

‘Why may not man one day be immortal?’ Population, perfectibility, and the immortality question in Godwin’s political justice

Siobhan Ni

Chonail Darwin College, Silver street, Cambridge CB3 9EU, UK

Available online 28 July 2006

Abstract

Godwin’s controversial claim for earthly immortality in the first edition of *Political Justice* has been largely dismissed by scholars as a flaw in his philosophy or as absurd speculation which Godwin cannily omitted from the later editions of the text. In this paper, I will demonstrate, not only that such claims were not nearly as idiosyncratic or eccentric as they have been presented, but that they constitute an intrinsic part of his overall philosophy regarding perfectibility and human progress. Moreover, by examining the revisions made to *Political Justice* in the second and third editions, it will be possible to prove that the essence of his argument regarding material immortality was not as radically altered as is widely accepted. I will further show how the population controversy of the 18th century forced Godwin to apply his perfectibilist theory to contemporary demographic challenges and how he defended his concept of immortality from both the principle of population and, more particularly, Malthusian philosophy.

© 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Godwin; Immortality; Malthus; Population; Condorcet

Toward the close of the first edition of his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, William Godwin confronted what he termed ‘the objection to this system from the principle of population’. The ‘system’ was Godwin’s philosophical construction of a politically and socially reformed society populated by a people who had perfected their rational minds to the point where the mental process had gained supremacy over physiological nature. Following this perfectibilist theory to its natural conclusion, Godwin advanced the

E-mail address: smn28@cam.ac.uk.

controversial claim that in such a society, mankind would enjoy an earthly immortality. For if the mind could gain power over all other matter, Godwin asks, then:

why not over the matter of our own bodies? If over matter at ever so great a distance, why not over matter which, however ignorant we may be of the tie that connects it with the thinking principle, we always carry about with us, and which is in all cases the medium of communication between that principle and the external universe? In a word, why may not man one day be immortal?¹

This claim, its purpose and motivations, has intrigued, confounded, and divided scholars as they have attempted to either reconcile the rational philosopher with such a seemingly absurd and irrational assertion, or alternatively to endeavour to omit this curious and somewhat embarrassing aspect of his philosophy from his oeuvre entirely. This confusion has been aided by the mistaken belief that Godwin omits this claim from the second and third editions of the text: ‘mistaken’ because, as we will see, while Godwin may have dropped the language of immortality from the revised editions of *Political Justice*, the sentiment remains intact. In attempting to understand Godwin’s claims for immortality, we are faced not only with the usual difficulties of meaning and context which accompany all textual scholarship, but with a particular interpretative challenge; one that is complicated by the various revisions which attended the second and third editions and which bear little resemblance to the original text. And so, the meaning and intent of Godwin’s ideas on earthly immortality in *Political Justice* are largely misunderstood. What does it mean to suggest that mankind will become immortal? Is it a reasonable claim when conceived as part of a perfectibilist philosophy? Is it merely a moment of utopian dementia on Godwin’s part? And, perhaps most importantly for the present argument, what do the revisions to this claim tell us about Godwin’s original argument?

I

The purpose of this essay is not merely to revisit the terrain of the population controversy from the perspective of the Godwin–Malthus debate.² It is neither to defend Godwin’s population theory from his critics, nor to attack the apparent absurdity of his utopian claims. My intention is to examine the claim made in the first edition of *Political Justice* in the light of the changes made to it in the second and third editions. In proposing that Godwin’s initial claim was not nearly so ‘accidental’ or foolish as it has largely been

¹William Godwin. *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*. 1st ed. 2 vols. (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1793) II, 862. All quotations refer to this edition, unless otherwise stated, and are hereafter cited in parenthesis by volume and page number. For a comprehensive list of variants and revisions for the second and third editions of *Political Justice*, see *The Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*. Vol. 4. Ed. Mark Philp. (London: Pickering, 1993).

²For an interesting account of this opposition, see Frances Ferguson. ‘Malthus, Godwin, Wordsworth, and the Spirit of Solitude.’ *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*. Ed. Elaine Scarry. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) 106. On Malthus more generally, see Patricia James. *Population Malthus: His Life and Times*. (London: Routledge, 1979); James Bonar. *Malthus and His Work*. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1894); Harold A. Bonar. *Hungry Generations: The Nineteenth Century Case Against Malthusianism*. (New York: Kings Crown Press, Columbia University, 1955); D.V. Glass. *Introduction to Malthus*. (London: Watts & Co., 1953); G. E. McCleary. *The Malthusian Population Theory*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1953); Jacob Oser. *Must Men Starve?: The Malthusian Controversy*. (Oxford: Alden, 1956); *Malthus and his Time*. Ed. Michael Turner. (London: Macmillan, 1986).

regarded, I will locate Godwin's conjectures, as he did, within the context of the population controversy. This provides us with a challenging perspective on the immortality question, given the intrinsic link between the indefinite deferral of death and the concerns of overpopulation and, more importantly, Godwin's consistent defence of his perfectibilist argument against the 'principle of population'. In establishing this foundation for Godwin's conjectures, I will demonstrate that while scholars have traditionally tended to either undermine the importance of the claims or to question their validity, the concept of immortality was a crucial element of Godwin's philosophy and, contrary to common belief, underscores his entire work on the subject of human progress.

To this day, it is impossible to achieve a level of consensus as to Godwin's intention in *Political Justice*. His invocation of physical immortality has largely been regarded as either an excessive and eccentric utopian ideal or as mere speculation—a perfectibilist abstraction intended merely to extend the existing tradition of progressive philosophy, but with no actual weight placed behind it. John P. Clark adheres to such an interpretation when he writes that '[Godwin] is not certain that we can ever become immortal (and doubts on Human grounds whether it makes sense to speak of immortality, of which we can form no distinct idea), but he suggests that such a development would certainly "contribute to prolong our vigour."' ³ Mark Philp, on the other hand, declines to engage with the issue as 'even if we can see that this conclusion might follow from a given set of premises, we must also recognise that it seems an absurd thing to argue. It is difficult to see how any rational person could seriously suggest that people will become immortal.' ⁴ It is certainly tempting for the modern reader to discard Godwin's theory on this subject as utopian fiction. We might indeed feel instinctively compelled to agree with Malthus's dismissal of these ideas as 'the grossest and most childish absurdities.' ⁵ We might broadly subscribe to the two main interpretations of his claim and read it either as mere speculation that does not warrant a rational response or as a nonsense concept that deserves little serious consideration. We might even tactfully forget that Godwin made such an argument at all. And yet, Godwin not only makes this argument but sustains it through the period of hopeless pessimism that followed the French Revolution, when anxieties regarding population growth forced Godwin to attempt to reconcile his utopian thought with contemporary economic challenges. In this way, the population controversy emerges as a very useful conduit through which to explore the dimensions of Godwin's ideas on immortality and perhaps determine the intended purpose of the claim.

That the immortality claim is made in the chapter in *Political Justice* dealing with the principle of population is particularly provocative, given the inescapable dichotomy between contemporary overpopulation anxieties and the creation of a utopian society without death as a natural check on population growth. However, the link Godwin makes in *Political Justice* between immortality and population, although important, is not entirely unusual. Many key writers on perfectibility, the so-called 'prophets of progress',

³John P. Clarke. *The Philosophical Anarchism of William Godwin*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 78. Although Hume conceded historical improvement and defended the superiority of modernity to the past, he avoided any endorsement of the doctrine of inevitable progress. On the contrary, Godwin, a severe critic of past and present, held strongly to the possibility of infinite perfectibility. In this, J. B. Bury observes how such optimism is far removed from Godwin's interpretation of the achievements in world history and the potential that existed within the contemporary sphere: 'His survey of human conditions seems to lead inevitably to pessimism; then he turns around and proclaims the doctrine of perfectibility.' *The Idea of Progress*. (London: Macmillan, 1920) 226.

⁴Mark Philp. *Godwin's Political Justice*. (London: Duckworth, 1986) 5.

⁵T. R. Malthus. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. (London: J. Johnson, 1798) 350–351.

participated in the debate on population growth, largely in response to the claim that the principle of population constituted a major obstacle to any philosophical scheme of progress. Although Godwin, like others, acknowledged some potential disproportion between population and food supply, this was not envisaged as a serious difficulty. Instead, the problem was diluted by a mood of optimistic reformism in which doubts concerning the effects of overpopulation were abated with the promise that progress would overcome the obstacle should it arise.⁶ This is precisely the manner in which Godwin treats the population issue in *Political Justice*, as the objections raised by the controversy to Godwin's utopian vision are shown to be redundant within the trajectory of human progress. Yet, Godwin was repeatedly compelled to debate the issues which arise out of the controversy in a very public arena and his conjectures regarding immortality, whilst not universally endorsed as a plausible theory, still attracted a rational response from the key philosophers of this period. Indeed, if *Political Justice* contains Godwin's first proposition of the potential for mankind's immortality on earth, it also provides the first defence of this utopian ideal from the principle of population.

The arguments that characterised the population controversy might be broadly divided down two distinct theoretical lines that separate materialist determinism from idealist invention. For one group of thinkers, including Robert Wallace, Thomas Malthus, and Erasmus Darwin, the problem of overpopulation was primarily a matter of subsistence: a predicament that was contingent on the earth's inability to provide sufficiently for the growing population and which could only be rectified through increased food production and the employment of checks to reduce and contain the existing population. Conversely, the arguments of David Hartley, Joseph Priestley, and Condorcet placed an emphasis upon the mind and its superiority over the body.⁷ They believed that overpopulation was the result of the unequal distribution of wealth and property and that human agency not only circumscribes the problems of poverty and starvation but has the capability to prevent them.⁸ Godwin's argument for physical immortality was advanced from this standpoint—in the spirit of human progress and with a sense of the latent powers of the mind to transcend the weaknesses of the body. The debate on population, however, forced Godwin to apply his philosophy to demographic challenges and it provided a particularly explosive context for such a utopian concept as earthly immortality.

⁶This was a view put forward most memorably by the Marquis de Condorcet and William Paley. See Robert M. Young, 'Malthus and the Evolutionists: the common context of biological and social theory,' *Past and Present* 43 (1969) 109–145; John Avery, *Progress, Poverty and Population: Re-reading Condorcet, Godwin and Malthus*. (London: Frank Cass, 1997) xiv–xv, 9–11; M. L. Clarke, *Paley: Evidences for the Man*. (London: SPCK, 1974) 55. It was this tendency of the perfectibilists to avoid dealing with the problems which arose out of the population controversy directly that frustrated Malthus and which formed the basis of his criticism of Godwin in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*.

⁷For an interesting account of these different readings of the population issue, see Maureen McNeil, *Under the Banner of Science: Erasmus Darwin and his Age*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

⁸For a broader survey of the population controversy and population theory than is possible within this article, see James Bonar, *Theories of Population from Raleigh to Arthur Young*. (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1931); D. V. Glass, *Numbering the People*. (London: Gordon & Cremonesi, 1978); on France, Joseph J. Spengler, *French Predecessors of Malthus*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1942); on America, James H. Cassedy, *Demography in Early America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969); E. P. Hutchinson, *The Population Debate*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); and Charles E. Strangeland, *Pre-Malthusian Doctrines of Population* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1904).

II

In order to understand Godwin's intention in the original version of *Political Justice* and his motivations for the revision of this argument in the later editions, it is important to be very clear about what is said in the first edition of the text. Prior to his discussion of a future world without births, death, or sickness, Godwin writes that 'What follows must be considered in some degree as a deviation into the land of conjecture' (II, 862). This concession would apparently support the arguments of those who characterise the immortality claim as 'idle speculation'. But, although his conjectures are largely utopian in spirit it does not follow that Godwin expected them to be dismissed as idle meanderings. Despite their fantastical nature, Godwin's utopian speculations are an important part of the entire ideological framework of *Political Justice*, embodying the perfectibilist climax to the execution of his political and social system. As he claims:

If it be false, it leaves the great system to which it is appended in all sound reason as impregnable as ever. If this do not lead us to the remedy, it does not follow that there is no remedy. The great object of enquiry will still remain open, however defective may be the suggestions that are now to be offered (II, 862).

The invocation of immortality has undoubtedly coloured the response to the original text of *Political Justice*, and the omission of such an explicit connection between the exercise of reason and the achievement of physical immortality from the later editions has tended to endorse those assessments of the first edition as containing errors in reasoning or idle musings. And yet, upon returning to the 1793 version, it becomes abundantly clear that not only were the immortality conjectures intended to be read seriously, but that Godwin anticipated an adverse reaction to his argument and yet resolved to include the utopian element at the risk of public prejudice:

The principal part of the preceding paragraph is nothing more than a particular application of what was elsewhere delivered respecting moral and physical causes [Book I, Chapter VII, Part I]. It would have been easy to have cast the present chapter in a different form, and to have made it a chapter upon health, showing that one of the advantages of a better state of society would be a very high improvement in the vigour and animal constitution of man. In that case the conjecture of immortality would only have come in as an incidental remark, and the whole would have assumed less the air of conjecture than of close and argumentative deduction. But it was perhaps better to give the subject the most explicit form, at the risk of a certain degree of prejudice (II, 870).

That Godwin did later relegate the conjecture of immortality to that of an 'incidental remark' in his later editions is an apparent inconsistency of intent which will be addressed a little later.

Godwin's question, 'why may not man one day be immortal?', is inspired by Benjamin Franklin's 'sublime conjecture' that 'mind will one day become omnipotent over matter' (II, 862), and is immediately followed by a careful analysis of the ways in which the mind involuntarily modifies the matter of our own bodies. The effects of good or bad news on our physical state, the advantage of a positive attitude in battling illness, the debilitating effect of a melancholy or worried mind upon the health and vigour of the system, are included in Godwin's exposition of his claim. Within this logic, Godwin's claims are

presented as merely a logical extension of current, undisputed phenomena in physical health:

The application of these reasonings is simple and irresistible. If mind be now in a great degree the ruler of the system, why should it be incapable of extending its empire? If our involuntary thoughts can derange or restore the animal economy, why should we not in the process of time, in this as in other instances, subject the thoughts which are at present involuntary to the government of design? If volition now can do something, why should it not go on to do still more and more? (II, 865)

For Godwin, any irrationality linked to his argument lies not in the invocation of material immortality, but in the resistance to a particular supposition of power simply because it is out of line with our current circumstances: ‘There is no principle of reason less liable to question than this, that, if we have in any respect a little power now, and if mind be essentially progressive, that power may, and, barring any extraordinary concussions of nature, infallible will, extend beyond any bounds we are able to prescribe to it’ (II, 865). Although we may endeavour to calculate the limitations of our bodies we cannot be as confident in setting the boundaries to the powers of the mind which is capable of infinite progression. To illustrate this point, Godwin invokes the example of the savage inhabitants of Europe in the times Theseus and Achilles. Had these people been told of the future ability of mankind to predict eclipses, weigh the air, explain natural phenomena, he conjectures, ‘this would not have appeared to them less wonderful, than if we had told them of the possible discovery of the means of maintaining the human body in perpetual youth and vigour’ (II, 866).

In the context of the population controversy, the eradication of death as a natural check on population growth presented a serious theoretical concern and it was one Godwin dealt with in a particularly provocative way. The threat that longevity posed for population control is an improbable one, Godwin maintains, because once the earth and its inhabitants have evolved to the point where human life may be indefinitely prolonged, the inevitable knock-on effect will be the cessation of propagation:

The men therefore who exist when the earth shall refuse itself to a more extended population, will cease to propagate, for they will no longer have any motive, either of error or duty, to induce them. In addition to this they will perhaps be immortal. The whole will be a people of men, and not of children. Generation will not succeed generation, nor truth have in a certain degree to recommence her career at the end of every thirty years.⁹

Godwin thus indicates that concerns pertaining to overpopulation are completely redundant for two reasons: as the point at which such a predicament would be made apparent is in the remote future, we cannot possibly account for the advances, both scientific and biological, to be made in the interim and which could conceivably transform any future society.¹⁰ Moreover, it is probable that when the time arrives when a zero rate

⁹*Political Justice*. II, 871. In the second and third editions, Godwin omits the reference to a future immortality, but retains the rest of the quotation with successive small modifications.

¹⁰In 1786, Joseph Townsend had presented the obverse side of the issue when he argued that the pressures represented by population growth constituted, not a future possibility, but a constant and current threat. *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws: By a Well-Wisher to Mankind* (London: C. Dilly, 1786).

of population growth would become necessary, this would be realised in a world without births or deaths. Furthermore, an ever-increasing population poses no threat to his political and social ideal because there is, he argues, a ‘principle’ in human society that keeps the population down to the means of subsistence. It is this principle, that the population will self-regulate if not interfered with, which renders precautionary checks to population growth ‘superfluous and nugatory’.¹¹ The radical imagining of a society that no longer propagates was a key element of the original *Political Justice*, and a major factor in the ensuing debate with Malthus over the impact of moral restraint upon population control. It was also, crucially, an element which remained largely intact in each of the subsequent editions. In the second and third editions, Godwin omits the reference to immortality and the phrase ‘will cease to propagate’ becomes ‘will probably cease to propagate’. This clearly points toward a softening of intent on Godwin’s part, and also calls into question the centrality of immortality to his utopian scheme. However, despite such apparent retractions, Godwin nonetheless retains the possibility of a future population of men ‘and not of children’, primarily respecting the necessity of such a society for the unfettered progress of truth. This adherence to such a drastic idea further demonstrates that Godwin did not wholly renege on his original utopian framework, and the rephrasing of the immortality question in the more general terms of progress and improvement would thus seem to support the assessment of the revisions as indicative merely of an adjustment in reasoning regarding our ability to calculate a limit to human perfectibility.

Godwin’s disposal of the human sexual urge as a resolution to the threat of overpopulation was not enough, however, to abate the concerns of Malthus who, in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, revealed his frustrations at the inability of the perfectibilists to provide a rational response to the debate on population. For Malthus, the threat of overpopulation was serious enough to dismantle all the utopian fantasies of the perfectibilists, particularly the notion of an immortal society, and he was annoyed at the refusal of Godwin and his progressive contemporaries to acknowledge the principle of population as an unavoidable and immovable obstacle to such schemes of improvement. He remarks with astonishment that ‘all writers on the perfectibility of man and of society who have noticed the argument of an overcharged population treat it always very slightly and invariably represent the difficulties arising from it as at a great and almost immeasurable distance.’¹² The consequences of earthly immortality for the debate on population emerge as a pressing issue for Malthus who concedes that it ‘will not be necessary, I think, in order to more completely show the improbability of any approach towards immortality on earth, to urge the very great additional weight that an increase in

¹¹The idea that a growing population would itself generate the means of solving the problems it creates is one which originates in A. R. J. Turgot, who also believed that population growth was necessary for the production of geniuses and, hence, a vital component of human progress. While Godwin adopts Turgot’s argument that an expanding population would bring with it the self-adjustment necessary to cater for any negative effects it creates, F. G. Whelen observes that Godwin’s application of this principle is in direct contravention to the ideals of his utopian society. The solutions offered by Godwin, including infanticide and abstinence, run contrary to the projected perfectibility of the society that he imagines. According to Whelen, this ‘Malthusian’ theory ‘represents a pessimistic variant of the theory of self-regulating social processes; hence it seems inept as a defence of the possibility of the kind of perfect society that Godwin seeks to uphold against the demographic objection, since the self-regulative mechanisms entail pain and the equilibrium state envisioned is at the margin of subsistence.’ F. G. Whelan. ‘Population and ideology in the enlightenment.’ *History of Political Thought* 12:1 (1991) 35–72.

¹²Malthus. *Essay*, 142. Hereafter cited in parenthesis with page number.

the duration of life would give to the argument of population' (*Essay*, 142). Malthus stresses that it is precisely the principle of population which constitutes the major stumbling block for Godwin's system of equality and the realisation of physical immortality. Godwin, however, like Condorcet was mindful of the dangers inherent in rapid population growth and believed it could conceivably negate the advances made in economics and science. On the other hand, both men felt that such a predicament would not manifest itself for a great many years, and their responses to the issue indicate their inability to register overpopulation as an urgent problem for mankind. Predicting a time when population might outrun subsistence, Condorcet suggested that birth control might be used as a means to control the situation. This was, however, a solution which Malthus was unable to reconcile with the purported attributes of human perfectibility. 'To remove the difficulty in this way', he writes, 'will surely, in the opinion of most men, be to destroy that virtue and purity of manners which the advocates of the perfectibility of man profess to be the end and object of their views' (*Essay*, 171). While Godwin aspired to a world without births or deaths, Malthus emphasised the necessity for such limits on human life. He demanded that the perfectibilists acknowledge the physiological constraints on human progress, writing that 'Mr Godwin considers man too much in the light of being merely intellectual' (*Essay*, 252).

For Malthus, the alleged perfectibility and earthly immortality of man presented such an affront to his sense of the logic and gravity of the natural and social sciences that, despite his belief that such claims did not merit engagement, he felt compelled to respond to such outrageous conjectures as a matter of principle and out of a sense of duty:

Many I doubt not, will think that attempting gravely to controvert so absurd a paradox as the immortality of man on earth, or indeed even the perfectibility of man and society, is a waste of time and words, and that such unfounded conjectures are best answered by neglect. I profess, however, to be of a different opinion. When paradoxes of this kind are advanced by ingenious and able men, neglect has no tendency to convince them of their mistakes. (*Essay*, 161).

Such was the radical nature of both Godwin's and Condorcet's perfectibilist claims that Malthus deemed them destructive to the progress of human science and understanding. By 'forming improbable and unfounded hypotheses' which bear no positive relation to human science, Malthus argues that the perfectibilist philosophers are in effect 'contracting' the boundaries of human understanding, or as he puts it 'so far from promoting the improvement of the human mind, they are obstructing it.' In this way, Malthus indicts both the concept of immortality and that of perfectibility as instances of dangerous paradox which jeopardise the very foundations of philosophy and threaten to throw us back 'almost into the infancy of knowledge' (*Essay*, 161–162). Although he acknowledged in his refutation of Godwin that he believed 'great discoveries are yet to take place in all branches of human science' Malthus identified a real danger in failing to employ past experiences as the foundation of our conjectures concerning the future. In tolerating conjectures which 'absolutely contradict past experience', Malthus argues that we 'are thrown upon a wide field of uncertainty, and any one supposition is then just as good as another' (*Essay*, 232). Thus, for Malthus, to refute the utopian claims of the perfectibilists was to defend both the empiricism of human science and the very integrity of moral and political philosophy.

III

Alongside Malthus' *Essay*, the critical reaction to the first edition of *Political Justice* has been consistently viewed as the main catalyst behind the revisions to the later editions and Godwin's apparent renegotiation of the centrality of immortality to his utopian thought. Yet the reviews of *Political Justice* were mixed, and it is difficult to imagine their having a significant impact upon the revised text, particularly since the utopian dimensions of the original *Enquiry* were not as widely condemned or ridiculed as one might be inclined to believe. Godwin's poorest review appeared in the *British Critic*, which made Godwin's work the pretext for an attack on 'this enlightened age' as the 'most vain, shallow, foolish, and impertinent age, that ever the revolution of time has yet brought into existence'.¹³ The reviewer actively ridiculed notions in the *Enquiry* such as 'the omnipotence of truth' (p. 311), which has no meaning since by Godwin's own definition truth is nothing more than 'the perceived agreement or disagreement of the terms of a proposition' (p. 312). Similarly, the concept of perfectibility was an easy target for criticism: 'and thus solidly is it concluded, that because men can invent speaking and writing, they can, by their own powers, make themselves immortal!' (p. 313). The *Critical Review* also honed in on Godwin's ideas regarding immortality, finding that his 'extraordinary reasonings concerning the prolongation of human life' are 'totally inconsistent with the scheme of Providence in every thing that respects this world!'¹⁴ While it admitted itself 'to prophesy that this doctrine cannot be long-lived,' the *Critical Review* did concede that 'Mr. Godwin's work is well deserving the perusal of every philosophical politician, of every man indeed who consider politics as a science.'¹⁵ At least the dissenting liberal intellectuals of the *Analytical Review* wholly endorsed Godwin's consideration of the need for a moral government and accepted the more eccentric aspects of the text as having originated from a sincere and moral set of principles:

For our part ... among several extravagant and Utopian ideas, we have found much clear reasoning, judicious argument, and profound thought. If his ardent enthusiasm in favour of truth and liberty, with a sanguine anticipation of the perfection of human nature, have betrayed Mr. G. into a few extraordinary and chimerical positions, though we may be disposed to smile at their singularity and extravagance, we can scarcely censure the principle in which they originate. His morality is bold and imperious: if in any instance it be either impracticable or inconsistent, it seems to be in his doctrine of sincerity.¹⁶

While we cannot be sure of the extent to which these reviews motivated Godwin's revisions in the second and third editions, he did admit in the preface to the first edition that he was wholly disappointed with parts of the text, stressing that there existed an imbalance between his early defective enquiries and the more perspicuous arguments of subsequent chapters. Although such an admission would suggest that Godwin was largely satisfied with his final chapters (during which his discussion of physical immortality appears), the fact that he reworks the structure of his argument in the later editions is indisputable. If we do not lay the motivation for the revisions to *Political Justice* at the

¹³*The British Critic* (July, 1793) 313.

¹⁴*Critical Review*. (April, 1793) 154.

¹⁵*Critical Review*. (October, 1793) 372.

¹⁶*Analytical Review*. (August, 1793) 404.

door of Malthus or the press, then perhaps Godwin, in his revised text, felt that explicit references to immortality were not absurd, but unnecessary because, crucially, while he may have altered the language of the thesis on immortality, the spirit of the argument remains largely intact in the subsequent editions. Godwin may not indulge in the term ‘immortality’ in the same way, but the sentiment of his writing remains the same.

Returning to the first edition of *Political Justice*, it becomes clear that Godwin’s basis for the immortality claim is intrinsically connected to his more general philosophy regarding social and political change; both are centred on the concept of human perfectibility. It is the alleged perfectibility of man which forms the basis of Godwin’s system of equality and reform, and it is this same faith in the potential rationality of all human beings that inspires his belief in the mind’s superiority over the body (a belief which in turn forms the premise upon which his arguments for the achievement of earthly immortality are based). The relationship between the rational mind and the immortal body is most explicitly demonstrated in the first edition of *Political Justice*, but even in the revised versions of the text the connection between man’s rationality and the unlimited perfectibility of mankind constitutes a major theme. While there is an unmistakable air of restraint in the second and third editions as Godwin tempers his original optimism, dropping the language of absolute immortality for that of indefinite progress, his general argument regarding the correlation between prolonged life and the rationality of the mind remains largely unchanged. The exaltation of the unlimited power of the mind and man’s rationality remains a characteristic of the text in all editions and it is through this faith in human progress that Godwin defends his controversial theories of utopian society. While his later editions may have ceased to announce the inevitability of earthly immortality, Godwin continues to reason that the potential omnipotence of the mind must necessarily extend to the human body:

Our involuntary motions are frequently found gradually to become subject to the power of volition. It seems impossible to set limits to this species of metamorphosis. Its reality cannot be questioned, when we consider that every motion of the human frame was originally involuntary. Is it not then highly probable, in the process of human improvement, that we may finally obtain an empire over every articulation of our frame?¹⁷

While Godwin renegotiates his explicit delineation of the connection between the rational mind and the immortal body in subsequent editions of his *Enquiry*, his fundamental sense of the power of the mind to influence ‘the structures and members of the human body’ and, hence, its potential to resist sickness and death, remains a thematic focus. However, Godwin reworks his initial argument to such an extent that he is later prompted to declare that the pursuit of absolute perfection is ‘pregnant with absurdity and contradiction’, while his previous campaign for the achievement of immortality through the mind’s conquest over the body is replaced by a declaration that the concept of immortality is absurd and the enquiry into the matter therefore meaningless. Some commentators have suggested that these revisions are the response to the critical reaction to the first edition, or that Godwin, bound by strenuous deadlines, had simply rushed his

¹⁷Godwin. *Political Justice*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1796) II, 515. This argument is repeated in the third edition in the appendix ‘*Of Health and the Prolongation of Human Life*.’ (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1798) II, 524.

arguments and had never intended to betray such an overt faith in earthly immortality. These interpretations would seem to be supported by Godwin's refusal in the revised text to incorporate the language of certain immortality into his conjectures regarding the extension of the duration of life. Having relegated the original section of the text that dealt with the question of immortality to an Appendix entitled 'Of Health, and the Infinite Prolongation of Human Life,'¹⁸ Godwin, whilst maintaining his belief that the mind could potentially influence the health and longevity of the human body, creates a conscious distinction between the belief in perfectibility and that of immortality:

The sum of the arguments which have been here offered amounts to a species of presumption that the term of human life may be prolonged, and that by the immediate operation of intellect, beyond any limits which we are able to assign. It would be idle to talk of the absolute immortality of man. Eternity and immortality are phrases to which it is impossible for us to annex any distinct ideas, and the more we attempt to explain them, the more we shall find ourselves involved in contradiction.¹⁹

This concession, however, has been far too hastily appropriated as evidence of a major retraction in Godwin's thinking. Far from being a complete disavowal of potential immortality, the text of the second and third editions represents merely a readjustment in Godwin's particular figuration of perfectibility and human improvement. In the first edition, he had imagined the endpoint of our improvement, a utopian society of immortals; in the later editions, Godwin professes that the endpoint to the improvement of our minds and bodies simply cannot be imagined, such is our potential for limitless, unbounded improvement. Moreover, in writing that 'eternity and immortality are phrases to which it is impossible for us to annex any distinct ideas', Godwin would seem to indicate merely that these are words without a reference. In this way, the above revision represents not a capitulation but a further rationalisation of the concept of immortality. Concepts such as 'immortality' and 'eternity' are impossible to comprehend and so Godwin, in the second and third editions, omits them from his argument in favour of a more coherent discourse. He does not, crucially, renounce the philosophy which previously incorporated these terms as an ideological destination and, hence, the revisions are merely representative of a refinement of terminology rather than of ideas. Maureen McLane observes that Godwin, by avoiding any commitment to 'absolute immortality' in his revised text, instead establishes the 'figure of a line approaching infinity; an asymptotic curve. Not absolute immortality but an approach toward one.' In this way, immortality, as 'an approachable but never attainable goal' partakes of the logic of perfectibility itself.²⁰ Similarly asymptotic, the progress of mankind is deemed perpetually to continue and improve whilst never actually arriving at completion. As Godwin writes: 'the term perfectible, thus explained, not only does not imply the capacity of being brought to perfection, but stands in express opposition to it. If we could arrive at perfection, there would be an end to our improvement.'²¹

¹⁸This Appendix is introduced in the third edition of *Political Justice*. The second edition still incorporates this material in the chapter 'Objection to this System from the Principle of Population'.

¹⁹*Political Justice*. 3rd ed. II, 527.

²⁰Maureen McLane. *Romanticism and the Human Sciences*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 170.

²¹*Political Justice*. 3rd ed. I, 93.

While previous writers such as La Mettrie had discussed the connection between the mind and physical health, Godwin was the first philosopher to take the doctrine of perfectibility a step further by establishing a link between human progress and physical immortality. In *Political Justice*, Godwin identifies the exercise of human reason, and its liberation from the restrictions imposed upon it by government, private property and marriage as absolutely essential to the perfectibility of man and society. In delineating a society which would be wholly organised and determined by considerations of general morality, Godwin rejects Benthamite notions of penal reform, believing that legislation can never produce that conception of morality upon which the ideal of perfection rests. The imposition of punishments or judicial penalties cannot reform or morally improve a man, Godwin believes, because it effectively coerces a man into placing the rights of the community ahead of individual interest. On the contrary, Godwin believed that in order for the progression of mankind to take place, the individual must be personally and intellectually convinced that the welfare of the many is always preferable to the welfare of the individual. Godwin applies this same sense of the capabilities of the enlightened mind to his belief in the mind's ability to resist death and the weaknesses of the flesh. For George Crowder 'Godwin shares with Plato the assumption that man is a pre-eminently rational creature, and his view that opinion is omnipotent over action may reflect that notion that in the healthy human specimen reason governs the body.'²² Godwin does not suggest that the dissolution of social and legal institutions must precede the enlightenment of men's reason, but rather argues that as men become increasingly enlightened they will naturally liberate themselves from the strictures of government and society. It is this liberation which will make them even more rational and so on they will progress until an earthly utopia is realised. It is only through such a process of gradual, rational improvement that mankind becomes not only enlightened, courageous, truthful, honest, and intellectually advanced but, more than this, 'They will perhaps be immortal'. As, John Passmore observes, in Godwin the desire to be godlike is again invoked: 'Only then, as immortals in an community of fully adult beings, no longer obliged to act as pupils to their predecessors, no longer subject, as children, to the authority of parents, can Godwin's society of rational men achieve its full fruition.'²³ This points again to the central impulse behind Godwin's utopian pursuits—the idea of 'truth' having to recommence her career every 30 years. For Godwin, death places a constraint on progress by taking from the world persons of genius and knowledge. Those left behind must endeavour to learn what their predecessors knew before themselves making some new contribution to human knowledge and society. This laborious process, endlessly repeated, generation after generation, renders the world forever 'in a degree of infancy'.

Godwin's exposition of psychosomatic phenomena and his suggestion that the mind might eventually transcend the weaknesses of the flesh develops into a utopian theory which allows for the potential of human immortality. Expanding his theory of the mind's ability to prevail upon the body, Godwin identifies a positive attitude or cheerfulness as the 'principle' of immortality in man. He argues that as the mature man desists from the habits of youth he becomes vexed with all the cares that arise out of mistaken institutions;

²²George Crowder. *Classical Anarchism: The Political Thought of Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 50.

²³John Passmore. *The Perfectibility of Man*. (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1970) 180.

a condition which in turn accelerates old age and death. Each time one allows one's mind to become 'morbid, vacant and melancholy', Godwin argues, a certain period is cut off from the length of one's life. Thus, 'just as listlessness of thought is the brother of death', so a cheerful disposition gives 'new life to our frame and circulation to our juices'.²⁴ Recognising the great distance at which this 'future improvement of the mind' might reside, Godwin makes the contentious point that in order to banish death we must first remove its image—sleep. He describes sleep as 'one of the most conspicuous infirmities of the human frame' and says that it 'is not as has been supposed, a suspension of thought, but an irregular and distempered state of the faculty'.²⁵ He does not presume that alleviating such problems will inevitably lead to immortality on earth but rather stresses that they are a physical part of the process of perfectibility. It is only through this process that human beings can develop their rational mind to the point where they might ultimately transcend the 'accidents' of sickness and death:

If the remedies here prescribed tend to a total extirpation of the infirmities of our nature, then, though we cannot promise to them an early and complete success, we may probably find them of some utility now. They may contribute to prolong our vigour, though not to immortalise it, and, which is of more consequence, to make us live while we live.²⁶

One might identify a certain correlation between Godwin's argument here and Mary Wollstonecraft's embracing of the concept of the soul's immortality on the premise that, not being created perfect or infallible, one must find fulfillment in a future state for which this life is a probation.²⁷ It is important to note that Godwin rejects the possibility of banishing sleep and death in the revised editions of *Political Justice*, suggesting instead that it is only 'in a certain sense' that we consent to sickness and mortality. This retraction has significant implications for his doctrine of human perfectibility, which no longer accepts the inevitability of man's achievement of perfection, but rather stresses his instinctive desire to be 'made better' and his potential for 'perpetual improvement'.²⁸

Godwin's renewed view of perfectibility as a constant process is underlined by his warning that we should never 'look back as if the wisdom of our ancestors was such as to leave no room for improvement'. At this stage, he appears to subscribe to Condorcet's suggestion that 'the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite':

no bounds have been fixed to the improvement of the human faculties [...] that the progress of this perfectibility, henceforth above the control of every power that

²⁴*Political Justice*. 3rd ed. II, 522.

²⁵*Political Justice*. II, 867–868. Antoine-Angelique Chomel made the obverse argument in 1772, claiming that the ability to sleep for prolonged periods would contribute to the longevity of the individual. In this case, the major obstacle to an immortal existence is not actually death, but insomnia. See Marie Roberts. *Gothic Immortals*. (London: Routledge, 1990) 29.

²⁶*Political Justice*. II, 868. In the second and third editions, Godwin makes some minor changes to this statement. 'though we cannot promise to them' becomes 'though we should not be able to promise to them' and 'utility now' becomes just 'utility'. These small changes, which have the effect of lessening the weight and inflexibility of his argument, would seem to indicate Godwin's recognition of the difficulty in defending oneself from 'absolutes' in language or argument, a major reason for the attacks visited on the first edition, whilst still retaining his more extreme utopian ideas.

²⁷Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. (New York: Norton, 1998) 180–181.

²⁸*Political Justice*. 2nd ed. I, 93–94; 3rd ed. I, 93.

would impede us, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has placed us.²⁹

Yet, Godwin's subsequent vision of a perfect society implies a certain culmination of the process of perfectibility. In this utopian world there would be 'no war, no crimes, no administration of justice' and 'no disease, no anguish, no melancholy and no resentment'.³⁰ Moreover, in light of Godwin's previous characterisation of the mind as 'a real cause, an indispensable link in the great chain', it is perhaps noteworthy that he again employs the language of the chain as he envisions a utopia in which every man and woman contentedly plays his or her part in contributing to the general good:

Every man will seek with ineffable ardour the good of all. Mind will be active and eager, yet never disappointed. Men will see the progressive advancement of virtue and good, and feel that, if things occasionally happen contrary to their hopes, the miscarriage itself was a necessary part of that progress. They will know, that they are members of the chain, that each has his several utility, and they will need not feel indifferent to that utility.³¹

IV

One might conclude that it is precisely Godwin's rejection of the biblical notions of original sin and the Calvinist belief in predestination that impels him to argue so vehemently for the perfectibility of man. His entire philosophy on this subject is based on a regard for man as a morally and intellectually progressive being. Godwin's lapsed faith, and growing dissatisfaction with religious organisation, might be read as a consequence of his increasing sense of the powers of the free mind. In a rationale that typifies his Dissenting heritage, Godwin argued that the culture of fear of judgement that was an integral part of the teachings of Christianity only serves to cripple individual autonomy and independent thought. Thus, crucial to Godwin's opposition to Christianity is this confidence in the freedom of the mind. For progress to occur, the whole community must be allowed 'to run the generous race for intellectual and moral superiority', and should not therefore have their understandings shackled by the fear of a judgmental God and an afterlife of retribution. Mindful of the necessity for individual, secular enlightenment, Godwin strongly objects to the state's sanction of religious authority, arguing that '[w]herever the state sets apart a certain revenue for the support of religion, it will infallibly be given to the adherents of some particular opinions, and will operate in the manner of prizes to induce men at all events to embrace and profess those opinions' (II, 608). Godwin's estimation of the powers of the mind and the intellectual process, and the connection he establishes between this and possible physical immortality in the first edition of *Political Justice*, are thus advanced in deliberate contravention of the doctrines of Christianity. For Godwin, religion and more particularly the religious concept of the afterlife, pose a significant obstacle to his scheme of utopian progress by restricting the mind's triumph over the mortality of the body. Thus, if death was to remain a human

²⁹M. de Condorcet. *Outlines of an Historical View of the Human Mind*. (London: J. Johnson, 1795) 4.

³⁰*Political Justice*. II, 871–872. This sentiment is repeated in the second and third editions with little modification.

³¹*Political Justice*. II, 872. Again, this argument is retained in each edition of the text.

reality, Godwin, in a specifically Enlightenment perspective, wanted it unleashed from the religious scheme of heaven and hell.

The objection raised by the principle of population to Godwin's system of utopian society and earthly immortality is one which was never fully settled during the controversy of the 19th and early-19th centuries. In a sense, this stems from the conceptualisation of earthly immortality as the culmination of human perfectibility which, as a utopian ideal removed from everyday reality, thus precludes its eligibility to participate in an empirical discourse on population. Yet, the appropriation of the principle of population by Malthus as an impediment to all utopian projects of perfectibility is in itself problematic for, as Hazlitt argues, 'it requires not only a shrinking back from every progressive refinement, but a perpetual deterioration and retrograde movement from the positive advances we have made in civilisation, comfort, and population, to the lowest state of barbarism, ignorance, and depopulation'.³² Nevertheless, the eradication of death as a natural check on population inevitably antagonises existing concerns regarding overpopulation and yet all solutions proffered by the 'prophets of progress' are part of that same utopian trajectory. The dissolution of all governmental and institutional structures, the dissipation of the commerce between the sexes, and the amelioration of public attitudes from egoism to altruism, are all aspects of this tradition which cannot be effectively applied to genuine concerns regarding population growth and levels of subsistence.

Considering the involvement and tenacity with which Godwin defended his concepts of perfectibility and immortality, it is impossible to ignore the significance of this concept to his wider philosophical project. The question then becomes how best to understand the implications of his theory and the repercussions it has for his philosophy. I would argue that, rather than reading Godwin's conjectures on earthly immortality as a rational idea, they are more accurately understood as an ideological climax to his perfectibilist philosophy. In this way, they emerge more clearly as one aspect of the secular ambitions of human progress which, as a philosophy, intended to transfer utopian concepts of paradise and immortality from the realm of religion to the earthly domain. It is this fact which most accurately informs Godwinian notions of reform and progress, and which qualifies his need to establish an immortal existence which was independent of any religious and spiritual apparatus. Arguments about the 'rationality' of the concept of immortality are wholly unhelpful in this instance and serve only to entrench immortality as a static state. Conversely, rephrasing the idea of immortality in asymptotic terms enables us to appreciate Godwin's radical challenge in favour of the secular intellect and is more consistent with his own progressive notion of perfectibility. For Godwin, the process of perfectibility provides precisely the means by which such a material and secular form of immortality can be achieved. Rather than placing our hopes for immortality in a God or religion, Godwinian perfectibility proclaims that the potential for an immortal life might be made a reality through the exercise of human reason and the liberation of our minds from the shackles of religion, government, and ignorance.

³²*Political Essays. The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*. 9 vols. Ed. Duncan Wu. (London: Pickering, 1998) 4, 311. For Hazlitt, as with others, population is viewed as a positive effect of society's advance, while depopulation is seen as indicative of a retardation of progress; an outcome as dastardly as ignorance and barbarism.