The Spirit of the Age*, xii).

¹² Henry Reeve, "Autobiography of John Stuart Mill" *Edinburgh Review* 139 (1874): 121.

¹³ J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1968 [1865]), 136.

eration he cultivated throughout his career. The context is the agitated environment that would lead to the Reform Bill of 1832:

If the ministers flinch or the Peers remain obstinate, I am firmly convinced that in six months a national convention chosen by universal suffrage, will be sitting in London. Should this happen, I have not made up my mind what would be best to do: I incline to think it would be best to lie by and let the tempest blow over, if one could get a shilling a day to live upon meanwhile: *for until the whole of the existing institutions of society are leveled with the ground, there will be nothing for a wise man to do which the most pig-headed fool cannot do much better than he.*¹⁴ [emphasis added]

Mill's radical aspirations for total transformation mark a real break with the classical-liberal tradition, as represented by a Burke, a Madison, or a de Tocqueville. His turn toward French radicalism, anticipated by Bentham and James Mill, interjected an alien 'activist' element into the Anglo-American political tradition that has fueled the transformation of classical-liberal constitutionalism into modern-liberal progressivism. Such recognition suggests that the conventional view not only of Mill but of the liberal tradition more generally requires reinterpretation. English liberalism, generally conceived as moderate, pragmatic, and sympathetic to traditional religion, is seen to have been shaped by a militant ideology wholly informed by the anti-Christian humanitarianism of the French *philosophes* and their revolutionary descendants. As said, the result has been the transformation of the Anglo-American political tradition under the dispensation of the new god of Humanity: the birth of an incongruous "liberalism" that ostensibly seeks to promote individual liberty through the illiberal collectivist means of massive centralized government, dispensing benefits and sanctions through the god-like (and Benthamite) power of legislation. Nor is it coincidental that modern-liberalism is very often hostile to traditional religious values and beliefs. Such hostility was of the essence not only of Benthamite "liberalism" but, even more, of the "advanced liberalism" of John Stuart Mill. The putative "secular" ethic of modern-liberal Humanism was regarded and experienced by its founders as a "new religion," one, moreover, that established its identity and claimed its own superiority precisely by its self-conscious opposition to its chief rival, Christianity. Indeed, John Mill would insist that the new Reli-

*Breaks with
classical
liberal
tradition.*

¹⁴ Mill to John Sterling, October 20, 1831, CW 12: 78.

gion of Humanity is “more profoundly religious” than any other that has heretofore governed mankind. In short, the intense intramundane religiosity that Mill incorporated into the Anglo-American political tradition casts a new light on the nature of modern “secular” liberalism, the chief political carrier of the new secular religiosity in the American context.

The Religion of Secular Humanism

Our interest is in the relationship of Mill’s religious thought and aims to the development of the liberal tradition. Mill is often regarded not only as the last of the great classical-liberal thinkers but as the prototypical “secular” liberal. Alan Ryan spoke of “Mill’s utterly secular, this-worldly temperament.”¹⁵ Even as perceptive a Mill scholar as Joseph Hamburger characterized the impulse behind Mill’s advocacy of the Religion of Humanity as “rational and secular.”¹⁶ Such interpreters, we suggest, fail to see the true nature of Mill’s enterprise. Mill was very far from a secular thinker if “secular” is understood as areligious, more or less indifferent to spiritual matters and more or less preoccupied with mundane considerations. The true nature of the allegedly secular liberalism that stems from Mill is more accurately glimpsed by the surprising depth of Mill’s animus toward traditional religion, theology, and metaphysics.

The conventional view of the process of secularization as a gradual “lessening” of the influence of religious authority, creeds, and the like is misleading, certainly with respect to Benthamite utilitarianism and its descendants. Such a view fails to capture the essence of secular or non-theological utilitarianism. Bentham and his disciples were not mere passive carriers of a more or less autonomous process of social change, but, on the contrary, militant activists determined to undermine, if not eradicate, the traditional theological orientation of the West and the social and political order it sustained. The Benthamites not only infused their own allegedly secular ethics with the spirit of quasi-religious fervor, but intended their new philosophy as a “new religion,” as a

*Benthamite
utilitarianism
a “new
religion.”*

¹⁵ Alan Ryan, “Intro,” *An Examination of Sue William Hamilton’s Philosophy* in CW 9: xxi (hereafter cited as *Hamilton*).

¹⁶ Joseph Hamburger, “Religion and *On Liberty*,” in *A Cultivated Mind, Essays on J. S. Mill Presented to John M. Robson*, ed. Michael Laine (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 162.

this-worldly substitute for the otherworldly religion they regarded as superstitious nonsense. John Mill went even further in this direction. He bent his prodigious efforts and talents, inspired by all the moral fervor of his essentially religious nature, toward the social establishment of his new “religion without a God.” The aim throughout was to capture and reorient the spiritual energy traditionally channeled toward a transcendent God and personal salvation toward the attainment of collective salvation through an intramundane “service to Humanity.” What occurred, certainly in the case of Mill, is not secularization, if that term is understood as a movement away from a religious toward a non-religious ethic and politics, but the emergence of a new religiosity in secular garb. John Mill was quite clear that the “negative philosophy” of the eighteenth century, which merely eviscerated traditional religious belief, was radically insufficient to fulfill mankind’s spiritual needs. What was required was the creation and establishment of a new and full-bodied religion. And Mill, like his French predecessors and compatriots, was never in doubt that his Religion of Humanity fully met such a requirement.

Mill’s nature was not, as Ryan thinks, “utterly secular [and] this-worldly,” but an essentially religious nature in search of a god. Mill’s contemporaries saw this more clearly than later interpreters. As one contemporary critic put it, “there was something in Mill which, whether you call it mysticism or not, was of a totally different cast from his honestly-professed opinions. . . . [Mill often] used the language of religion rather than of philosophy.”¹⁷ Indeed, Mill was, above all, a religious thinker and the impulse behind his militant advocacy of the Religion of Humanity, however distorted and misconceived, was of the same character. What all of this suggests is that the modern “secular humanism” that stems from Mill is, as both its proponents and opponents have recognized, itself akin to a religion. Moreover, it is a religion *defined* in its origin by its animus toward Christianity and, more generally, toward the notion of a transcendent source of order and obligation. As one contemporary adherent to the “Religion of Secular Humanism” summarized one of its basic tenets, “man is his own rule and his own end.” This is a concise expression of Mill’s two-

Mill’s nature essentially religious.

¹⁷ Anonymous, Review of A. Bain, *John Stuart Mill: A Criticism, with Personal Recollections*. Leslie Stephen observed, “Truly Mill was qualified for a place among the prophets.”

pronged message.¹⁸ What should be emphasized is that the type of secularism that stems proximately from Mill and ultimately from his French sources, was developed in explicit opposition to theological—Christian—morality and beliefs. This fact has been obscured in the past century and with the general assimilation of the ethos Mill championed. The anti-Christian roots of “secular humanism” may help explain why that creed, as its critics have sometimes alleged, seems tolerant of all religions except Christianity.

*Mill and
“immanen-
tization.”*

The ultimate reasons behind Mill’s vehement rejection of transcendent faith, so manifest in his work, are far from self-evident. There is a well-developed literature tracing what Eric Voegelin famously characterized as the progressive “immanentization” of existence—the progressive eclipse of the transcendent dimension of reality—over the course of modernity. Others have written of the “drama of atheist humanism” enacted in the nineteenth century and the “revolt against God” such a drama represented. Although we find such views persuasive, a critical analysis of them is beyond the scope of this study. What is clear, however, is that whatever the ultimate explanation for the progressive trend toward “immanentization” or the metaphysical revolt against the order of being, John Stuart Mill was himself a full-bodied participant in that process. Although Mill may not have taken as extreme a position as a Comte or a Marx, his aims and intentions were shaped by a similar impulse—the desire to replace God with Humanity and to elevate mankind, however implicitly, to the status of divinity. This is what it means to establish “Humanity” or “utility” as the “ultimate source” and end of moral obligation and value. Indeed, Mill’s efforts in this regard may have been more socially effective than those of the more radical carriers of the same impulse. Precisely

¹⁸ J. Wesley Robb, *The Reverent Skeptic: A Critical Inquiry into the Religion of Secular Humanism* (1979), 6. Robb identifies several of the leading tenets of the contemporary “Religion of Secular Humanism”: 1) “There is no entelechy, no built-in pattern of perfection. Man is his own rule and his own end”; 2) “A philosophy founded on the agreement that ‘man is the measure of all things’ can have no room for belief in the intervention of non-material postulates”; 3) “. . . [W]e have increasing knowledge of our world, and . . . there is no need to postulate a realm beyond it”; 4) “Humanism believes that the nature of the universe makes up the totality of existence and is completely self-operating according to natural law, with no need for a God or gods to keep it functioning” (*ibid.*, 6-7). All of these postulates are similar, if not identical, to various of Mill’s teachings.

because they appeared more moderate and were clothed in the idiom of the liberal tradition Mill knew so well, Mill's anti-theological animus was able to insinuate itself into Anglo-American consciousness in a way that the more radical and essentially alien Continental expressions of that animus could never hope to do. Anglo-American society did not become self-consciously Marxist or Positivist. It became, instead, "modern-liberal"—"secular," humanistic, positivistic, collectivistic, relativistic—committed not to the establishment of the Communist Paradise or the Final Positivist State but to a mundane "service to Humanity" and the pursuit of a chimerical "social justice." Christianity was of course not destroyed but relegated, as Bentham and Mill had long intended, to the innocuous position of private or subjective preference. Mill's evisceration of the traditional God, precisely because it was less extreme and thus less threatening than the militant atheism of a Marx, was all the more socially effective. Yet for all practical purposes, the Probable Limited god Mill offered his descendents was a god as dead, as effectively neutralized, as Marx's or Nietzsche's.

The Social Religion and Immanentist Consequentialism

The most far-reaching aspect of Mill's endeavor to incorporate the anti-Christian humanitarianism of the French Radicals into the Anglo-American liberal tradition has been its success. Mill's Religion of Humanity and the concomitant "social morality" he absorbed from both Bentham and Comte have been more or less assimilated by large segments of contemporary Anglo-American society and, arguably, constitute the dominant public ethos.¹⁹ Mill's vision of a social religion has been partially realized, the moral views he championed so extensively assimilated that they have become seemingly self-evident. All good people are today expected to serve Humanity, to realize "social justice," to have a "social conscience" and a concern for "social problems." As former President George Bush succinctly if unwittingly expressed the new

Mill's religious endeavor a remarkable success.

¹⁹ Charles Cashdollar, *The Transformation of Theology, 1830–1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). Cashdollar provides an excellent account of the manner in which the various Protestant denominations engaged in a dialectical confrontation with the new "social morality" throughout the nineteenth century. The result was their internal transformation in the direction of the new Positivist ethics, manifested, we suggest, in such entities as Social Gospel, American Progressivism, and modern-liberal collectivism.

Humanitarian ethos, “[f]rom now on, any definition of a successful life must include service to others.”²⁰

The replacement of traditional theological morality with a humanity-centered “social morality” has entailed far-reaching changes in contemporary society. It is intimately related to what is widely decried as the accelerating decline in personal moral standards as well as to the emergence of expansive-government “liberalism.” Traditionally, morality has been regarded as an attribute of an individual agent. A just person is a person who *is* just, who acts justly, and this because to do so is right in itself, in alignment with the moral law or the order of being. A decent or just society is the outcome of the just behavior of the individual members of that society. Such a conception of morality is antithetical to the social consequentialism championed by Mill and especially to the conception of “social justice” he advanced. “Social” or distributive justice is largely unrelated to the personal moral characteristics of individuals—the just and unjust alike can pursue a politically imposed agenda intended to realize someone’s preferred conception of “social justice.” Perhaps even more importantly, Millian “social justice” cannot be realized by an individual agent but requires organized collective—political—action.

*Collective
happiness
becomes the
standard.*

As said, Mill’s immanentist consequentialism, wedded to the social ethos of Comtean altruism and “service to Humanity,” contributed significantly to the evolution of the spiritual and moral ethos that has impelled the rise of expansive-government “liberalism” throughout the past century. The tension produced in Mill’s liberalism by his simultaneous embrace of a social religion and his lingering classical-liberal impulse to defend individual liberty is brought to the surface by Mill’s repeated emphasis that utilitarianism is *not* concerned with the happiness of the individual. Both Bentham and Mill explicitly elevated the social well-being of the collectivity over individual happiness. As Mill emphasized, “. . . the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned” (*Util*, 418). As Bentham expressed the same view: having discovered “utility [to be] the test and measure of all virtue, . . . the obligation to minister to general happiness, [is found to be] an obliga-

²⁰ The author found this inscription on a memorial plaque in the lobby of Chippenham Hospital, Richmond, Virginia.

tion paramount to and inclusive of every other.”²¹ As suggested, the immanentist consequentialism that derives from Benthamite utilitarianism, combined with the religious valorization of the “social” in the thought of Mill, was one of the steppingstones toward the development of a full-blown “social”-ist or collectivist ethic in the Anglo-American context. The tendency of their social consequentialism was to shift the locus of morality from the person to external consequences or arrangements, that is, to displace the person as the bearer of moral agency in favor of “society” and “social institutions.” As Bentham put it in describing the superiority of his ethical system over that of the “religionists”: “[t]he laws of perfection derived from religion, have more for their object the goodness of the man who observes them, than that of the society in which they are observed. Civil laws, on the contrary, have more for their object the moral goodness of men in general than that of individuals.”²² Benthamism’s relocation of moral agency from the individual to “men in general,” as well as its simultaneous projection of moral agency onto “society” or social institutions, resembles the similar transfer so prominent in the thought of Rousseau and Marx.

Moral agency displaced.

It has long been recognized that Benthamite utilitarianism is one of the roots of British socialism. What should be emphasized is that the root of that root is the very conception of a consequentialist ethic. When an action is judged moral or immoral on

²¹ Bentham, cited in Mary Warnock, Introduction to *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Essay on Bentham* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1962 [1863]), 15. Bentham had defined “utility” as that “property in an object [whereby it] tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good or happiness” (more or less equivalent in the Benthamite lexicon) and this for the community as a whole. “An action is conformable to utility when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it.” Bentham regarded the general or collective happiness as not only objective but as quantifiable/measurable.

²² Jeremy Bentham, from his “Commonplace Book,” written between 1781-1785, in *Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, Vol. 10: 143. James E. Crimmins has also pointed out that Bentham’s “shift in focus” from individual goodness to that of “men in general” “clearly distinguishes the central aim of his work from that of the religious exponents of utility.” The Christian utilitarians, while in some sense concerned with the long-term consequences of their actions, and this, essentially, in the eyes of God, had still remained committed to the belief that the person is the bearer of morality and that individual actions are what matter. Such a view was inseparable from a concern with personal salvation (James E. Crimmins, “Religion, Utility, and Politics: Bentham versus Paley,” in Crimmins, ed., *Religion, Secularization and Political Thought: Thomas Hobbes to J. S. Mill* [London: Routledge, 1990]).

*Social
consequen-
tialism
undermines
rule of law.*

the basis of its consequences, and especially its “social” consequences, and not on its inherent rightness or wrongness, justice inevitably moves in the direction of an outcome-based justice. Such a justice is antithetical to liberal constitutionalism, bound up as it is with a rule-based or “procedural” justice. Liberal constitutionalism is inseparable from the rule of law as historically achieved in the West—the universal observance of general rules, an observance that does not and cannot produce particular or foreseeable concrete outcomes.²³ Accordingly, if what matters morally is the outcome of an action and not its inherent moral rightness or wrongness, the rule of law that sustains limited government and individual freedom is undermined. The pursuit of “social justice” is incompatible with the traditional rules of just personal behavior that sustain the classical-liberal order of limited government and market exchange. Apart from the theoretical issues involved, the rise of a consequentialist ethic has led historically in Anglo-American society to the demand for a Millian “social justice.” Mill championed a social consequentialism that evaluates the morality of an action by its temporal “social” effects—its contribution to the “collective” or “general happiness,” as determined by the utilitarian moralist and legislator. It is but a short step from this to a fully fledged socialist ethic demanding a “social justice” that entails, however implicitly, the imposition of a politically determined concrete pattern of distribution. John Mill furthered such a development not only by his consequentialism and his religious valorization of the “social,” but by his infamous assertion that economic “distribution” is utterly amenable to human will. The ethical roots of Anglo-American collectivism, of the Social Religion that was to sweep Anglo-American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are seen to be firmly embedded in the Benthamite/Millian utilitarianism that substituted for the traditional conception of morality—doing what is right for its own sake—the notion that the morality of an action is to be determined by its “social” or temporal consequences. John Stuart Mill’s successful “revision” of Benthamism, his successful attack on the “in-itself” morality of the “transcendentalists,” and his successful promotion of Comtean altruism made him a major carrier of the consequentialist, “social”-ist ethic into the Anglo-American liberal tradition.

²³ See Hayek, *Rules and Order* and *The Mirage of Social Justice* (volumes 1 and 2 of *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*).

Mill's ethics involved a rigid dichotomy between the bad of "selfishness" or self-interest, represented by Christianity, and the good of the "social," associated with the Religion of Humanity. As is widely known, Comte offers in place of self-interest the motive of altruism or, as the famous Positivist slogan would have it, "live for others." Mill was greatly attracted to Comte's altruistic or social ethic and would preach the good of the "social" over the evil of "selfishness" all his life. Mill not only disparaged traditional morality, bound up, as he thought, with the selfish Christian concern with personal salvation, but invested its alleged opposite, "social morality," with an intense religiosity. It is not coincidental that the "social sciences" have replaced what were called at the beginning of Mill's era the "moral sciences," for as a result of the efforts of Mill and his compatriots, the "social" has become identified with the "moral." Hayek has enumerated over a hundred different uses of what he calls the "weasel word" "social" in modern ethical and political discourse. Terms like social justice, social conscience, social morality, social duty, social democracy, social problems, social service, and so on, have been thoroughly assimilated into Anglo-American moral consciousness. "Social" aims have assumed the character of the self-evidently good, having supplanted in many quarters the traditional personal or "in-itself" morality that shaped the evolution of Western liberal society.

*Ascendancy
of "social
morality."*

All of this is no doubt related to the successful battle against such "transcendental" or "anti-utilitarian" morality conducted by Mill in the name of non-theological utilitarian consequentialism. The "social" having become the "moral," classical liberalism, inseparably wedded to the notion that morality inheres in the personal agent and not in the "social" outcome, that is, in a rule-based and not an outcome-based justice, has been shaped in the direction of a modern-liberal "social"-ism that tends to judge the morality of action in terms of its social effects. Such a view underlies, for instance, the contemporary Communitarian call for a "personal" justice that takes account of particular circumstances and concrete outcomes, as well as the modern-liberal assumption that all right-thinking people should desire and pursue various "social" (political) goods—universal government-provided education, child- and health-care, "social safety nets," and so on. We have also alluded to the decline in personal morality that has accompanied the widespread embrace of "social morality." If what

matters morally is the collective production of a predetermined “social good” and not the personal morality of the agent, then one may behave in any manner one wishes provided one supports or forces others to support the correct “social causes.”

The Political Religion: The Politicization of Society

*Spiritual
aspirations
reoriented
from God
toward
“Humanity.”*

Mill’s partly successful endeavor to replace Christianity with a secular or social religion is also bound up with what is widely apprehended as the thoroughgoing politicization of contemporary American society.²⁴ This is related to the fact that his promotion of a social religion shades off into the sacralization of the state and thus to the establishment of a fully fledged political religion. As has been emphasized, Mill was not concerned merely to dismiss or ignore God and religion; he was not a “secular” thinker. Mill’s aim was to found a new religion. Its realization did require the evisceration of the transcendent God of the Western tradition and of the belief in a morality and justice grounded in transcendent truth. But, what is of special significance with respect to political developments, it also required the *reorientation* of spiritual aspirations and yearnings away from that God and toward the intramundane substitute, “Humanity.” The result, as discussed, was the quasi-religious valorization of “Service to Humanity.” Mill’s labors did not issue in the secularization of society but in the investment of religious or *ultimate* value in Humanitarian Service. The explicit aim was to engage the religious fervor formerly oriented toward a transcendent source and end in service of this-worldly “humanitarian” ends. Not only does such collective “service” implicitly require organized political action, but Mill explicitly elevated the *collective* pursuit of humanitarian ends over comparable individual activities. As he said in *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, “[n]o efforts should be spared to associate the pupil’s self-respect, and his desire of the respect of others, with service rendered to Humanity—when possible, collectively. . . .”²⁵ If this is not possible, he will allow such service to be performed individually. Again, despite Mill’s lingering if qualified commitment to the classical-liberal ideal of limited government, his even

²⁴ See Jacques Ellul, “Politicization and Political Solutions,” in Kenneth S. Templeton, Jr., *The Politicization of Society* (1979).

²⁵ Mill, *ACP*, in *Selected Writings of JSM*, 115.

greater desire to “improve” mankind and his elevation of an all-encompassing collective or “social” good over the good of the individual, inevitably pushed his politics in the direction of expansive government.

There is no doubt that Mill played a significant role in the leftward shift of liberal politics over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He expressed his complete sympathy with the ultimate aims of socialism, going so far as to explicitly label himself a “socialist.”²⁶ Nevertheless, his legacy in this regard was a mixed one. He never accepted the socialists’ proposals for the utter abolition of private property (although he did call for the nationalization of land; this, Mill said, should be regarded as a common resource of Humanity), and never ceased, as he put it in *the Political Economy*, “utterly [to] dissent from the most conspicuous and vehement part of their teaching, their declamations against competition.”²⁷ Perhaps more importantly than his concrete proposals, however, Mill claimed the *moral* high ground for the socialist ideal. Although he believed contemporary human nature was still far too selfish and self-interested to allow the present establishment of socialist institutions, he believed that the Man of the Future, with proper education and training, would certainly become a more “social” creature concerned above all with the good of the whole. We may get a glimpse of Mill’s influence in this regard by his following remarks concerning the “true moral and social ideal of Labor,” which, as he says, had first been articulated by Comte:

*Mill's
legacy
mixed.*

. . . [T]he proper return for a service to society is the gratitude of society; and that the moral claim of anyone in regard to the provision for his personal wants is not a question of *quid pro quo* in respect to his cooperation, but of *how much the circumstances of society permit to be assigned to him*, consistently with the just claims of others. To this opinion we entirely subscribe. The rough method of settling the laborer’s share of the produce, the competition of the market, may represent a practical necessity, but certainly not a moral ideal. Its defense is that civilization has not hitherto been equal to organizing anything better than this first rude approach to an equitable distribution. . . . But in whatever manner [the] question [of equitable distribution] may ultimately be decided, the true moral and social idea of Labor is in no way affected by it. *Until laborers and employers perform the work of industry in the spirit*

²⁶ Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (1852).

²⁷ Mill, *ibid.*, Book 4, chap. 7, par 7 (ed. Ashley, 792).

in which soldiers perform that of an army, industry will never be moralized and military life will remain what, in spite of the antisocial character of its direct object, it has hitherto been—the chief school of moral cooperation [emphases added].

Mill also champions “another idea of M. Comte which has great beauty and grandeur.” This is “that every person who lives by any useful work should be habituated to regard himself not as an individual working for his private benefit, but as a public functionary, and his wages . . . not as the remuneration or purchase-money of his labor, which should be given freely, but as the provision made by society to enable him to carry it on.”²⁸ The notion that all persons are *public functionaries* employed by *society* cannot by any stretch of terms be regarded as an authentically liberal view. It is, however, a full-bodied expression of the socialist ideal.

*Sacralization
of politics.*

One result of Mill’s endeavor to “immanentize” spiritual aspirations has been the growth of a centralized government charged with god-like power and duties and the thoroughgoing politicization of social life. Modern government has replaced God as the object of petition and the bestower of blessing. Government, like the former transcendent God, is asked to rectify every alleged “social” ill and, indeed, to provide the existential meaning and purpose formerly gained through transcendent faith. Politics has become religion—the Religion of Humanity—institutionalized not in the Temples of Humanity that once graced the Anglo-American landscape, but in what one contemporary scholar has referred to as the “liberal church universal.”²⁹ In short, one outcome of Mill’s endeavor to replace God with Humanity has been the quasi-reli-

²⁸ Mill, *ACP*, 116-117. It is indeed doubtful whether Mill ever fully embraced classical-liberal ideals. We have seen his contemptuous dismissal of classical liberalism in the 1830s. We have also seen the extent of Mill’s commitment to the illiberal schemes of the St. Simonians and Comte well into the decade of the 1840s. We have examined the motives behind the apparent libertarianism of *On Liberty*. The extent of Mill’s commitment to socialist ideals is evinced by the fact that such a fully fledged socialist as Sidney Webb regarded Mill as his spiritual “godfather” (Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Pursuit of Certainty: David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Beatrice Webb*). According to Ruth Borchard, “Mill’s *Political Economy* did more than any other single book to bring about socialism in England” (Ruth Borchard, *John Stuart Mill, the Man* [1957], 99). And various of Mill’s socialist-leaning descendants, such as Iris Mueller and Pedro Schwarz, unabashedly celebrate Mill’s movement toward socialism. See Mueller, *JSM and French Thought* and Schwarz, *The New Political Economy of JSM*.

²⁹ Paul E. Gottfried, *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 28, 101-102).

gious pursuit of collective political ends. This has led to the implicit sacralization of politics, to a politics (the realm of organized coercion) beyond which there is nothing higher, hence unrestrained by the recognition of a law higher than that enacted by human agents. The pursuit of political agendas ostensibly designed to serve Humanity has itself become the “religion” Mill intended it to become, supplying existential meaning and purpose for many of Mill’s “advanced-liberal” or “progressive” descendants. These are a shadowy manifestation of the modern “spiritual power” of which Mill dreamed, the “philosophical elite” of adherents to the Religion of Humanity, who, he hoped, would achieve an authority comparable to that of the medieval clergy. All of this is pernicious enough from the perspective of classical liberalism. But what is worse, when man is conceived as the *ultimate* source of moral order, when Humanity is conceived as the *ultimate* object of service or reverence, when the only god that may be real is so limited and enfeebled as to become practically irrelevant, the human “servants of Humanity” become, in effect if not in explicit pronouncement, god. There is no source of appeal beyond the dictates of their judgment. The foundation of individual liberty and limited government is undermined. The replacement of the transcendent God of the Judeo-Christian tradition by the intramundane abstraction “Humanity” undercut the spiritual foundation of that individual freedom Mill himself at times seemed concerned to secure.

It is not merely hindsight that reveals the tendency of Mill’s intramundane social religion toward the sacralization of politics. Mill himself implicitly and explicitly advocated such a development. If, as he says, “Rome was to the entire Roman people . . . as much a religion as Jehovah was to the Jews,” there is no reason, he implies, why contemporary human beings cannot gain the same religious satisfaction in devoting their own ultimate allegiance to the “state.” Moreover, Mill explicitly advanced the view that “duty to the State” or devotion to the “good of one’s country” or “Humanity” can serve as a fully fledged religion: “[w]hen we see and feel that human beings can take the deepest interest in what will befall [sic] their country or mankind long after they are dead, and in what they can themselves do while they are alive to influence that distant prospect which they are never destined to behold, *we cannot doubt that if this and similar feelings were cultivated*

in the same manner and degree as religion they would become a religion"³⁰ (emphasis added).

That such is the logical and intended end of Mill's intramundane religion is further suggested by Mill's high enthusiasm for the glory he associates with the classical devotion to the state and by his elevation of the "good of the country" and even of "the world" to the "grand duty of life," to the highest human allegiance. "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 similar strength, both as a source of elevated emotion and as a principle of duty." Mill will admit that the morality of the ancients may have been deficient in certain respects, but not as concerns "duty to our country," to which the ancients were ready to "sacrifice life, reputation, family, everything valuable. . . ." Mill pointedly draws his conclusion: "If, then, persons could be trained, as we see they were, not only to believe in theory that the good of their country was an object to which all others ought to yield, but to feel this practically as the grand duty of life, so also may they be made to feel the same absolute obligation towards the universal good."³¹ Such an obligation is embodied in the Religion of Humanity, "sometimes called the Religion of Duty," and interpreted in line with Mill's non-theological utilitarian standard. To grasp the fullness of Mill's idea it is essential to recall his understanding of "duty": "it is a part of the notion of duty in every one of its forms, that a person may rightfully be compelled to fulfil it. Duty is a thing which may be exacted from a person, as one exacts a debt. Unless we think that it may be exacted from him, we do not call it his duty. Reasons of prudence, or the interest of other people, may militate against actually exacting it; but the person himself, it is clearly understood, would not be entitled to complain."³²

We may gather an idea of what Mill's proposed society of the future, oriented toward the Religion of Humanity, will look like from his frequent praise of the moral and social life of the ancients,

³⁰ Mill, *On Liberty*, in Stefan Collini, ed. *On Liberty and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 [1859], 51; *Diary*, March 17, 1854, CW 27: 660.

³¹ Mill, "Utility of Religion," in CW 10: 431, 421 (hereinafter cited in the text as "UR").

³² Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *The Utilitarians* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 454 (hereinafter cited in the text as *Util*).

and especially Sparta. James Mill's proposed "State religion" entailed the utter subordination of religion to social or political ends. John Mill's own view is similar. He himself holds up the Spartan model for our edification:

[I]t was not religion which formed the strength of the Spartan institutions: the root of the system was devotion to Sparta, to the ideal of the country or State; which transformed into ideal devotion to a great country, the world, would be equal to that and far nobler achievements. . . . Among the Greeks generally, social morality was extremely independent of religion. The inverse relation was rather that which existed between them; the worship of the Gods was inculcated chiefly as a social duty. . . . Such moral teaching as existed in Greece had very little to do with religion. . . . For the enforcement of human moralities secular inducements were almost exclusively relied on. ("UR," 409-410)

Needless to say, Mill's proposed replacement for allegiance to God—the elevation of the "ideal of the country or State," expanded, indeed, into "ideal devotion to a great country, the world"—rests in uneasy tension with his alleged concern for the individual and his liberty. This is especially problematic in light of the fact that Mill is aiming for the elimination or at least the evisceration of any supranatural or world-transcendent allegiance that, historically and existentially, served and serves as the basis of spiritual resistance to secular or political power. The "whole course of ancient history," Mill insists, provides a "lesson on this subject"—that the "good of the country is an object to which all others ought to yield." We heirs of the twentieth century have had a good lesson on this subject as well, a good hard look at the results of attaching quasi-religious emotion to the notion that one's ultimate "duty [is] to the state." Mill was certainly correct—"[o]bjects . . . confined within the limits of the earth . . . have been found sufficient to inspire large masses . . . with an enthusiasm capable of ruling the conduct, and colouring the whole." The gruesome aspect such "enthusiasm" has assumed in the past century points emphatically toward the dangers of repudiating world-transcendent spiritual allegiance while simultaneously investing any form of intramundane phenomena with *ultimate* value. Not only is the pursuit of earthly ends impelled by all the terrifying energy of disoriented souls in search of salvation but the essential basis of spiritual resistance to political power is destroyed.

We again emphasize the innerworldly object of Mill's reli-

Fusion of the temporal and spiritual realms.

gion—to reform the world in the here and now and not to achieve eternal life beyond time and space. The fusion of the temporal sphere of politics and the spiritual sphere of religion in Mill's thought is obvious, as are the quasi-religious roots of his politics and philosophy. The "improvement" and indeed the "regeneration" of the world became the central purpose of his life, the carrier of all meaning. Such was to provide a substitute for the meaning and purpose lost upon rejection of faith in a transcendent God. Mill's yearning is akin to the yearning that led many persons in the earlier decades of the twentieth century to embrace socialism and communism. Mill's new god ominously resembles *The God That Failed*.³³ Accordingly, Millian utilitarianism should be understood as a precursor of the more virulently atheistic ideological movements such as communism and revolutionary socialism, as well as a forerunner of the more benign manifestations of the same impulse, such as Fabian socialism, American Progressivism, and modern collectivist liberalism.³⁴

The True Believer

Mill and the socialization of the populace.

We have discussed the remarkable sweep of Mill's ambitions for moral, intellectual, social, political, and religious reform. Mill wanted to create a new world, peopled by new men. We have also seen his personal experience of the existing world as a reckless chaos, devoid of goodness or justice. We have further glimpsed Mill's experience of fear in the face of a world he could not rationally comprehend, a fear that issued in the intense desire radically to "amend" that world and its inhabitants. Mill will do so not through the overtly political means of coercion but through the intensive socialization of the populace. His aim was to shape human beings internally, to shape mind and soul through the socialization process and not through draconian legislation or violent terror. A deep immersion in Mill's thought leaves one with the decided impression that Mill's aspirations for human beings were not for the flowering of their unique individuality but for their conformity to his personal ideal of value and service. Mill, often

³³ Richard Crossman, *The God That Failed* (1954 [1949]).

³⁴ For a discussion of Bentham's legacy to totalitarianism see Richard A. Posner, "Blackstone and Bentham," *Journal of Law and Economics* 19 (October 1976): 599.

portrayed as the great liberal defender of individual liberty, was not, we suggest, a true friend of liberty. Mill seemed able to hide his own aspirations for power and control over a fearful reality not fully transparent to the reasoning mind—as well as over his fellows, the majority of whom fell so far short of his conception of a fully fledged human being—behind the image of himself as a selfless servant of humanity. The perceptive insight of Irving Babbitt springs immediately to mind: “If we attend to the psychology of the persons who manifest such an eagerness to serve us, we shall find that they are even more eager to control us.”³⁵ One obtains a glimpse of such an aspiration in Mill’s occasional private musings, for instance, in his ruminations over the injustice of the fact that such a being as his wife must die like all the lesser creatures:

If human life is governed by superior beings, how greatly must the power of the evil intelligences surpass that of the good, when a soul and an intellect like hers [his wife’s], such as the good principle perhaps never succeeded in creating before—one who seems intended for an inhabitant of some remote heaven, and *who wants nothing but a position of power to make a heaven even of this stupid and wretched earth*—when such a being *must* perish like all the rest of us in a few years. . . .³⁶ [emphasis added]

What should be emphasized is the pretentious sweep of Mill’s reformist ambitions and their separation from any higher allegiance or recognition of limits. Mill, like the Grand Inquisitor, will correct God’s work. He, unlike the inept god of his imagination, is motivated *solely* by the universal (temporal) good of Humanity. He will enable “the mass of mankind” to realize the end that the bungler god of possibly divided purposes failed to secure (*Util*, 414). Mill’s eviscerated god will allow Mill to become like god. He will make new men of a better and less selfish nature, and he will provide the goodness and justice this disordered world so sorely lacks. The self-aggrandizement implicit in such ambitions would be merely pathetic if we heirs to the twentieth century had not witnessed the consequences of the attempt to achieve self-transcendence in the manner Mill recommends. Governments controlled by communist and other cadres of self-sacrificing benefactors of Humanity murdered a hundred million of their citizens in

³⁵ Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979 [1924]), 314.

³⁶ Mill, *Diary*, February 14, 1854, CW 27: 654.

the past century, fueled by a drive similar to that which impelled Mill—the drive to order and perfect a reality experienced as in radical need of emendation. We have had a good hard look at the reality of the humanitarian heaven on earth, whether manifested as the Communist Paradise, the Social Gospel’s Kingdom of God, or the “universal happiness” achieved through modern-liberal socialization.

Bruce Mazlish has perceptively characterized James Mill as the prototype of the modern “revolutionary ascetic.”³⁷ His son fit the pattern of the communist or socialist “true believer” in many critical respects.³⁸ Mill’s new god, as said, was the same sort of god, created by a similar combination of disoriented spiritual or pseudo-religious aspirations masking an unacknowledged will-to-power, that failed so many others who sought their salvation in an intramundane socialism divorced from any transcendent allegiance. Mill, like such socialists, sought collective salvation through the perfection of what he took to be the very imperfect creation that is the actual world. Having rejected the possibility of fulfillment beyond the world of time and space, perfection *must* be achieved in this existence. Mill, unable to find lasting happiness in his present life, would project all his dreams and hopes into the Promised Land of the Future. Nor could he take any pleasure in the actual human beings he encountered in his concrete life. As we have said, “man” was always something of an abstraction for Mill; the only men he could love were the ideal men of the future to whom he clung in his imagination. The thought that he was helping to “make” such men enabled him to endure the distasteful imperfection of actual human beings and actual life. “Oh, for something better!” was how he himself characterized his life-long yearning.³⁹ To endure the miserable reality of the existing state of mankind and society Mill consoled himself with the dream of his special mission: his (self-) appointed task to “improve” other human beings and to establish the means by which Humanity would advance toward the “hoped-for heaven.”

Mill, while bearing a certain family resemblance to his more virulent communist and socialist cousins, is not, however, Lenin. The reason has to do with those other elements in his constitution

³⁷ Mazlish, *The Revolutionary Ascetic* (1976).

³⁸ Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (1951).

³⁹ Mill, *Diary*, March 25, 1854, *CW* 27: 663.

and “mental history” that served as moderating forces. Mill’s eclecticism, while maddening, was in some ways his saving grace. We are thinking of such factors as his attraction to the Stoicism his father also admired, as well as his thorough immersion in the tradition of English liberalism and the lingering restraining influences of the Christian tradition against which he so largely rebelled. As Mill put it in discussing the virtue of Stoicism,

For nothing except that consciousness can raise a person above the chances of life, by making him feel that, let fate and fortune do their worst, they have not power to subdue him; which, once felt, frees him from excess of anxiety concerning the evils of life, and enables him, like many a Stoic in the worst times of the Roman Empire, to cultivate in tranquility the sources of satisfaction accessible to him, without concerning himself about the uncertainty of their duration, any more than about their inevitable end. (*Auto*, 417-418).

So Mill consoles himself in his more sober moments.

On the other hand, such influences were no more than a moderating force. The primary thrust of Mill’s temperament was Promethean and Romantic, strongly colored by a gnostic pretension to infallibility and what can only be regarded as a breathtaking personal arrogance. Mill always asserted the most absolute moral authority, staked his claim on the very highest moral ground. We have drawn attention to his pronouncements with respect to the moral superiority of utilitarianism and the Religion of Humanity to traditional ethics and religion.

*Mill’s
temperament
Promethean
and Romantic.*

God and Social Justice

Mill’s conception of justice was peculiarly rigid and static: “[I]f the law of all creation were justice and the Creator omnipotent, then in whatever amount of suffering and happiness might be dispensed to the world, each person’s share of them would be exactly proportioned to that person’s good or evil deeds; no human being would have a worse lot than another, without worse deserts; accident or favouritism would have no part in such a world, but every human life would be the playing out of a drama constructed like a perfect moral tale” (“UR,” 389). Mill always conceived true justice to entail a perfect correspondence between moral desert and temporal reward. He also thought the reality of Omnipotent Goodness would necessarily entail a morally perfect world. As he said in “Theism,” “[if] we reason directly from God’s goodness to

*Mill de-
manded
desert-based
justice.*

positive facts, no misery, nor vice nor crime ought to exist in the world" ("The," 479).⁴⁰

Mill contra
Christian
voluntarism.

It is difficult to reconcile Mill's tenacious adherence to such perfectionist standards with his putative advocacy of individual freedom and flourishing. There is something disturbing about his failure to recognize the most obvious reason for the imperfection of the world. This is not, as Mill suggests, various unknown obstacles to the exercise of divine Omnipotence, but the fact of human freedom, moral and creative. It is difficult to understand how a philosopher who truly values human freedom could fail to see that connection. Mill's blindness to the relation between human freedom and the existing imperfection of existence is comprehensible, however, in light of what we have seen to be his predominant aim—to replace a theological with a purely human orientation. Mill's understanding of moral agency was permanently shaped by the deterministic "doctrine of circumstances" he absorbed from his father. More importantly, however, he found it necessary to deny the fact of genuine—"uncaused" or "spontaneous"—moral freedom because, within his context, this pointed all too clearly to the source of that freedom—the free will granted by the Christian God. A God-given moral freedom was in fact the foundational assumption of Mill's Christian-voluntarist opponents such as Hamilton and Mansel, the "free-will theologians and philosophers" he attacked in the *Hamilton*. As Ryan says, "Hamilton's theology rested on human freedom. In effect, he held that the existence of a non-natural origin of action was the chief ground for supposing that there was a personal Creator, rather than, say, a material first Cause or a Platonic Form, at the origin of the universe. . . . [For] unless human agency is somehow outside the ordinary natural course of events, there is no reason why the universe should not be thought of as having a wholly natural origin."⁴¹ As a result of his anti-theological agenda, Mill found it necessary to deny free will. Consequently, he did not have recourse to the traditional and obvious way to reconcile the actual imperfection of the world with Omnipotent Goodness—the fact of human freedom. Unwilling to accept the reality of a God who

⁴⁰ "Theism," in J. S. Mill, *Collected Works*, Volume 10, *Essays in Ethics, Religion, and Society*, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 479.

⁴¹ Ryan, "Intro," *Hamilton*, lx. See Mill, *Hamilton*, Chapter 26, "Freedom of the Will."

granted moral freedom to man, Mill was unable to accept the imperfection engendered by such freedom.

Mill's willful refusal to recognize the relation between moral freedom and the imperfection of existence is all the more remarkable in light of the fact that the reconciliation of Omnipotent Goodness and existing imperfection is implicit in the sort of trial-and-error "experiments" Mill ostensibly advocates in *On Liberty*. That is, one may easily conceive of God as voluntarily restraining himself in the interests of individual development, refusing to intervene in any dramatic way, in order to allow human beings the opportunity to learn. For we may need to learn our spiritual, moral, and creative lessons precisely through a process of trial and error, through *concretely* experiencing the consequences of our beliefs and actions, as Mill himself seemingly advocates. Accordingly, the world at any moment in time would not and could not appear perfect in Mill's narrow sense. Human moral, spiritual, and creative growth has long been understood to require moral, and thus practical, freedom. Love and growth commanded or determined are not genuine, nor is theoretical understanding alone sufficiently compelling. As said, Mill's inability to reconcile existing imperfection and Omnipotent Goodness, as well as his blindness to the relation between freedom and existing imperfection, stemmed from his concern to eviscerate the God long regarded as the source of that freedom. His inability to perceive such a self-evident relation casts further doubt on the authenticity of his putative commitment to individual freedom. As we have argued, there are reasons to believe Mill in fact regarded such freedom, at least for the masses, as a provisional necessity only, necessary in the short run to cut out the theological roots of the old order.

Learning a process of trial and error.

Mill's refusal to recognize the connection between human freedom and the imperfection of existence is, however, quite consistent with his frequent demands for a visible and transparent "social justice," that Trojan Horse of Anglo-American collectivism. As said, Mill's demand for "social justice" derived from his life-long conviction that Perfect Justice would require a perfect correspondence between moral desert and temporal rewards and benefits: "[i]f the law of all creation were justice, . . . then in whatever amount of suffering and happiness might be dispensed to the world, each person's share of them would be exactly proportioned to that person's good or evil deeds." Or, as Mill put it in *Utilitari-*

anism, “. . . it is a duty to do to each according to his deserts. . . . [It thus follows, he says, that] . . . society should treat all equally well who have deserved equally well of it, that is, who have deserved equally well absolutely. This is the highest abstract standard of social and distributive justice, towards which all institutions, and the efforts of all virtuous citizens, should be made in the utmost possible degree to converge” (*Util*, 468). We note, first, the ominous implications of the thought that the “efforts of all virtuous citizens should be *made* in the utmost possible degree to converge” in the pursuit of social justice; and, second, Mill’s strange, if characteristic, personification of “society,” the suggestion that the index of “society” is a thinking and willing mind or being.

*Economic
success
unrelated to
moral merit.*

Mill’s demand for “social justice” was intimately related to his sense of existential disorder, his hubristic rejection of the very possibility of Providence, and his insistence that *all* justice and goodness are products of human will and agency. As said, Mill’s demand for “social” and “distributive” justice derived from his yearning for a desert-based justice—Mill *wanted* temporal success and failure to correspond with obvious moral merit or its opposite. Such a justice has historically been interpreted as the conscious arrangement of market and other social outcomes in a way that appears to meet someone’s conception of merit or desert. There is, however, no correspondence between moral merit and economic success in a free society coordinated through market exchange; the wicked often prosper. Moreover, in a free or classical-liberal society wherein the co-ordination of human activities occurs through market-governed exchange, no one “distributes” the outcomes of social and economic activity; these are determined by impersonal social and market forces; they are unintended consequences of the observance of personal rules of just conduct. Although Mill himself did not plead for the institutionalization of the economic and political arrangements implicit in his demand for “social justice”—an arrangement wherein temporal rewards and punishments are meted out by a presumably all-knowing human “distributor” of some kind—such an implication was obvious and drawn by his descendants, as evinced both historically and contemporarily.

The mystery of the market was as unacceptable to Mill as the corresponding mystery of Providence. A free society, however, may require an acceptance of some such mystery, as well as the

abandonment of the notion that *economic* success in any way reflects *moral* merit. Such was undoubtedly difficult for a person such as Mill who not only sought to control a reality he experienced as fearful, but who also held a perfectionist, and utterly unrealistic, conception of what Goodness and Justice must look like in a world such as ours and who, moreover, would not accept the possibility of transcendent reconciliation. A trust in both providence and its secular expression, the “spontaneous order” of the market, may require the willingness to rest in the assurance that, somehow, there is an order, whether or not such is transparent to the limited reasoning mind. This Mill could not or would not do. Nor would he countenance the older insight that each person has an internal source of order, a consequence of his source in God, or allow the possibility that the realization of *ultimate* justice is not in human hands. Lacking trust and humility, and consumed by an overweening hubris of will and intellect, Mill ignored the limits of the human mind, as his conception of goodness ignored the concrete reality of human existence and its inevitable imperfections. Having rejected faith in an all-wise and all-good and, indeed, all-powerful governor of the universe, Mill felt that he and other human agents like himself must consciously design and impose the moral order his inept if well-meaning god could not or would not achieve.

*Freedom
requires trust
in objective
order.*

The heretofore widely overlooked religious dimensions of Mill’s work require a far-reaching re-evaluation of Mill’s contribution to the development of the liberal tradition. Almost alone among Mill scholars, Hamburger and Cowling have attempted to draw attention to the fact that “Mill’s politics are impregnated with religion.”⁴² Neither Mill’s own work nor his legacy can adequately be comprehended without taking account of his religious aspirations—to usher in a new moral world in which Humanity has replaced God as the ultimate source and end of value. Nor can they be understood without an awareness of the extent to which Mill’s views were permanently shaped by the most illiberal thought of his day—that of the Saint-Simonians and Auguste Comte. Mill’s was a confused and confusing legacy. Mill spoke the language of the liberal tradition while radically eviscerating its spiritual

⁴² Cowling, *Selected Writings of JSM*, 11.

ground—a transcendent source of existence and value that alone sustains the value of the individual—as well as its moral and legal foundation, a law that is given and not man-made. Nor can individual liberty, limited government, and the rule of law be sustained without a resurrection of the despised “in-itself” morality, the belief that an action is right or wrong in itself, because it conforms to or violates the order of being, and not because of its “social consequences.” Of greatest importance, however, is the rejection of Mill’s central religious tenet—the fantastic presumption that Humanity can replace God. The preservation of human liberty and the limited government that secures that liberty politically may require, on the contrary, the acknowledgment that each human being has a spiritual purpose and allegiance far greater and far more important than “duty” to country or even “Service to Humanity.” For only a recognition of the inviolable sanctity of the person that stems from his source and end in God can secure his freedom from organized coercion in forced servitude to pseudo-ultimate ends devised by all-too-human agents. Such a recognition is also essential to sustain the personal spiritual resistance that, historically and existentially, has served to limit the pretensions of political rulers and their clients. Mill claimed to desire the truth, as well as liberty. It may well be, however, that both truth and liberty require the recognition of precisely that which Mill took such pains to deny—Humanity, whatever its merits, is surely not God.