

### **3 John Stuart Mill as an Anti-Intuitionist Social Reformer**

“ With respect, then, to the discredit into which old institutions and old doctrines have fallen, I may premise, that this discredit is, in my opinion, perfectly deserved.” (J.S. Mill, *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 8)

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The central issue surrounding John Stuart Mill and intuition is his reaction to the doctrine known as intuitionism. Intuitionism is more than a belief, acknowledgment, or appreciation for human intuition. Intuitionism is a doctrine claiming that human beings have a unique faculty for intuition through which we can instantaneously know right from wrong, good from evil. At the extreme, intuitionists claim that intuitions are infallible. Mill's contention is that intuitionism was used to justify the status quo and was the 'trojan horse' for prejudice and authoritarianism.

Modern intuitionism is a reaction to Thomas Hobbes' belief that human beings are materialistic, egoistic, and driven by self-interest, and that morality is relative to what an individual or a society finds good or pleasurable, and bad or painful (Hudson, 1980). The intuitionists maintained that human beings are motivated by self-interest, benevolence, and duty; that morality is absolute and universal like the axioms of geometry, and known through intuition. Early intuitionists included the Cambridge Platonists Ralph Cudsworth (1617-88), Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), and Adam Smith's teacher Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746). The intuitionists which Mill responded to were those of the late 18<sup>th</sup>. century to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup>: Thomas Reid (1710-96), William Whewell (1794-1866), and William Hamilton (1788-1856). Intuitionism was one of the two leading philosophies during John Stuart Mill's lifetime. The other was empiricism -- Mill's preference. Mill was a leading anti-intuitionist during his lifetime, and his anti-intuitionism was a backdrop for some of his his economic and other related writings.

##### **3.1.1 Mill and Intuition**

The fact that Mill's own life was turned 'upside down' (at least) twice by his own intuitions often goes unnoticed. The first occurred in the autumn of 1826, at the onset of Mill's famous mental crises. Mill was educated by his father to be the perfect rational human being, and to deeply discount emotions. Mill does not mention his mother even once in his *Autobiography*. Did Mill have a mother? Of course, and her name is Harriet. Yet, he says, "I was born in London, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, 1806, and was the eldest son of James Mill, the author of *The History of British India*"

(Mill, 1964, p. 26). In his *Autobiography* he mentions never having a childhood, toys, or friends his own age, and that he was so accustomed to hearing his father tell him what to do that his conscience spoke to him in his father's voice (Mill, 1978c, vol. 1, p. 613). The question Mill asked himself on that fateful day in 1826, as well as the answer he received from inside himself are often quoted. What is overlooked is that his answer is what we would refer to as an intuition. Mill asks himself, "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" (Mill, 1964, p. 107). The voice was instantaneous, distinct or clear, irrepressible or non-analytical, in short an intuition.

Two years later in 1828, Mill had what we might consider another intuition, some might prefer the word insight, one which brought him out of his depression. "I was reading, accidentally, Marmontel's *Memoires*, and came to the passage which relates his father's death, the distressed position of the family, and the sudden inspiration by which he, then a mere boy, felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them – would supply the place of all that they had lost. A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment my burden grew lighter" (ibid, p. 111). The boy in the story had a *sudden inspiration*, and Mill himself had a *clear image* of the boy's sudden inspiration. We could say, in effect, that the boy's intuition inspired Mill's intuition. I'm neither a psychologist nor a psychiatrist, which is perhaps why my interpretation of this seems intuitively obvious. Reading *Memoires*, Mill pictures his dead father and he taking care of his family, and lo, he emerges out of his depression. Enough said, except Mill probably would have referred to his response as being the result of an inference, not an intuition.

After his bout with depression Mill began to read poetry and listen to music, and recognize the value of emotions and intuition. He said of Thomas Carlyle, "...he was a man of intuition, which I was not; and that as such, not only saw many things long before me, which I could only when they were pointed out to me, hobble after and prove, but that it was highly probable that he could see many things which were not visible to me even after they were pointed out" (ibid, pp. 132-33). In 1833, Mill, with his depression behind him wrote an essay titled "What is Poetry?" In the essay Mill claims that distinguishing the 'testimony' of consciousness" from rapid inferences, and "distinguishing whether that of which the mind is conscious be an eternal truth, or but a dream," are among the greatest accomplishments of the "most

matured and ‘perfect’ intellect” (Mill, 1978, vol 1, p. 355?). So it is possible to distinguish (real) intuitions from inferences, even though, by definition, it is a difficult task for most persons. Mill then says that poets and other writers “confines himself altogether to intuitive truths” (ibid., p. 355). But just when you think he may be going ‘soft’ he continues by saying that writers express intuitive truths with words chosen on the basis of “acquired notions,” analysis, and life experiences (ibid., p. 355). Therefore, intuitions exist but are expressed through words chosen by inference.

However, when Mill speaks about his beloved Harriet Taylor he seems to be more definite that intuitions are real. According to Mill, Taylor was “a woman of deep and strong feeling, of penetrating and intuitive intelligence, and of an eminently meditative and poetic nature” (ibid., p. 139). While Mill says that she and he came to similar conclusions on different issues, she “reached her opinions by the moral intuition of a character of strong feeling” while Mill used analysis (ibid., p. 141). Thus, Mill was clearly not opposed to the concept of intuition, per-se. He was, however, of two minds on the subject. On the one hand he considered Thomas Carlyle to be “a man of intuition,” and he gushed on about the intuitive, and intellectual qualities of Harriet Taylor. On the other hand, he believed that what most people consider to be intuition is in reality inferences born of sensations.

In *A System of Logic*, he says that “truths are known to us in two ways: some are known directly, and of themselves; some through the medium of other truths. The former are the subject of *intuition* or *consciousness*; the latter, of *inference*” (Mill, 1970, p. 3). What we know intuitively is gained without any previous knowledge, and are beyond question. The importance of truths known intuitively is that they are the “original premises from which all others are inferred” (ibid., p. 3). Our ability to establish any truths through reasoning requires that our premises are true, and this is possible because of the truths known intuitively. Examples might include estimating distances by eyesight, or perceptions of colors. However, Mill insists that most of what we believe to be an intuition is, in reality, an inference drawn from experience.

Estimating distance by eyesight, for example, had been considered by many to be an intuition, but according to Mill has been proved to be an inference. What the eye sees is a combination of a sensation and inferences made from those sensations (Mill, 1978a, vol 11, p. 250). Others have said that this inference is itself, an intuition. Unraveling this is not the subject of this book. Whatever is the ultimate truth about the mechanics of sight, Mill concedes that perceptions of color are intuitions.

### **3.2 Mill on Intuitionism**

Various intuitionists could agree on several things. First, the physical world "masks" an underlying spiritual or ideal reality (August, 1975, 28). This spiritual reality and the truths it holds is accessible to the individual through intuition. Man is not a *tabula rosa* at birth. To the contrary, intuitionism posits that Man has knowledge which is independent of observation and sense experience, independent of deduction and induction. Second, physical things are composed of qualities, which are known intuitively, and which reveal that things nature, purpose, and meaning. William Hamilton, a leading intuitionist of the time believed that we perceive *directly* through *intuition* the "essence" of things, or their "essential attributes" (Mill, 1978d, p.16). Third, one of the things we perceive directly is morality, right and wrong. Intuitionism's view of morality is that it is *a priori* or self-evident (Mill, 1978d, p. 170). That is, right and wrong is beyond doubt and need not be proved. In addition, right and wrong is a quality of something and independent of its consequences or (dis) utility. And, intuition is infallible, innate and a distinct faculty of knowing, one separate from the intellect (Hudson, 1980, p. 3). Intuition is thus the source and justification of moral principles and judgments. William Hamilton believed that "what is given in consciousness" – what we know intuitively -- is "a decision without appeal" (Mill, 1978d, p. 126).

Fourth, we must do what our intuition reveals to be right. William Whewell, another leading intuitionist of the time stated that morale behavior means "that we must do what is right at whatever cost. That an action is right, is a reason for doing it...It is painful...It is a loss....It is unkind; but it is right: therefore we must do it. These are *self-evident* propositions. That a thing is right, is a *supreme* reason for doing it..." (Donner, 1991, p. 33). Whewell preferred *a priori* morality or what he called the "internal principle" (Mill, 1978e, p.171) to utilitarian morality, what he deemed to be the use of external objects as the basis for morale judgments. He wanted morality grounded on "conscience", a "moral faculty", and the "superiority of reason to desire" (Mill, 1978e, 171-72). Only intuition "can see what is right; alone can understand that there is such a character as rightness" (Donner, 1991, 33). The moral dimension of intuition is to guide us in the "supreme" rule of human action - to do the right and avoid what's wrong.

Fifth, the source of our intuitions is God. According to Whewell, moral intuition is the faculty which perceives the eternal and non-changing ideas of right as they exist in the mind of God and it is also the source of rules for the other parts of human nature. What consciousness reveals to us is not a means to an end, i.e., happiness, but an end in itself. Intuitionists see a world where

truths exist waiting to be discovered -- by intuition. Coming from God, the intuitionists believed that our intuitions and proclamations about morality come from the "general voice of mankind." Intuition and morality, therefore, have aspects of a public good. Our moral faculty gives the same answer to all persons, are self-evident and universal, known by all, in all societies, and in all times (Bryson, 1968, pp. 13-14). More than this, they also assumed that everything worth knowing can be known and verified by all persons, and that all "truths" beyond the grasp of the majority are unimportant and probably not true. True intuitions are thus the intuitions, not of a single individual, but a truth which is part of "universal human nature" (Mill, 1978e, p. 187).

Intuition will lead our actions to be in conformity with the "eternal and immutable rule of right", or the "law of nature", or the "fitness of things" (ibid, p. 178). More than that, intuition is the basis of both belief and knowledge - the knowledge of individual things, of morality, of the underlying "superior unity" (Mill, 1978e, p. 36) within which all things exist, and knowledge of God.

### 3.2.1 Mill on Intuitionism

To put it mildly, there was a "natural hostility" (Nicholson, 1998, p. 464) between social reformers (Mill) and intuitionists. According to Mill, intuitionism is "a philosophy which discourages the explanation of feelings and moral facts.... and prefers to treat them as ultimate elements of human nature. It is also a philosophy which is addicted to holding up favorite doctrines as intuitive truths, and deems intuition as the voice of God, speaking with an authority higher than that of our reason" (Robinson, 1982, pp. 464-65). Mill had many specific objections to intuitionism.

First, he objected to intuitionism's tendency to regard "all the marked distinctions of human character as innate, and in the main indelible..." (Nicholson, 1998, p. 465). Mill's belief was that the greater part of differences among the races or between genders is produced by differences in circumstances. And these differences in character can be changed by social institutions and politics. Intuitionism's belief in the innateness of human character is according to Mill "one of the chief hindrances to the rational treatment of great social questions, an upholder of conservative doctrines, and one of the greatest stumbling blocks to human improvement" (ibid, p. 465). On the other hand, intuitionism's deification of both habit and opinion, interpreted the existing order as being the natural order, maintained that what *is*, is what *must be*, and hence equated change with criminality (Donner, 1991, p. 35).

The intuitionists' intuitions "revealed" that women are "naturally" less intelligent than men, that Blacks are "naturally" childish, and that the Irish are "naturally" lazy (August, 1975, p. 106). Why fight for social equality if women and Blacks aren't able to function as equals with White males? Why help the poor if they "naturally" reproduce at an unsustainable rate? Mill was persistent and adamant that an appeal to intuition is actually a disguise for one's own prejudices and uncritical feelings (Donner, 1991, p. 34).

A second objection is that intuitionism lacks progressiveness. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Anglican Church, and Universities such as Oxford and Cambridge were bastions of intuitionism and opponents of utilitarianism. The Church's opposition was so strong that they considered the concept of utility as a threat to their teachings and labeled it as a "deadly heresy" (Mill, 1978e, p. 170). Mill's view of English universities was that they were headed by persons who, while presumably being the "guides and governors" of mankind, were actually tied to required but outworn opinions based on faith and authority rather than facts of the physical world. Such men, he says, are neither philosophers nor teachers of philosophers, and neither education, a

strengthening of the mind, nor truth will ever be the outcome of their work. Their philosophies (including intuitionism) are but props of the "doctrines to which they are pledged" (ibid, p. 168). Mill maintained that their doctrines were behind the times and hence their doctrines (including intuitionism) tended to arrest rather than promote progress. Mill the reformer simply denied that what *is* means what *must be*. Mill points out that the history of science has seen case after case of supposed truths later proved false or impossible. Mill the empiricist denied that an individual can be directly -- intuitively -- aware of external objects, because he believes that only sense experience is a valid source of knowledge. We can know nothing more than what the senses allow, and nature has not given us any other vehicle for knowing. Therefore, there isn't any knowledge which is distinct from sensation. Thus he also denies that an irresistible belief must be innate or intuitive. And, in general, he denies that any self-evident principles exist. For Mill what is taken to be intuitive and self-evident is actually custom and prejudice, rationales for the protection of the status quo.

A third objection is intuitionism's apparent lack of a rational foundation and objectivity. According to Mill, intuitionism is neither objective, measurable, independent of majority opinion, nor can interpersonal comparisons of intuitions be counted upon. Intuitionist opinions are based on feelings yet they confuse them with fact. Even when the facts are pointed out they continue to hold to their feeling-beliefs. Their argument for their "consistency" is that their feelings stem from "some deeper ground which the arguments do not reach" (Mill, 1997, p. 1). Intuition is not an objective decision-making procedure because if two people disagree about their intuitions then an impasse exists. Since intuition is the ultimate judge, a disagreement stemming from intuition has no place to turn. The only recourse is to rely on feelings to justify other feelings! To make matters worse, intuitionists believe that the feelings which constitute intuitions are not their own individual feelings about right and wrong, but are part of human nature. Whose feelings speak for human nature is arbitrarily determined. Open resolution of moral conflicts among intuitionists was thus not common. But all of this also helps explain why intuitionism was so popular – people refuse to believe that their strong feelings of right and wrong could be considered wrong by others.

Obviously feelings exist. The point is, says Mill, do you take the feelings as "given", as the product of "design" as do the intuitionists, or do you ask whether the actions tied to those feelings cause happiness, as do the utilitarians? For Mill this question was central to many of his socio-political-economic philosophy and policy proposals. A fourth objection is that it is

part of religious fanaticism. “Deluded visionaries” (ibid., p. 514) believe themselves to be conversing with God and/or inspired by Heaven. In fact, they are simply reaching conclusions “drawn from appearances to his senses, or feelings in his internal consciousness” (ibid., p. 514). At the end of the *General Theory*, Keynes, the intuitionist (of sorts) makes a similar statement, “Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist” (Keynes, 1937, p. 383).

Many of the intuitionists' arguments appeared to Mill to be composed of nothing but *vicious circles*. One example is Whewell's statement "that we must do what is right, at whatever cost of pain and loss" (Mill, 1978e, p. 172). What is right is the "supreme, unconquerable reason" for doing something (Mill, 1978e, p. 187). Mill agrees that we should do what is right, but says that the real question is deciding "What *is* right"? In effect, Whewell is saying that we must do what is right, because it is right, and, that what is right is what we must do. Mill the scientist sought logic and consistency in arguments. The intuitionists' use of many moral rules, each known by intuition, but with unresolvable inconsistencies and conflicts among the various intuitions was intolerable for Mill. Mill thus holds that the intuitionism and the (so-called) intuitive faculty fail the empirical and objectivity tests.

### 3.2.2 Mill on the Experience the Intuitionist's Call Intuition

“The ways of nature are perfect,” “Things always move towards their own place,” and “Nature abhors a vacuum” are, according to Mill sayings believed by the intuitionists as truths known through intuition from prior to the life of Francis Bacon until Mill's own time. These truths are known directly even though they transcend the individual's own experiences because they are “revelations of nature in the depths of human consciousness, and recognizable by the light of reason alone” (Mill, 1978, vol 10, p. 417?). In other words, these beliefs emerge from a source ‘higher’ than induction. Mill's response is that these beliefs stem from associations and inductions based on experience, as well as examples of forgetfulness; custom, tradition, and habit; laziness, and; inference.

According to Mill, experience, culture and tradition, rather than intuition may be an unconscious source of our knowledge, and that "intuition" is actually forgetting what we've learned and experienced, as well as not understanding the source of our perceptions. Mill states that "Mankind are always predisposed to believe that any subjective feeling, not otherwise

accounted for, is a revelation of some objective reality" (Mill, 1987, p. 58).

Mill also asserts that naming a belief as stemming from intuition is a cover for being intellectually lazy. The intuitionists' intuition is actually nothing more than assertions about puzzling, paradoxical, and difficult problems; the intuitionists prefer to assert that the answer is intuitive than work through the problem for proof. In effect, it is intuition which tells us which knowledge is intuitive. In other words, intuition is proof of itself. Mill will have none of it. For him, 'intuition' is a measure of our ignorance. "Belief is not proof, and does not dispense with the necessity of proof" (Robinson, 1982, p. 63). Mill adds that, "Some of the causes may lie beyond observation; many are apt to escape it, unless we are on the look-out for them; and it is only the habit of long and accurate observation which can give us so correct a preconception what causes we are likely to find, as shall induce us to look for them in the right quarter. But such is the nature of the human understanding, that the very fact of attending with intensity to one part of a thing, has a tendency to withdraw the attention from the other parts. We are consequently in great danger of adverting to a portion only of the causes which are actually at work" (Mill, 1968, pp. 153-54).

Mill's third response is that intuition may be an "instantaneous and irresistible suggestion and inference, which has become by custom and habit undistinguishable from direct intuition" (Mill, 1978e, p. 188). Why the confusion between intuitions and inferences? First, inferences may be made so rapidly as to stay below the 'radar' of memory or the conscious mind. The rapidity is due to a law of the human mind acting on habit due to the law of Association. Second, the quality of inferences are known to improve with experience, thus giving them the appearance of an intuition. Mill maintains that sensations, not matter, are the building blocks of our reality. Thus, Mill's famous phrase about matter: "Matter, then, may be defined as the Permanent Possibility of Sensation" (Mill, 1978d, vol 9, p. 183). Mill's approach to the reality of matter is based on the "Psychological Method." His intellectual opponents, the Intuitionists, relied on the Introspective Method." The Psychological Method begins with two "psychological truths." First, after we experience a sensation the mind forms expectations about sensations which would be present if certain conditions were present. Second, there exist the laws of "Association of Ideas." According to these laws, similar phenomena and phenomena experienced in close proximity of each other are associated with each other, and thought of together. The more two phenomena are experienced together the more certain and rapid the Association becomes. Eventually, the rapidity seems to be an intuition.

Mill says that "The Psychological Theory maintains that there are

associations naturally and even necessarily generated by the order of our sensations and of our reminiscences of sensation, which, supposing no intuition of an external world to have existed in consciousness, would inevitably generate the belief, and would cause it to be regarded as intuition” (ibid., p. 178). The particulars which might generate a belief that the sensation is an intuition is the simplicity, rapidity, and the role of the unconscious through which we become conscious of the sensation. And, the fact is that from before Mill’s time to ours, these characteristics are considered trademarks of intuition. However says Mill, “These features can only prove the impression to be intuitive, on the hypothesis that there are no other means of accounting for them otherwise. If they not only might, but naturally would, exist, even on the supposition that it is not intuitive, we must accept the conclusion to which we are led by the Psychological Method, and which the Introspective Method furnishes absolutely nothing to contradict” (ibid., p. 183).

By contrast with Mill, William Whewell, a leading intuitionist of the time claimed that the laws of motion are intuitive because we are compelled to believe these laws and no others. In other words, it is inconceivable that the laws of motion could be anything other than what they are. Mill illustrates his disagreement with Whewell with the First Law of gravity, “An object in motion tends to stay in motion, and an object at rest tends to stay at rest, unless the object is acted upon by an outside force.” Mill points out that the first law “stood opposed to apparent experience of the most familiar kind” (Mill, 1970, p. 160). Yet, after the laws of motion were “suddenly” established, scientists started to believe that they “were under a ‘demonstrable necessity, compelling them to be such as they are and no other’” (ibid., p. 160). Intuitionists such as Whewell then began to speculate the laws of motion are intuitively obvious even if they are never experienced.

### 3.2.3 Moral Judgments. Plato Vs Mill

The issue of moral judgments was central to Mill. Are moral judgments intuitions or inferences? Asked in another way, what is the origin of moral judgments? The Intuitionists said the origin is consciousness or intuition. Moral judgments are thus derived from a moral sense, just as sight is derived from the sense of sight. Moral judgments – the difference between right and wrong – are considered to be “an ultimate and inexplicable fact” (Mill, 1978e, vol 10, p. 51), derived from “a peculiar law of our own nature,” and from a “peculiar and inscrutable property in the acts themselves” (ibid., p.51). Mill objected to moral judgments being described by the words

inexplicable (mysterious) and inscrutable (unfathomable). He believed instead that moral judgments of right and wrong are an acquired belief based on the effect of the actions on human happiness.

So common is the confusion between intuition, and experience or inference that, according to Mill, it applies even to Plato, the “champion of the intuitive or *a priori* character of moral truth, against what is regarded, by most of the Platonic critics, as the low and degrading doctrine of Utility” (Mill, 1978b, vol. 11, p. 388). According to Mill, Plato’s error was to consider things of the real world to be based in an alternative universe of pure Forms or Ideas. Knowledge for Plato became knowledge of these Forms or Ideas, while the knowledge of individual (worldly) objects was achieved only through knowledge of these transcendental forms. To make matters worse, Plato, or other philosophers assumed to possess knowledge of the Forms or Ideas through cognition of the transcendental realm, were “akin to the gods, who, being the possessors of supreme wisdom, must live in the perpetual contemplation of these glorious and superterrene existences” (ibid., p. 406).

Making matters even worse still, is the related, almost inevitable issue of past life memories. In Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates wonders why we have knowledge of things about which we have no earthly knowledge? Why is the truth we are seeking “instantaneously” accepted as the truth when we find it? Socrates’ answer is that we knew it in a past life and our seeking the truth in this life simply reminds us of what we once knew. According to Mill, modern thinkers simply substituted the word intuition for past life memories. Mill prefers a third explanation, that truth is found only after a long and gradual process, and inductions are often so rapid that they seem to be coming from thin air, or past lives.

In short, Mill explains the intuitionists’ intuition as an “acquired product” through the principle of association: “When two phenomena have been very often experienced in conjunction...it is impossible to think the one thing disjoined from the other”; as a result, ‘the facts... answering to those ideas come at last to seem inseparable in existence’, and ‘the belief we have in their coexistence, though really a product of experience, seems intuitive’ ” (Hamilton, 1998, p. 148). In fact, not only are moral feelings the result of association, but so are a wide variety of other human emotions such as ambition, envy, and jealousy (Ryan, 1974, p. 100).

### 3.2.4 Henry Mansel

Henry Mansel was a disciple of Hamilton’s at Oxford, held the position

of Chair of Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford, and is the author of *Limits of Religious Thought* (Mansel, 1860a), and *Prolegomena Logica* (Mansel, 1860b). Both Mansel and Hamilton held strong religious beliefs including the belief that the world and God are ultimate mysteries to the human mind. On the other hand, Mansel, unlike Hamilton did not believe that humans have a separate and unique faculty for knowing God, nor did he believe that human reason was sufficient to understand the nature of God. Acknowledging the limits of human reason for knowing God was part of Mansel's definition of reverence towards God. At the same time, Mansel was a harsh critic of Hamilton's *The Philosophy of the Conditioned*; Mill spent a considerable amount of time and mental energy critiquing this book. Perhaps it is not surprising that Mill had a more positive reaction to Mansel. For example, Mill says that Mansel "has a decided taste for clear statements and definite issues; and this is no small advantage when the object is, not victory, but to understand the subject" (Mill, 1978d, vol. 9, p. 262).

For example, Mansel says about the laws of association, "that whatever truths we are compelled to admit as everywhere and at all times necessary, must have their origin, not without, in the laws of the sensible world, but within, in the constitution of the mind itself. That constitution includes intuition. Mill appreciates the fact that Mansel is interested in scientific proof, and that his statement is consistent with someone advocating the Psychological Method. On the other hand, Mill was clear that although Mansel's views weren't as erroneous as Hamilton, he was still a believer in the 'relativity of all knowledge,' and an intuitionist in his own right who rejected the Law of Association as this Mansel quote testifies: "Sundry attempts have, indeed, been made to derive them from sensible experience and constant association of ideas; but this explanation is refuted by a criterion decisive of the fate of all hypotheses: it does not account for the phenomena" (Mill, 1978d, vol 9, p. 262).

On the topic of God, Mansel says that an Absolute and Infinite Being -- God -- is "inconceivable" to the human mind. Hence we can know neither the character, attributes, or characteristics of God, nor can we judge his teachings. God must be "actually everything and potentially nothing" (ibid., p. 96). In addition we cannot know what Wisdom, Justice, Benevolence, and Mercy mean to God. But it is safe to assume that Wisdom to God is not human wisdom taken to the power of infinity. Wisdom, or Justice to God is of a fundamentally different kind or quality from these attributes among humans. At the same time, it is reasonable to believe in God. Mill rejects the assertion that it is reasonable to believe in God. Religion, says Mill, an empiricist and social reformer, have been used as "reasons why we may

assert any absurdities and any moral monstrosities concerning God, and miscall them Goodness and Wisdom...My opinion of this doctrine, in whatever way presented, is, that it is simply the most morally pernicious doctrine now current..." (Mill, 1978d, vol 9, p. 90). In addition, using the same word to stand for two different things – Wisdom, and human wisdom -- is not acceptable to Mill who says, "I take my stand on the acknowledged principle of logic and of morality, that when we mean different things we have no right to call them by the same name, and to apply to them the same predicates, moral and intellectual" (ibid., p. 102). The implication is that Mill refuses to sanction the presumed rules of God because God cannot be logically defined and His rules are merely expressed as "the highest human morality which we are capable of conceiving" (ibid., p. 103). Likewise, Mill refuses to worship a God who is unknowable and inconceivable but described in humans terms raised to the highest conceivable power. It is likewise on logical grounds that Mill is ready to be banished to hell by God for not worshipping God.

In Mill's essay, "On Genius," Mill also rejects the intuitionist belief in vicarious knowledge – that one person's knowledge (via intuition) can be accepted uncritically by all persons because all persons are connected with God. As will be discussed in the next chapter of this book, Alfred Marshall thought highly of Mansel and Marshall's concept of "external economies" is based on knowledge passively received.

### **3.3 Mill's Anti-Intuitionism, Socio Political Economics**

Intuitionists were too prone to equate what *is* for what *must be*, and Mill sees this intuitionist tendency in political economics. He says that "It is a case of the error too common in political economy, of not distinguishing between necessities arising from the nature of things, and those created by social arrangements: an error which appears to me to be at all times producing two opposite mischiefs; on the one hand, causing political economists to class the merely temporary truths of their subject among its permanent and universal laws, and; on the other hand, leading many persons to mistake the permanent laws of Production... for temporary accidents arising from the existing conditions of society..." (Mill, 1973, p. 436). Speaking about mercantilism in ways reminiscent of Smith, Mill states: "It often happens that the universal belief of one age of mankind... becomes to a subsequent age so palpable an absurdity, that the only difficulty then is to imagine how such a thing can ever have appeared credible. It has so happened with the doctrine that money is synonymous with wealth. The

conceit seems too preposterous to be thought of as a serious opinion" (ibid, p. 3).

### 3.3.1 Economics as an Inexact Science

Mill's anti-intuitionist economic philosophy was partly the result of his training received by his father, James Mill. The elder Mill trained the younger Mill in the "geometric" (Newtonian) method of economic or social science -- that self-interest is the one organizing principle from which all economic or social science may be explained. Mill eventually came to the conclusion that his father's method was too narrow, and that economics was more complex than the geometric method could admit. What was missing for the younger Mill were the elements which converted geometric economics into a socio-economics.

On the one hand, Mill knew that nature contains many uniformities. On the other hand, he also knew that the problem for the economist in trying to understand these uniformities is that effects have multiple & simultaneous causes, and the data we use is fallible. This increases the occurrence of false claims about cause and effect, and makes economics an "inexact science" (Redman, 1997, p. 330). The "truths" of economics are thus only "rough" truths (ibid, p. 344); they reveal tendencies, allowing for an "approximate generalization" (ibid, p. 336). Economics has the "certainty, but not the precision" of physical science. And, the best method for obtaining the

(rough) truths of economics are a combination of deductive logic based upon a knowledge of human nature, and observation.

In *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy* (Mill, 1968), Mill's anti-intuitionism is revealed when he says, "If the knowledge what are the particular causes operating in any given instance were revealed to us by infallible authority, then, if our abstract science were perfect, we should become prophets. But the causes are not so revealed: they are to be collected by observation" (ibid, p. 153). The social scientist can't rely on exact measurement, they need good judgment and skill. Social scientists can't pretend to be mathematicians because social scientists must deal with incomplete and fallible data, and the complexity of human beings. Mill desired the "emancipation" of the laws of economics such as supply and demand because these laws are treated "as if they were laws of inanimate matter, not amenable to the will of human beings from whose feelings, interests, and principles of action they proceed (Redman, 1997, p. 345). Mill thus considered math a good starting point for economic theory. And, he considered the laws of economics to be relative to time and place. Mill thus

placed the fields of history and sociology, and the combination of theory and observation as pivotal in social science (ibid, p. 337).

Mill didn't treat history as thoroughly as did Marx, nor did he replace individual choice with group behavior as thoroughly as Marx. Mill believed in the usefulness of economic theory and tried to defend it against "over-enthusiastic sociologists" (Ryan, 1974, p. 162). Yet, he also tried to defend and incorporate history and sociology into his economics. He did this, in his anti-intuitionist way by distinguishing the theory of production from the theory of distribution.

### 3.3.2 Production Theory

There *are* "truths" in this world. However, they are not the moral truths of the intuitionists or the "truth" of the current status quo. Rather the truths "partake of the character of *physical* truths" governing production (Mill, 1973, p. 199; italics added). Diminishing returns to labor in agriculture is one such "fundamental truth" (ibid, p. 469). There is nothing "optional or arbitrary" about the laws of production. The "constitution" and "inherent properties" of *things* are important in determining the maximum output which can be gained from them. Output is also limited by a person's energy and skill, the quality of the machinery being used, and the organization of production. But regardless of one's opinions or feelings, the laws of production are fixed.

### 3.3.3 Distribution Theory

While the production of things may "partake of the character of physical truths", while the laws of production would be the same regardless of whether the economy were market oriented or socialist, the distribution of income depends upon social arrangements. The distribution of wealth is

solely a matter of human custom, feeling, and opinions, and change from time to time and place to place. The rules of distributing wealth can be whatever society decides, it is "a matter of human institution solely" (ibid, p. 200). However, the results of those rules, "...must be discovered, like any other physical or mental truths, by observation and reasoning" (ibid, p. 201). In other words, while Mill allows for some indeterminacy in the distribution of income, he is also defending economics against "over-enthusiastic sociologists" by also having one foot in a more standard economic way of thinking, i.e., that the distribution of income also follows the deterministic rules of cause and effect.

Which laws and customs determine the distribution? It is by the “opinions and feelings of the ruling portion of the community” (ibid, p. 200) that the distribution is decided. How did the custom of distributing income through the institution of private property emerge? It emerged because private property helped to “repress violence and terminate quarrels” (ibid, p. 201). What is the source of these opinions? The Newtonian in Mill states that it is the “consequences of the fundamental laws of human nature” (ibid, p. 200), while his non-Newtonian side states that it is also the effects of a very complex interaction of intellectual and moral development, existing social institutions, and knowledge and experience.

### 3.3.4 Value Theory

Speaking about the nature of value, Mill sounds his anti-intuitionist philosophy when he states: "Political economy has nothing to do with the comparative estimation of different uses in the judgment of a philosopher or of a moralist. The use of a thing, in political economy, means its capacity to satisfy a desire or serve a purpose...The word value... always means, in political economy, value in exchange..." (ibid, p. 437). Mill rejected the intuitionists' claim that intuition is capable of *intuiting* value, i.e., judging about right and wrong, judging about the "nature" of a thing, and hence judging its usefulness, worth, or value.

For Mill a thing has value in exchange if it is conducive to some purpose -- satisfies a desire, yields utility -- and, if there is some difficulty attaining it

(ibid, p. 442). In 99% of the cases the difficulty of attaining something totally controls value, while utility is "inoperative" (Mill, 1964, p. 443). Utility determines value only in the case of pure monopoly. The utility of the thing "in the estimation of the purchaser" (Mill, 1973, p. 442) is the upper limit to the thing's exchange value. In other words, exchange value will be greater than or equal to use value. Therefore, value is not determined by infallible intuition of a "priest" but by the estimation of the buyer, regardless of how priest-like they are. Striking his anti-intuitionist more explicitly, Mill says that, "...value is a *relative* term: that the value of a commodity is not a name for an inherent and substantive *quality* of the thing itself, but means the *quantity* of other things which can be obtained in exchange for it. The value of one thing must always be understood relatively to some other thing, or to things in general...the high value of some things is synonymous with the low value of others" (ibid, p. 459; italics added).

### 3.3.5 Capitalism vs. Socialism

The alternative to the institution of private property (capitalism) is communism (or socialism). Mill points out that a supposed major defect of communism is also true of most organizations in a capitalist society: that most workers' income is not tied to effort and hence there is a tendency for slacking off. However, Mill is not certain that this is a major defect of either communism or capitalism. The anti-intuitionist social-reformer Mill says, "That even this inferiority would necessarily exist, is by no means so certain as is assumed by those who are little used to carry their minds beyond the state of things with which they are familiar. Mankind are capable of a far greater amount of public spirit than the present age is accustomed to suppose possible" (ibid, p. 206).

Does Mill prefer capitalism or communism? He doesn't have the data to make an informed judgment! Capitalism "is supposed to mean the guarantee to individuals of the fruits of their own labour and abstinence" (ibid, p. 209).

On the other hand, capitalism as he knew it meant the institution under which income is inversely related to a person's hours worked. Therefore his conclusion is that "The principle of private property has never yet had a fair trial in any country; and less so, perhaps, in this country than in some others...The laws of property have not yet conformed to the principles on which the justification of private property rests" (ibid, p. 208). Mill would not rule out the possibility that socialism may one day replace capitalism, or that popular opinion may one day support socialism.

### 3.4 The "Nature" of Women

Sounding this anti-intuitionist stance on the first page of his book, *The Subjection of Women*, Mill says that: "So long as an opinion is strongly rooted in the feelings, it gains rather than loses in stability by having a preponderating weight of argument against it...when it rests solely on feeling, the worse it fares in argumentative contest, the more persuaded its adherents are that their feeling must have some deeper ground, which the arguments do not reach..." (Mill, 1997, p. 1). Mill says that his own age, the 19th. century, believed in the infallibility of the "unreasoning elements" and used the word instinct, and the sayings "intention of Nature" and the "ordinance of God" for whatever "we find in ourselves and for which we cannot trace any rational foundation" (ibid, p. 3). Mill called this the most extreme case of false worship.

What is Nature's intention for women? Mill provides examples of how his society found it intuitively obvious that women should be subordinate and

submissive to men. The subordination of women to men rests with the belief that the “character” or “nature” of women ordains it. “All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections” (ibid, pp. 14-15). But such presumptions are not infallible. According to Mill there aren't any presumptions which are infallible. This is, in fact, one of Mill's main arguments for freedom of expression in his book, *On Liberty*. In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill says that the presumption that women should be subordinate to a male rests only on theory. This is so because there never was a time, says Mill, when society tried different degrees of subordination of males over females and vice-versa in order to gather data on the best organization of society. The subordination of males over females rests from the fact “...that from the very earliest twilight of human society, every woman (owing to the value attached to her by men, combined with her

inferiority in muscular strength) was found in a state of bondage by some man” (ibid, pp. 4-5).

The “nature of women” is not their nature; it is the result of “forced repression” and “unnatural stimulation” (ibid, pp. 21), so that their “nature cannot but have been greatly distorted and disguised...” (ibid, p. 56). Therefore, the circumstances in which they live rather than their “natural capacity” is what we use when concluding about the “nature” of women. The greatest obstacle to human progress - and a prime example of “unspeakable ignorance” - is the opinion that whatever tendency anyone shows is assumed to be their “natural tendency” (ibid, p. 21). What then are the real, underlying strengths of women? To mention the one which is central to this paper: women are more intuitive than men! Mill was an anti-intuitionist, but he also believed in the value of intuition, especially after he met Harriet Taylor (Rose, 1984). In other words, Mill believed that intuition was useful but neither infallible nor magical. His view was very sensible, one which would be reformulated about 100 years later by Herbert Simon (Simon, 1982). What does it mean that women are more intuitive than men? To Mill it meant that women are superior at having a more “rapid insight into character” (Mill, 1997, p. 55), and “a rapid and correct insight into present fact” (ibid, p. 56). Women have a “quickness of observation” and “quickness of apprehension” (ibid, pp. 57-59). Their intuitive sagacity makes them superior in formulating general truths from a given amount of data and observation.”

Of course, women being subservient to men and kept away from a science education don't get credit for their intuition! "It no doubt often

happens that a person, who has not widely and accurately studied the thoughts of others on a subject, has by natural sagacity, a happy intuition, which he can suggest, but cannot prove, which yet when matured may be an important addition to knowledge... They occur by hundreds to every woman of intellect" (ibid, p. 70). A "matured" intuition is an intuition tested by a scientific procedure. Women, being kept away from science can never prove their intuitions. Hence women's intuitions "are mostly lost, for want of a husband or friend" who can test the intuition. But even when the women can test it and prove it accurate, the credit "generally appear as his ideas, not their real author's" (ibid, p. 70). Presumptions about gender (and racial) differences he says is the greatest impediment to social progress. "Whatever any portion of the human species now are, or seem to be, such, it is supposed, they have a natural tendency to be" (ibid, p. 21). And this is true not only for a belief in the "natural" submission of women to men. "Did not the slave-owners of the Southern United States ... call heaven and earth to witness that

the dominion of the white man over the black man is natural, that the black race is by nature incapable of freedom, and marked out for slavery?" (ibid, pp. 11-12).

Such presumptions about gender differences had its affects in the economic status of women. Lower wages for women which do not reflect their lower efficiency are generally caused by custom, which in some cases takes of form of occupational discrimination. Where wages are regulated by custom they are not determined by competition (S&D), and for women this means that their wage is less than their market value. Custom against paying women an equal wage for equal work is "grounded either in a prejudice, or in the present constitution of society, which, making almost every woman, socially speaking, an appendage of some man, enables men to take systematically the lion's share of whatever belongs to both" (Mill, 1973, p. 400).

In some cases this custom of paying lower wages for women is caused by occupational discrimination, so that "... the occupations which law and usage make accessible to them are comparatively so few, that the field of their employment is still more overcrowded" (ibid, p. 401). What to do about the lack of opportunities facing women? Educational and political institutions have a central role. The educational system must stop teaching that women are naturally subordinate and naturally gifted only at being a mother and wife. The legal system must support women's desire for equality. Mill supported women's suffrage, educational and occupational openings for women, and legislation such as the Married Woman's Property Bill, and the Divorce Act of 1857.

Once equal rights and equal opportunity were supported by social institutions, Mill placed faith in the ability of the market to create more equality. His reasoning is this. First, there is no need to forbid a woman to do what “by nature” (Mill, 1997, p. 26) she cannot do. Second, what a woman cannot do as well as a man, labor market competition, if it truly exists, will prevent them from doing. Third, labor market competition, if it truly exists, will offer incentives for women to enter those occupations where they are more productive than a male. Mill, the quintessential 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal, seems in this case to be a forerunner of Gary Becker's theory of discrimination.

Mill says that reducing educational and occupational discrimination will create a benefit for women but also an external benefit by "doubling the mass of mental faculties available for the higher service of humanity" (Mill, 1973, p. 83). This is all the more important because there is an excess demand for "mental superiority" (ibid, p. 83).

### 3.5 Quantity vs Quality

Mill was more “modern” than the intuitionists. The intuitionists believed that physical things (including humans) are composed of qualities, and these qualities reveal that thing's nature, purpose, and meaning. This necessarily limits what that thing is capable of doing. This underestimates the expected benefits of any social reform program and raises the unit costs. The more “modern” / scientific view is that physical things are not composed of qualities, but are able to be quantified. For example, the ‘nature’ of women is replaced by women’s relative wages. Jacques Barzun, in *From Dawn to Decadence*, discusses how this change from quality to quantity was a catalyst for the rise of the modern scientific world view (Barzun, 2000, pp. 194-196).

Having eradicated the quality aspect of things, the modern view eliminates one of the limits placed on possibilities. This necessarily increases the perceived benefits of social reform proposals and reduces the costs. For a passionate social reformer, Mill’s anti-intuitionism was consistent with his reform proposals and his views on political economics.