

# Narrative, Imagination, and the Religion of Humanity in Mill's Ethics

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FOR MANY OF THE BENTHAMITE “philosophical radicals” of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Christianity was an especially pernicious superstition. It fostered indifference or outright hostility to human happiness, the keystone of utilitarian morality. In addition, religious sanctions (e.g., the prospect of eternal damnation or eternal reward) impeded social and political reform—the Church thereby set itself in alliance with the privileged classes to limit the power of the masses.<sup>1</sup>

John Stuart Mill's stance towards religion remained similarly critical throughout his life.<sup>2</sup> Though he argues in his essay “Theism” that one can justify the possibility of a God using an argument from design, he repudiates the evidence of revelation and the typical Christian conceptions of that God as all-powerful and perfectly benevolent. Moreover, in “Utility of Religion” he contends that Christianity weakens the intellect by asking its adherents to accept its flawed theology, fosters selfishness for the majority with its doctrine of heaven and hell, and places questionable moral exemplars before its believers, including a God who seems to act arbitrarily by keeping grace from the millions who lived and died without ever hearing of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, unlike Bentham, Mill took religion as meeting, however imperfectly, genuine ethical needs. Religion supplies “ideal conceptions grander and

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent account of Bentham's views on religion, see James E. Crimmins, *Secular Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Some helpful discussions of Mill on religion include Karl Britton “John Stuart Mill on Christianity,” in *James and John Stuart Mill: Papers of the Centenary Conference*, eds., John Robson and Michael Laine (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976); Alan Millar, “Mill on Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, ed. John Skorupski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Alan Ryan, *J.S. Mill* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); Lou Matz and Linda Raeder, *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill [Collected Works]*, John M. Robson, general ed., 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–91), vol. X:422–25.

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more beautiful than we see realized in the prose of human life."<sup>4</sup> For nobler spirits inspired by religion's ideals rather than by its sanctions, religion imbues even the smallest of life's activities with a sense of purpose while also generating greater recognition of duties to others.

Interest in religion's existential importance was closely interwoven in this period with concern about the negative ethical impact of changes in economic and social life. Mill shared the unease of many prominent British intellectuals of the early- to mid-nineteenth century, who witnessed the alteration of British life with increasing alarm, especially the transformation of a quiet, predominantly agrarian nation into one on the verge of urban, industrial modernity. Carlyle helped to crystallize resistance with his famous rallying-cry: "We have profoundly forgotten everywhere that *Cash-payment* is not the sole relation of human beings."<sup>5</sup> Coleridge lamented "the decrease in our feelings of reverence towards mankind at large."<sup>6</sup> Both men express apprehension about the meaning of the individual life—what can such a life be in a world emptied of reverence, in which self-interest grounds interactions with our fellows?

Mill adds to this chorus of voices when he decries in his *Autobiography* "the low moral tone of what in England, is called society; the habit of, not indeed professing, but taking for granted in every mode of implication, that conduct is of course always directed towards low and petty objects."<sup>7</sup> In the "Inaugural Address" he expands on this theme:

One of the commonest types of character among us is that of a man all whose ambition is self-regarding; who has no higher purpose in life than to enrich or raise in the world himself and his family; who never dreams of making the good of his fellow-creatures or of his country an habitual object, further than giving away, annually or from time to time, certain sums in charity.<sup>8</sup>

This prevalence of self-regard is, of course, a topic of particular concern for Mill and other utilitarians. Not only does inordinate self-regard need to be overcome for the development of utilitarian agents, it also limits the happiness that the individual herself can enjoy. A passage from *Utilitarianism* captures the threat that stunted fellow-feeling represents for personal happiness:

When people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is caring for nobody but themselves. To those who have neither public nor private affections, the excitements of life are much curtailed, and in any case dwindle in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be terminated by death; while those who leave after them objects of personal affection, and especially those who have also cultivated a fellow-feeling with the collective interests of mankind, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigor of youth and health.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, X:419.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: Ward, Lock, and Bowden, Ltd., 1897), 202–3.

<sup>6</sup> S.T.C. Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State According to the Idea of Each* (3rd Edition), and *Lay Sermons* (2nd Edition) (London: William Pickering, 1839), 279.

<sup>7</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, I:61.

<sup>8</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, XXI:253.

<sup>9</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, X:215.

Though Mill is in substantial accord with Carlyle, Coleridge, and others on the problems at hand, he can countenance neither of the two most popular alternatives for dealing with those problems, namely, calls for a re-dedication to Christianity (which he takes as exacerbating the problem of self-regard for all but the best people) and efforts to re-institute more 'traditional' ways of life.<sup>10</sup> Mill is thereby left with the following difficulty: How can one retain the ethical benefits offered by religion without accepting traditional religion or reverting to a reactionary social policy? Mill (again, unlike Bentham) takes the solution to this problem to be vitally important for both the happiness of individuals and for the viability of utilitarian morality.

Inspired by Comte, Mill finds great promise in the odd idea of a Religion of Humanity, in which an idealized humanity becomes an object of reverence and in which the morally useful features of traditional religion are supposedly purified and accentuated. This paper will show how the ethical benefits of the Religion of Humanity—a life imbued with purpose, an improved regard for others, and greater happiness for oneself from the pleasures of fellow-feeling—were to be actualized through the imagination's creation of compelling narratives about humanity. For Mill, the moral psychology of utilitarianism depends upon individuals integrating the narratives that constitute the Religion of Humanity into their self-conceptions. Understanding the ethical importance of the Religion of Humanity therefore implies understanding the central role of imagination in Millian ethical life.<sup>11</sup> This investigation serves to articulate a feature of Mill's utilitarianism that differentiates it from Bentham's, namely his commitment to the importance of a religious sensibility in the moral agent. It also raises the broader philosophical issue of what narratives a psychologically tenable humanist world-view requires—an issue of pressing importance given the growing centrality of conflict between ethical universalism and religious and nationalistic identities.

I will begin by showing how Comte, whom Mill follows, emphasizes art's role in the idealization of humanity, thereby making humanity worthy of reverence. Mill

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<sup>10</sup> The conservative call for a slower, more traditional society—a call made by, among others, Carlyle, Southey, and many of the proponents of the Corn Laws protecting British agriculture and landowners—was heard throughout the early- and mid-nineteenth century and often took the form of polemics against the new science of political economy and against the industrialism it seemed to promote. An interesting and typical case is that of Francis William Newman, whose 1851 *Lectures on Political Economy* were reviewed that same year by Mill in the *Westminster Review*. Mill characterizes Newman's worries about the great evils of "moral disorganization" as follows: "His complaint is, virtually, that the old doctrines and old institutions do not continue. He complains that human beings are not bound together into fixed groups by an irrevocable bond; that hardly any of the relations of life are permanent; that people do not always hire the same labourers, buy and sell with the same persons, work for the same employers, and so forth." See Mill, "Newman's Political Economy," in *Collected Works*, V:453.

<sup>11</sup> The imagination is a sorely understudied topic in Mill's ethics. As an example, the *Cambridge Companion to Mill's* extensive index includes no references to imagination. Some mention of the imagination in the context of ethics can be found in the following: Lou Matz, "The Utility of Religious Illusion: A Critique of J.S. Mill's Religion of Humanity," *Utilitas* 12 (2000): 137–154; Wendy Donner, *The Liberal Self* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 97–106; John Robson, "J.S. Mill's Theory of Poetry," in *Mill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. B. Schneewind, (London: MacMillan, 1968); Robson, *The Improvement of Mankind* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1968); and Susan Feagin, "Mill and Edwards on the Higher Pleasures," *Philosophy* 58 (1983): 244–52.

suggests, however, that idealization is not sufficient for situating the individual in proper relation to humanity. The latter requires imaginatively placing humanity within a drama (i.e., the drama of human history), which has a destination or point, namely, the victory of good over evil. The individual is thereby able to describe himself as working in conjunction with others for the triumph of good (i.e., the well-being and perfection of humanity).

In order better to appreciate this seemingly elaborate ethical use of the imagination, it is helpful to contrast it with the views favored by Mill's fellow utilitarians. Thus, we will go on to look at Bentham's general suspicion of the ethical value of the imagination.

Before concluding, I will show how Mill attempted to solve the problems raised by Bentham's attack on ethical uses of the imagination. Mill's efforts to defend the imagination by arguing for a realm in which the attribution of truth and falsity is mistaken—and by suggesting that in such cases there can be ethical justifications for the products of imagination—indicate interesting parallels with Kant's postulates.

#### I. IMAGINATION, ART, AND THE DRAMA OF IDEALIZED HUMANITY

Commentators on Mill have often ignored or dismissed outright his discussions of the Religion of Humanity in order to get to his "serious" moral philosophy. It is useful to ask what led Mill to emphasize this religion. Why did he take it to be worth our attention?

In "Utility of Religion," Mill identifies the value of religion for the individual. It derives from religion's capacity to meet one of our basic needs, a "craving for higher things."<sup>12</sup> This craving originates in the recognition that this world, in which one finds suffering, injustice, and human relations constituted by "cash payment," is impoverished and badly flawed. We are prone, therefore, to entertain hopes for something better: "Belief in a God or Gods, and in a life after death, becomes the canvas which every mind, according to its capacity, covers with such ideal pictures as it can either invent or copy. In that other life each hopes to find the good which he has failed to find on earth, or the better which is suggested to him by the good which on earth he has partially seen and known."<sup>13</sup> Religion relies on the power of imagination to offer ideal pictures of another world which serve to satisfy us that this imperfect world is not the only one which we can inhabit.

Mill goes on to suggest, however, that our craving for something better need not depend upon satisfaction from an afterlife or heaven. A poetic attitude takes us beyond "the prose of human life" through beautification of *this* world, thereby providing an attractive alternative to religion:

The value, therefore, of religion to the individual both in the past and present, as a source of personal satisfaction and of elevated feelings, is not to be disputed. But it still has to be considered, whether in order to obtain this good, it is necessary to

<sup>12</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, X:419.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

travel beyond the boundaries of the world which we inhabit; or whether the idealization of our earthly life, the cultivation of a high conception of what *it* may be made, is not capable of supplying a poetry, and, in the best sense of the word, a religion, equally fitted to exalt the feelings, and (with the same aid from education) still better calculated to ennoble the conduct, than any belief respecting the unseen powers.<sup>14</sup>

Mill anticipates an objection to his substitution of a humanist, this-worldly stance for a religious one. Wouldn't it be that "the small duration, the smallness and insignificance of life, if there is no prolongation of it beyond what we see, makes it impossible that great and elevated feelings can connect themselves with anything laid out on so small a scale"?<sup>15</sup> In other words, wouldn't our earthly existence, emptied of traditional theological import, weigh down even the most fertile imagination and fail to satisfy genuinely our craving for higher things? From a large enough perspective, the individual will always appear miniscule, unimportant and horribly unpoetic.

Mill responds by contending, in partial agreement with the objectors, that in order to find something to satisfy our aspirations, we cannot depend upon the *single* human life. Lives end, and our awareness of death invariably destroys the aesthetically and ethically charged associations we might build around one life, unless we come to see that life as part of something larger which will persist. But rather than turn to God's providence for a meaningful context for the individual life, as Christians do, or to nature, as the Romantics do, Mill draws our attention to humanity at large: "Let it be remembered that if individual life is short, the life of the human species is not short; its indefinite duration is practically equivalent to endlessness; and being combined with indefinite capability of improvement, it offers to the imagination and sympathies a large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur of aspiration."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the problem that leads Mill to the idea of a Religion of Humanity can be understood as follows. Traditional religion is morally repugnant. Nevertheless, Mill took religion to be meeting genuine human needs. In order to serve those needs without relying on religion, he recommends idealizing earthly life. But the scope of a single life is not robust enough to sustain this idealization; it requires connecting the individual life to something beyond itself, namely humanity.

### 1.1 *Comte, Art, and Idealization*

Comte's endeavor to supplant traditional religion by substituting humanity for God as the object of worship acts as Mill's inspiration. A basic problem for the attempt to make of humanity a new God and to secure the relation of the individual to it, however, is that it is not readily apparent that humanity can or should generate feelings of veneration. Humanity can seem, in fact, to be a rather unlovely thing. War, evils (both extraordinary and banal), pettiness, selfishness: the catalogue of ugliness goes on and on.

<sup>14</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, X:419–20.

<sup>15</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, X:420.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Comte responds by emphasizing the need to *idealize* humanity through the powers of imagination and art. In *A General View of Positivism*, Comte shows how the imagination's idealization makes out of humanity an object worthy of veneration, thereby prompting the individual to understand herself and others as part of something greater, rather than as mere self-regarding individuals. It is the poet who serves to transform our conception of our individual life: "The poet is now called to his true mission, which is to give beauty and grandeur to human life, by inspiring a deeper sense of our relation to Humanity."<sup>17</sup>

Now, it is mistaken to think that our connection to humanity is simply manufactured by art—reason also gives us access to this new God. Unlike the familiar Christian God, humanity's existence can be established despite Positivism's epistemological demands: "It must not . . . be supposed that the new Supreme Being is, like the old, merely a subjective result of our powers of abstraction. Its existence is revealed to us, on the contrary, by close investigation of objective fact."<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, reason can take us only so far. In particular, for service to humanity to become an active part of an individual's ethical life, humanity must be taken up by art and made beautiful through idealization.

Art is defined "as an ideal representation of Fact" whose object "is to cultivate our sense of perfection."<sup>19</sup> By surpassing reality, art stimulates us to amend it.<sup>20</sup> "Its function is to construct types of the noblest kind, by the contemplation of which our feelings and thoughts may be elevated."<sup>21</sup>

The power of artistic imagination achieves the substitution of the Religion of Humanity for traditional religion by limiting what is included within the idea of humanity. Comte suggests elsewhere that 'humanity' does not comprise everyone who ever existed, but "those only who are really capable of assimilation, in virtue of a real co-operation on their part in furthering the common good."<sup>22</sup> The imagination acts selectively on the 'real' to present something better than the real, thereby directing our moral attention to the ennobling instead of the degrading.

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<sup>17</sup> Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism* [1848] (Dubuque, Iowa: Brown Reprints, 1971), 368.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 354. Mill's relation to the claim that humanity's existence is an "objective fact" remains more problematic than Comte's relation, because of Mill's commitment to "methodological individualism" in the social sciences. The most basic expression of this is his ranking of psychology over sociology. Comte's reversal of that ranking—his contention that man as a psychological being is derivative from man as a social being—leads him to ascribe greater ontological heft to Humanity than to the individual: "Man indeed, as an individual, cannot properly be said to exist, except in the exaggerated abstractions of modern metaphysicians. Existence in the true sense can only be predicated of Humanity" (354). This view creates problems for Mill's whole-hearted acceptance of Comte's Religion of Humanity. Mill cannot acknowledge the ontological status Comte gives to humanity. Since Humanity does not have the same status as a "fact" that it does in Comte's system, Mill must place more stress on the role of imagination. The facts for Mill (as for Bentham) are those of individual human beings (e.g., beliefs, desires, pains, pleasures)—all social facts are reducible to these and explainable by them. For an excellent discussion of these issues, see John Skorupski, *John Stuart Mill* (London: Routledge, 1989), 276.

<sup>19</sup> Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 300.

<sup>20</sup> Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 302.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> As quoted in T.R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 23. For another treatment of the Comtean idea of Humanity, see Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. 7.

### 1.2 *History as Manichean Drama*

This Comtean theme—artistic imagination as idealizing humanity into an object of veneration, suitable for replacing a traditional notion of God—is appropriated and adapted by Mill. However, for the Religion of Humanity to have its desired effects (i.e., promotion of a sense of duty to others and ennoblement of the individual's life), the new “God” that it offers cannot be beautiful and yet distant. A poetic idealization of humanity alone would be insufficient to improve attitudes and conduct.

The image of humanity that Mill paints has two primary characteristics which address this short-coming and which I will examine in turn. In this image, humanity (1) participates in an epic or drama which (2) has a destination that can be characterized as a Manichean triumph of good over evil. This picture of humanity is meant to draw the individual into identification with it, such that the narrative of the individual's life begins to incorporate and become a part of the story of humanity as a whole.

The ethical benefits of the new religion therefore depend on getting people to imagine humanity as a corporate being with a mission that they can promote, which itself depends upon utilizing the imaginative resources provided by history. This is not, of course, an uncommon occurrence when the “corporate being” is an institution like a business or a nation (as a worker at General Motors, for example, I might be brought into closer relation to the company by being exposed to an idealized corporate history and by having the company accentuate my importance in achieving the company's goals). Mill stresses these features of humanity because he marks them as central devices for furthering a proximate goal of a Religion of Humanity, namely, creating bonds between the individual and humanity at large. This is essential, in turn, for fostering the ethical cosmopolitanism necessary for utilitarianism and for promoting the happiness of individuals through the increased pleasures of fellow-feeling and through the richer sense of purpose in their lives.

#### 1.2.1 *Humanity's Epic/Drama*

By placing humanity within an epic or drama, Mill moves beyond a static idealization into a dynamic one. In so doing he provides narrative structure for humanity and situates it within a story of change and progress:

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. If we honour as we ought those who have served mankind in the past, we shall feel that we are also working for those benefactors by serving that to which their lives were devoted. And when reflection, guided by history, has taught us the intimacy of the connexion of every age of humanity with every other, making us see in the earthly destiny of mankind the playing out of a great drama, or the action of a prolonged epic, all the generations of mankind become indissolubly united into a single image, combining all the power over the mind of the idea of Posterity, with our best feelings towards the living world which surrounds us, and towards the predecessors who have made us what we are. That the ennobling power of this grand conception may have its full efficacy, we should, with M. Comte, regard the Grand Etre, Humanity, or Mankind, as composed,

in the past, solely of those who, in every age and variety of position, have played their part worthily in life. It is only thus restricted that the aggregate of our species becomes an object deserving our veneration. The unworthy members of it are best dismissed from our habitual thoughts; and the imperfections which adhered through life, even to those of the dead who deserve honourable remembrance, should be no further borne in mind than is necessary not to falsify our conception of facts.<sup>23</sup>

We should note a number of things about this long passage. First of all, it is through emphasizing humanity's participation in a drama or epic extended over time that we can see humanity as possessing some kind of unity. Humanity begins to appear as a "corporate being," rather than as a simple aggregate of individuals, when one begins to imagine it as having a destiny. In this way it becomes possible to "live in thought with the great dead" because one's activities, though on the surface very different from those of the admirable people of the past, can be construed as necessary for playing a role in the same drama of humanity. One does not simply speak and do; one has lines and a part.

Next, it is revealing that Mill invokes the metaphors of drama and epic when speaking about the "Grand Etre" that is the object of worship in the Religion of Humanity. As we have seen, Mill is working to substitute a poetic for a religious mentality by means of a carefully modulated use of the imagination. The cravings met by the drama of traditional Christianity (e.g., the story of Christ and of the activities of a transcendent God) are now to be addressed by a new, humanist drama (e.g., the story of humanity's progress).

Third, reason or science's goal in looking at history is to explain its course by isolating the cause and effect relationships at work in, say, the fall of the Roman Empire or in the French Revolution. It attends selectively to the facts, but always in service to explanation. For a perspective on history to be psychologically and motivationally viable, however, the imagination must operate selectively on the facts for ethical rather than explanatory purposes. The imagination idealizes these facts so that the motivational associations remain stable. In this particular case, we concentrate on ideal examples of humanity, filtering out those undoubtedly more numerous members of the race who remain infelicitous objects of imaginative concern and unwelcome co-workers in a grand project, and then proceed to construct a 'drama' or 'epic' for this humanity. Idealizing in this way makes the humanity which is to be an object of veneration into something more attractive to us, i.e. more prone to elicit pleasurable associations.

### 1.2.2 *Humanity's Destination and Manichean Struggle*

The ultimate goals of promoting utilitarian virtue and of ennobling the life of the individual (thereby avoiding the spiritual impoverishment in which self-regard and instrumental, contractual relations with others dominate life) depend upon getting individuals to incorporate their own life narratives into the story of humanity. This is facilitated when one recognizes that there is a *point* to humanity's drama—that the drama has a destination and meaning. In his "Guizot's Essays and Lectures on History" (1845), Mill contrasts the English and Continental minds

<sup>23</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, X:334.



by appeal to “their respective literatures” and suggests that the higher tone of the Continental mind can be explained by the pervasiveness of the idea of a destination to history:

Certain conceptions of history considered as a whole, some notions of a progressive unfolding of the capabilities of humanity—of a tendency of man and society towards some distant result—of a *destination*, as it were, of humanity—pervade, in its whole extent, the popular literature of France. Every newspaper, every literary review or magazine, bears witness of such notions. They are always turning up accidentally, when the writer is ostensibly engaged with something else; or showing themselves as a background behind the opinions which he is immediately maintaining. When the writer's mind is not of a high order, these notions are crude and vague; but they are evidentiary of a tone of thought which has prevailed so long among the superior intellects, as to have spread from them to others, and become the general property of the nation.<sup>24</sup>

The Continental mind, then, consistently expresses a sense that the story of humanity is one of meaningful—and progressive—change.

It is not, however, that we must merely accept, as a fact of social science, that there is some kind of destination for history, some goal of progress. There is no such fact to be had in the strict sense (thus the “as it were” which qualifies “destination”).<sup>25</sup> Moreover, even if it were a fact, there are innumerable facts about the universe which we accept—like the velocity of the moon or the developmental stages of a frog—that do little to change or influence our self-understanding.

Rather, we have to be able to assign humanity's drama and its apparent destination importance for our own lives, in order for them to affect our feelings and to be a “background” for our interpretations. Accepting humanity's *telos* as in some way our own depends upon recognizing this destination as one to which we seem to be able to contribute and one whose achievement we may promote. That means that, though we do not need to envision all our actions as directly in service to this end, we see it as permeating our lives and as giving our lives meaning and direction. This attitude towards life is what makes the utilitarian agent discussed in chapter three of *Utilitarianism* possible.

Mill proceeds in the late “Inaugural Address” to suggest how, if this *telos* is to benefit ethically the individual, one should conceive of the point of this history, namely, as a Manichean struggle between good and evil. In outlining the ideals for a university education, he suggests that a Professor of History has a responsibility to present his subject in a manner that encourages imaginative engagement by the student. The goal is

to make him [the student] take interest in history not as a mere narrative, but as a chain of causes and effects still unwinding itself before his eyes, and full of momentous consequences to himself and his descendants; the unfolding of a great epic or dramatic action, to terminate in the happiness or misery, the elevation or degradation, of the human race; an unremitting conflict between good and evil powers, of

<sup>24</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, XX:260–61. See also Mill's essay on Coleridge (X:39), in which he claims that the series of writers and thinkers from Herder to Michelet “by making the facts and events of the past have a meaning and an intelligible place in the gradual evolution of humanity, have at once given history, even to the imagination, an interest like romance.”

<sup>25</sup> For a helpful discussion of Mill's views on history and progress, see Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 194–99, 391–92.

which every act done by any of us, insignificant as we are, forms one of the incidents; a conflict in which even the smallest of us cannot escape from taking part, in which whoever does not help the right side is helping the wrong, and for our share in which, whether it be greater or smaller, and let its actual consequences be visible or in the main invisible, no one of us can escape the responsibility.<sup>26</sup>

This lofty Manichean/Zoroastrian version of history and of the nature of human progress reveals that history is not just a science.<sup>27</sup> It has an important ethical purpose, which involves situating the student within a story (not a mere retelling of past events, but a continuing drama or epic).<sup>28</sup> It is the story of an idealized humanity in which we may insert ourselves as a protagonist using the imagination, no matter how humble our status in life.<sup>29</sup> In so doing, we come to see others as potential compatriots in a grand project, thereby encouraging a sense of responsibility towards them beyond what justice and the contractual dictate. We also come to identify ourselves with a form of life which takes place on a temporal and communal scale different from that found in the ordinary run of things (i.e., the “prose of human life”). This promotes a tone of mind imbued with a sense of the world-historical relevance of even the smallest activities. Actions not only originate from nobler motives than they had before, they are also placed within a very different context (e.g., as serving the goals of humanity rather than merely the goals of the self). It is precisely the kind of spirit which, for Mill and other nineteenth century intellectuals, is absent from the common English sensibility, and for utilitarian moral reform to be successful, the ethically charged narratives of the Religion of Humanity must begin to permeate the self-narratives of the citizenry.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, XXI:244.

<sup>27</sup> This historical ‘Manicheanism’ should be distinguished from the more metaphysically robust religious Manicheanism, for which the evidence is “too shadowy and unsubstantial” (*Collected Works*, X:425).

<sup>28</sup> Bentham’s dismissal of history, and especially of its ethical value, is summed up nicely by Winch: “Bentham remained largely indifferent to much that had preoccupied Scottish historians of civil society, the origins of historical development of forms of law and government: he saw some merit in the work of Ferguson and Kames, but history was more often regarded by Bentham not merely as a record of error (what it could also be to Scottish historians), but as a record of *uninstructive* error, constantly in danger of succumbing to the Chinese or Blackstonian disease of ancestor-worship.” See Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 94.

<sup>29</sup> The idea that one may be a protagonist or agent no matter what one’s social standing indicates imagination’s potential for erasing fundamental class conflict from public life. This has obvious political implications, some of them strongly conservative. For a treatment of this general issue, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> Though central, this is not the only requirement of utilitarian moral reform. For Mill, unlike for Comte, the Religion of Humanity has *no* institutional structure or associated ritual. This distances it further from traditional Christianity (not simply in the form of a doctrine, but as a set of practices) and from its status as a religion at all (rather than as an ethical ideal, which is how I think it should be understood). It is a religion, in other words, only in name (though the name “Religion of Humanity” undoubtedly served valuable polemical functions in both France and England by, among other things, provoking opponents). Lacking institutions, the Religion of Humanity’s ethical importance is of a largely intellectual and imaginative variety.

The institutional structures and rituals meant to further the development of utilitarian agents do not come from a humanist religion, but from the economic realm (e.g., the worker cooperatives recommended in the *Principles of Political Economy*) and from civil society (e.g., the family reformed along lines argued for in the *Subjection of Women*). An exhaustive treatment of the Religion of Humanity

## 2. BENTHAM'S CHALLENGE TO THE ETHICAL USE OF IMAGINATION

### 2.1 *Bentham*

Mill's advocacy for the Religion of Humanity is also an advocacy for the ethical importance of the imagination. That religion is effective only insofar as the imagination can generate the kind of narrative we have just outlined. Interestingly, this position on the ethical value of the imagination developed out of an intellectual environment which was quite hostile to the imagination's ethical claims. Bentham's and the early (mid- 1820's) Benthamite *Westminster* Reviewers' anti-aestheticism reflects a fundamental suspicion of the imagination. Though Bentham's views on art have been often taken as a somewhat humorous example of his eccentricity, they pose a serious challenge to Mill.

Putting aside Mill's apologetics, Thomas contends that the *Westminster* utilitarians were of the mind that the arts should be measured using the rulers of truth and utility:

John Mill later wrote as if the popular notion of a Benthamite as an enemy of poetry derived from a single sentence in an article, by Peregrine Bingham on the poet Thomas Moore, whom Bingham had called "a poet, and therefore . . . *not* a reasoner." Actually the *Westminster* attacked imaginative literature on a much wider front than this implies. Its writers showed a puritanical dislike of any literature which set out to entertain and amuse. Poetry was tried by a severe utilitarian test.<sup>31</sup>

The utilitarians expected that good art would either produce pleasure or would have to be appropriately didactic if it pretended to serve any positive function at all. In the latter case, it would instruct the reader (the arts of greatest concern were literary) and promote their acceptance of scientific truth and of the principle of utility. Art's persistent tossing off of these shackles made it an object of deep suspicion among those associated with the *Westminster*. From their point-of-view, the mere deviation of these works of art from treatise form did not imply that new means of evaluation were called for. One genre is as susceptible to judgments of truth and falsity as any other genre, and must rise to that standard.

Any writing of the period claiming to be a criticism of the *Westminster* and of Bentham seemed to abide by an unspoken rule that it must expose their disgraceful philistinism. Hazlitt, Macaulay and Carlyle all found time for more than one version of this attack. Dickens and Arnold gave it succor through the century. The radicals' position elicited accusations of inhumanity, coldness, and lack of respect for the sacred and venerable.<sup>32</sup>

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in Mill would have to examine how the sensibility deriving from the Religion's view of humanity and its history supports such economic and civil institutions, and, perhaps more importantly, how it garners support from them.

The recognition that Mill's version of the Religion of Humanity lacks an institutional structure brings into question attempts to take this religion as a sign of an anti-liberal tendency in Mill (which may still be there, but which cannot depend on the evidence of his religious views) and efforts to interpret him as supporting a type of civil religion.

<sup>31</sup> William Thomas, *The Philosophic Radicals: Nine Studies in Theory and Practice 1817-1841* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 161.

<sup>32</sup> These same barbs that were tossed at the *Westminster* set had been thrown against the English Jacobins of the late eighteenth century. See Thomas, *The Philosophic Radicals*, 163.

The cadre of people who were associated with the new review had good reason to be suspicious of the imagination, however. For Bentham, whose overriding focus is on improving our everyday existence—our day-to-day experience of pleasures and pains—and who has a very pragmatic and un-romantic view of human life, a basic problem with the imagination is that it can veil the truth about how the features of actions or states of affairs contribute to well-being. It acts to confound reform by, among other things, hiding the insidious workings of class and religious interests behind a curtain of tradition. As Bentham had begun to show 50 years earlier in his *Fragment on Government*, and continued to demonstrate through the time during which the *Westminster Review* was founded, the imagination is responsible for propping up injustice.<sup>33</sup> It frequently acts to distort judgments of value, by making some pleasures or pains seem more or less important than they really are (e.g., aristocrats' playing down the sufferings of the poor). Rather than indulging the imagination through the arts, we need to tame it through the disciplined use of reason, which helps us to recognize what really moves people and to see which consequences tend to result from which actions. The imagination is more often than not a luxury of the powerful that the powerless can ill afford, because the stories which the imagination is likely to tell will rarely be reformist ones.

Illustrative examples of how the imagination could be employed by the forces of reaction can be found in the attacks on industrial society by various poets and critics throughout the 19th century, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Ruskin. A fascinating exemplification of this comes from a book written by Southey called *Sir Thomas More; or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, in which he attacks the "manufacturing system" while fondly hearkening back to medieval England by invoking the ghost of More. Macaulay, in a biting review of the work, discusses a telling section which it is worth quoting at length:

We remained a while in silence looking upon the assemblage of dwellings below. Here, and in the adjoining hamlet of Millbeck, the effects of manufactures and of agriculture may be seen and compared. The old cottages are such as the poet and the painter equally delight in beholding. Substantially built of the native stone without mortar, dirtied with no white lime, and their long low roofs covered with slate, if they had been raised by the magic of some indigenous Amphion's music, the materials could not have adjusted themselves more beautifully in accord with the surrounding scene; and time has still further harmonized them with weather stains, lichens, and moss, short grasses, and short fern, and stone-plants of various kinds . . . the garden beside, the bee-hives, and the orchard with its bank of daffodils and snow-drops, the earliest and the profusest in these parts, indicate in the owners some portion of ease and leisure, some regard to neatness and comfort, some sense of natural, and innocent, and healthful enjoyment. The new cottages of the manufacturers are upon the manufacturing pattern—naked, and in a row.

"How is it," said I, "that everything which is connected with manufactures presents such features of unqualified deformity? From the largest of Mammon's temples down to the poorest hovel in which his helotry are stalled, these edifices have all one

<sup>33</sup> An example of this is given in Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), where he argues that maxims like *Delegatus non potest delegare* and *Fiat Justitia, ruat coelum*, are examples of the corrupting power of the imagination. In both of these cases, the "music of the maxim, absorbing the whole imagination" drowns "the cries of humanity along with the dictates of common sense" (22).

character. Time will not mellow them; nature will neither clothe nor conceal them; and they will remain always so offensive to the eye as to the mind."<sup>34</sup>

Macaulay's response is pithy: "Mr. Southey has found out a way he tells us, in which the effects of manufactures and agriculture may be compared. And what is this way? To stand on a hill, to look at a cottage and a factory, and to see which is prettier."<sup>35</sup> The exchange makes clear what manifestations of imagination and aesthetic sensibility the utilitarians (and as Macaulay demonstrates, some of the Whigs) were fighting against.

This example confronts Mill with a basic problem, however. If, as we have seen, the construction of specific and ethically useful narratives by the imagination is the precondition for the utilitarian agent possessing a 'high tone of mind,' then how are we to distinguish between dangerous and desirable performances by the imagination? How can we know if an appeal to imagination such as is made by the Religion of Humanity is inappropriate?

### 2.2 *Mill's Reply to the Benthamite Challenge*

Talk of an idealized humanity and the Manichean drama of its development, therefore, should trigger a Benthamite response to Mill that many twenty-first century thinkers would second: "Isn't all this simply false? Isn't all this talk of humanity's history as a drama in which good battles evil just a mere fable?"

Both Comte and Mill believe that reason and imagination can harmonize—they need not be in opposition. Both also support the authority of reason, namely, that imagination must give way before evidence. Mill nevertheless defends the principle that, when reason is silent, imagination can operate freely of truth as long as it refuses to produce clear falsehood. It remains free to serve ends other than that of truth, including ethical, aesthetic and religious ones, and it does so by making its object more or less attractive to the imaginer. The most thorough treatment of this issue in Mill can be found in the essay "Utility of Religion" and in the concluding section of "Theism," the last of his three essays on Religion.

In the final part of "Theism," after having determined that "the rational attitude of a thinking mind towards the supernatural, whether in natural or in revealed religion, is that of scepticism as distinguished from belief on the one hand, and from atheism on the other" and that "there is evidence, but insufficient for proof, and amounting only to one of the lower degrees of probability" for the existence of God, Mill observes that the "whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of Belief into that of simple Hope."<sup>36</sup> That is, the supernatural is not amenable to truth claims. This leads to the question "whether the indulgence of hope, in a region of imagination merely, in which there is no prospect that any probable grounds of expectation will ever be obtained, is irrational, and ought to be discouraged as a departure from the rational principle of

<sup>34</sup> Robert Southey, *Sir Thomas More: Or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1829), I:173–74.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, 2 vols. (London: Everyman's Library, 1937), II:198.

<sup>36</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, X:482–83.

regulating our feelings as well as opinions strictly by evidence.”<sup>37</sup> To provide an answer to this, what we need to find are the principles “which ought to govern the cultivation and the regulation of the imagination,” which form a subject that “has never yet engaged the serious consideration of philosophers, though some opinion on it is implied in almost all modes of thinking on human character and education.”<sup>38</sup>

His conclusion is that the principle which ought to regulate the imagination is that “literal truth of facts is not the only thing to be considered.”<sup>39</sup> Whether or not, for example, a set of associations is degrading or ennobling should also count for consideration. Associations, in other words, need not only be organized by epistemological principles; they may be in service to ethical or aesthetic principles as well. We should be open to letting the imagination dwell on those possibilities (e.g. a destination for humanity in history) which are the “most comforting” and the “most improving,” “without in the least degree overrating the solidity of the grounds for expecting that these rather than any others will be the possibilities actually realized.”<sup>40</sup>

An example Mill gives is that of cheerfulness. What is a cheerful disposition, he asks, “but the tendency, either from constitution of habit, to dwell chiefly on the brighter side both of the present and of the future?”<sup>41</sup> Cheerfulness involves, in other words, a selective filtering by the imagination (notice the similarity to the process of idealizing humanity): “if every aspect, whether agreeable or odious, of every thing, ought to occupy exactly the same place in our imagination which it fills in fact, and therefore ought to fill in our deliberate reason, what we call a cheerful disposition would be but one of the forms of folly.”<sup>42</sup> The way the cheerful person views the world is not justified epistemically, but ethically. Mill is quick to point out that cheerfulness need not compromise one’s necessary attentiveness to the evils of the world—evils that need to be addressed by good people.<sup>43</sup> But to dwell on the evils of life, or to focus on meanness or baseness, “makes it scarcely possible to keep up in oneself a high tone of mind.”<sup>44</sup> “The imagination and feelings become tuned to a lower pitch; degrading instead of elevating associations become connected with the daily objects and incidents of life, and give their colour to the thoughts, just as associations of sensuality do in those who

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 483.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 483.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> The congruence of imagination with truth is emphasized by Mill in the *Autobiography* in a discussion of his disputes with Roebuck on the importance of the arts:

“It was in vain I urged on him that the imaginative emotion which an idea, when vividly conceived, excites in us, is not an illusion but a fact, as real as any of the other qualities of objects; and far from implying anything erroneous and delusive in our mental apprehension of the object, is quite consistent with our most accurate knowledge and most perfect practical recognition of all its physical and intellectual laws and relations. The intensest feeling of the beauty of a cloud lighted by the setting sun, is no hindrance to my knowing that the cloud is vapour of water, subject to all the laws of vapours in a state of suspension; and I am just as likely to allow for, and act on, these physical laws whenever there is occasion to do so, as if I had been incapable of perceiving any distinction between beauty and ugliness.” (*Collected Works*, I:157)

<sup>44</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, X:484.

indulge freely in that sort of contemplations."<sup>45</sup> This is what it means to have one's imagination corrupted. Associations, instead of being directed to the ideal, lead instead to the low and base. By doing so, they fail to meet the need for those "ideal conceptions grander and more beautiful that we see realized in the prose of everyday life."<sup>46</sup>

The key issue, however, is what distinguishes the idealizations of the imagination sanctioned by Mill (e.g., humanity, the world of the cheerful person, etc.) from the idealizations of pre-industrial England provided by Southey, Carlyle, and others, or from the idealizations of the relations between the rich and the working classes discussed by Mill in his *Principles of Political Economy*.<sup>47</sup> What distinguishes them is that in the former instances, according to Mill, reason does not reject the images constructed by the imagination. It provides a check on the activity of the imagination by means of the sciences it supports—particularly the moral sciences treated in Book VI of the *System of Logic*. It is, for example, through the science of history and rigorous research that we discern whether or not an historical claim stands well justified or floats on wistful nostalgia.

It is one thing to be able to rule out images and stories that conflict in some way with scientific fact or law, however, and another thing to provide justification for images and stories for or against which there is little or no evidence. Mill is clearly uneasy with the status of the latter, which include an idealized humanity.

Though the comparison should be drawn with many qualifications, it is fruitful to think of Mill's difficulties here as paralleling the problems which faced Kant and which led him to his postulates of practical reason.<sup>48</sup> For both, ethical life without the resources of traditional religion remains under threat, and a pressing difficulty for the ethicist is to defend ethical life while avoiding theoretically indemonstrable claims. They both, in different ways, eschew theoretical or scientific justifications of their "postulates" for the sake of ethical or practical ones (while at the same time ruling out various alternatives that make claims which go beyond what experience can justify).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 484–85.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>47</sup> In the *Principles*, Mill states that many of the rich want to be "*in loco parentis* to the poor, guiding and restraining them like children" ([John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy: Books IV and V* [Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970], Bk. IV, ch. 7]. This leads him to the following attack on a particular kind of idealization: "This is the ideal of the future, in the minds of those whose dissatisfaction with the present assumes the form of affection and regret towards the past. Like other ideals, it exercises an unconscious influence on the opinions and sentiments of numbers who never consciously guide themselves by any ideal. It has also this in common with other ideals, that it has never been historically realized. It makes its appeal to our imaginative sympathies in the character of a restoration of the good times of our forefathers. But no times can be pointed out in which the higher classes of this or any other country performed a part even distantly resembling the one assigned to them in this theory. It is an idealization, grounded on the conduct and character of here and there an individual. All privileged and powerful classes, as such, have used their power in the interest of their own selfishness, and have indulged their self-importance in despising, and not in lovingly caring for, those who were in their estimation, degraded by being under the necessity of working for their benefit." What we should take from this is Mill's continued wariness of the imaginative activity of idealization.

<sup>48</sup> For Kant's discussion of the postulates, see the *Critique of Practical Reason* (5:122ff.). Section 87 in the *Critique of Judgment* is also pertinent, especially his account of the moral problems faced by the righteous man (he uses Spinoza as an example) who reveres the moral law but does not believe in God (5:452–53).

Mill's treatment of this subject is much more *ad hoc* than Kant's; it attributes importance to religion for moral psychological reasons rather than because practical reason demands it (the postulates act as conditions for the possibility of the highest good); and Kant would, perhaps rightly, claim that Mill's own position is untenable without the rejection of empiricism and the acceptance of the phenomenal/noumenal distinction. Moreover, Kant defends something much more religiously orthodox than does Mill. Nevertheless, given the frequent contrasts drawn between their moral theories, it is revealing to note their similarity in defending the importance of a religious sensibility for ethical life, especially when that defense comes in the face of many—including Bentham, the atheists of the radical French enlightenment, and the eighteenth century's version of Spinoza—who denied that very thing.

### 3. CONCLUSION

We comprehend Mill's emphases on the Religion of Humanity and on the ethical value of imagination best when we recognize their importance in constructing a compelling humanist narrative. For Mill, to avoid the malaise and self-regard identified by critics of industrialization requires a capacity to understand life in a manner that transcends the realm of ordinary human transactions. It requires more than science and fact could offer. People like Carlyle and Coleridge understood much better than Bentham and his followers, Mill felt, that humans rarely flourish in a world which, though eminently practical and efficient, finds its ideals in the paltry and profane. This led Carlyle and others, however, into what Mill considered to be an unfortunate religious and metaphysical mysticism. The pressing issue was how to encourage a moral psychology suitable to utilitarian morality (i.e. how to instill a "high tone of mind" beneficial to the individual and a motivational disposition to consider the well-being of different people as having equal value), without sacrificing the authority of our reason and without reverting to conservative social policy or a traditional religious position that depended on discredited metaphysical and ethical views. How does one, in other words, encourage reverence for humanity without relying on nostalgia or mystery (a mystery that can easily slide into superstition)?

Mill's hopes rested on the narratives provided by an imagination drawing on the resources of the Religion of Humanity. These narratives act to infuse our world with possibility, with awareness that it could be otherwise (and better). It promotes a new, joyful sense of our lives and our actions as having a relation to the sacred—not because we are the creatures of a transcendent God, but because we are a part of something greater than ourselves, namely an idealized humanity. We can come to see our conduct as in partnership with those ideal figures whom we admire and who have prominent roles in the drama of humanity's historical development. In so doing, we are meant to achieve the "idealization of our earthly life, the cultivation of a high conception of what *it* may be made."<sup>49</sup>

One wonders, given the seemingly ineliminable attractiveness of more specific narratives (i.e., those concerning family, tribe, nation, religion), if Mill's hopes

<sup>49</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, X:420.



were realistic. Perhaps he has tumbled from optimism into naïveté. Our rejection of this naïveté may explain why the most compelling psychological foundation for ethical universalism is now often taken to be recognition of the shared possibility of suffering—recognition of, as Rorty puts it, “similarities with respect to pain and humiliation.”<sup>50</sup> I recognize you as worthy of moral consideration because you are able to suffer as I do. An important question for us raised by Mill’s somewhat odd discussion of the Religion of Humanity is the following: What do we lose, if anything, by trading Mill’s grand foundation of human solidarity for a less sweeping, more limited one?<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 192.

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