A Moral Economics

Klaver, Claudia C.

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chapter six

Rewriting Ricardo/Renewing Smith: The New, Expanded Political Economy of J. S. Mill

John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* is in large part an attempt to create a space within economic theory for the concerns that led writers such as Dickens and Mayhew to reject and attack scientific political economy. In this chapter, I examine both the larger structural aspects of Mill’s synthetic project and Mill’s treatment of specific, central economic issues in order to explore how Mill goes about creating that space and reincorporating ethical concerns into economic theory. After studying how Mill’s economic treatise attempts to reintegrate the “human element” of Smithian economics, social philosophy, and romantic poetry, I conclude with a brief discussion of the effects of Mill’s attempt to rewrite scientific political economy—both for economic theory and for Mill’s project of humanization.

The most important effect of Mill’s attempt at synthesis lies precisely at the juncture between the “scientific” and “humanitarian” impulses of his project. While Mill successfully constructs a version of political economy that can allow for social amelioration, his vision is hedged in by the Malthusian population principle. The population principle was for Malthus a manifestation of providence and divine will; for Mill it was a naturally given biological fact that, rather than adding meaning to human existence, threatened the human ability to make life meaningful.

Unlike Dickens and Mayhew, Mill critiques scientific political economy from within the tradition of classical political economy. Mill was raised on the political economy of Ricardo and of his own father, James Mill. In his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill describes the “complete course of political economy” through which his father took him in 1819:

Though Ricardo’s great work was already in print, no didactic treatise embodying its doctrines, in a manner fit for learners, had yet appeared. My father, therefore, commenced instructing me in the science by a sort of lectures, which he delivered to me in our walks. He expounded each day a portion of
the subject, and I gave him next day a written account of it, which he made
me rewrite over and over again. . . . In this manner I went through the whole extent of the science. . . . After this I read Ricardo, giving an account daily of what I read, and discussing, in the best manner I could, the collateral points which offered themselves in our progress.1

Mill enumerates other readings and analyses in his economic education, including discussions of Ricardo’s pamphlets on money and Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. “Such a mode of instruction,” Mill concludes, “was excellently calculated to form a thinker.”2 Thus, at the age of thirteen, John Stuart Mill began what was to be a lifelong project of thinking about, analyzing, and writing about political economic theory. It is significant that even in 1853–54, when he first drafted the *Autobiography*, he repeatedly and almost emphatically refers to political economy as a science.

Mill’s approach to scientific political economy, in relation to that of the other writers I have examined, comes closest to the writings of the 1844 Bank Act critics. Like Mill, these critics approached economic questions largely from within the discursive traditions of political economy. Unlike Mill, however, their use of those traditions was largely polemical rather than systematic. Individually and as a group, they drew from a broad range of economic arguments in order to support their polemics; their goal was less to theorize about economic issues per se than to persuade their readers that their opinions were supported by accepted economic doctrine.

Henry Mayhew’s *Morning Chronicle* project also exhibits some formal overlap with Mill’s writings on political economy. Mayhew claimed to be investigating and revising political economic theory as part of a comprehensive investigation of London labor. In contrast to Mill, however, Mayhew’s approach to the scientific aspect of political economy was almost totally inductive; his economic opinions changed through the course of the letters on the basis of what he observed in his investigations. Mill’s much more systematic approach to economic theory was much more deductive. Although he, unlike Ricardo, did attempt to incorporate inductive reasoning and observed phenomena into his *Principles of Political Economy*, the essential structure of the book was deductively derived from a few “first principles” of economic theory and social philosophy. Significantly, also, when Mill supported his arguments with “experience,” he almost always relied on and quoted the observations of other writers rather than making Mayhew-like investigations and observations of his own. Thus, while Mill and Mayhew wrote about many of the same issues and often used similar terminology, their final written projects bear little formal resemblance to each other.
In terms of the generic forms through which they explore economic questions, Mill’s writings on political economy are furthest from those of the novelist Charles Dickens. In these two writers, we find opposing extremes of middle-class Victorian approaches to scientific economic theory—Mill approaching these issues from the tradition of utilitarianism and Ricardian economics and Dickens from an almost purely literary tradition of romance, realism, and satire. At the same time, the literary tradition of which Dickens is a part provides a crucial link. While Mill was raised to be a thoroughly scientific and analytical thinker, his well-known mental crisis and “conversion” to romanticism led him to incorporate some of the ideals of literary romanticism into his philosophy of life and also into his study of economic theory. In the Autobiography, Mill explains the alteration of his vision: “I, for the first time, gave its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual. I ceased to attach almost exclusive importance to the ordering of outward circumstances, and the training of the human being for speculation and for action. . . . The cultivation of feeling became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed.”

The extension of Mill’s sympathies beyond the narrow confines of utilitarianism and eighteenth-century philosophy was fostered and reinforced by his reading of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, and nineteenth-century continental literature and philosophy, all of which he saw as a reaction against the eighteenth century. Mill’s relationship with Harriet Taylor further supported his movement away from the Benthamism of his father and his own youth. In conjunction with Taylor, Mill extended his new valuation of “internal culture” into his social and economic philosophy. In the Autobiography, Mill directly attributes his increasing sympathies toward socialism and the writing of the chapter “On the Probable Future of the Labouring Classes” to Taylor’s influence. More generally, he describes her influence on Principles in the following terms: “What was abstract and purely scientific [in Principles of Political Economy] was generally mine; the properly human element came from her: in all that concerned the application of philosophy to the exigencies of human society and progress, I was her pupil.” While many historians and biographers have doubted the accuracy of Mill’s account of Harriet Taylor’s influence—especially regarding the extent of her influence—the account reveals Mill’s high valuation of those parts of his work that go beyond the “abstract and purely scientific” approach to economic theory. Interestingly, Mill’s distinction between the “purely scientific” and the “properly human element” of his economic project implicitly reconstructs the contours of the separate-spheres ideology that he rejects in On the Subjection of Women and aligns the discursive divide between science and philosophy with the difference between masculine and feminine. Thus, Mill’s autobiographical account exposes a gendering of
the science/philosophy breakdown that remains largely invisible in the text of *Principles*.

The very organization of Mill’s *Principles* reflects his attempt to reconnect the scientific aspects of political economy with human elements of social philosophy. Rather than rejecting scientific political economy in deference to his romantic conversion, Mill attempts to reconstruct the Ricardian legacy of economy theory; he retains in large part Ricardo’s abstract theories but uses Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, rather than Ricardo’s *Principles*, as his structural model. He titles his work *Principles of Political Economy* but adds the revealing subtitle, *with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy*. In the Preface to the first (1848) edition of *Principles*, Mill announces the integrative goals of his text:

> The design of the book is different from that of any treatise on Political Economy which has been produced in England since the work of Adam Smith. The most characteristic quality of that work, and the one in which it most differs from some others which have equalled or even surpassed it as mere expositions of the general principles of the subject, is that it invariably associates the principles with their applications. This of itself implies a much wider range of ideas and of topics than are included in Political Economy, considered as a branch of abstract speculation. . . . It appears to the present writer that a work similar in its object and general conception to that of Adam Smith, but adapted to the more extended knowledge and improved ideas of the present age, is the kind of contribution which Political Economy at present requires.6

Mill perceives his return to Smith as a return to the marriage of abstract theory with practical application. Both aspects of this formulation—the marriage and the return—are significant. Mill self-consciously formulates his project in terms of an eighteenth-century tradition of writing on social history and theory that, unlike Ricardian economics, did not perceive or study economic phenomena in isolation from other social issues.

For Mill, the reunion of abstract theory with practical application involved a broadening of the very definition of political economy—at least of political economy as formulated by Ricardo, James Mill, Nassau Senior, and J. R. McCulloch. Mill creates an opposition between the narrowness of political economy “considered as a branch of abstract speculation” and the “much wider range of ideas and of topics” that he associates with practical applications. Another passage in the Preface suggests what, for Mill, this Smithian breadth includes: “No attempt, however, has yet been made to exhibit the economical phenomena of society in the relation in which they stand to the
best social ideas of the present time, as [Smith] did... in reference to the philosophy of the eighteenth century" (PPE xxviii). “Practical application,” then, involves not simply discussions of “how abstract theory works in the real world” but also the integration of abstract economic theory with other traditions of “social ideas” and contemporary philosophy.

Mill’s return to Smith was a structural and methodological return rather than a return to Smithian economic theory per se. Mill refers to his model, *The Wealth of Nations*, as “in many parts obsolete, and in all, imperfect” (PPE xxviii). Mill’s goal is to combine Smith’s “practical mode of treating his subject” with “the increased knowledge since acquired of its theory” (emphasis mine, PPE xxviii). Similarly, Mill insists that his practical object has not been purchased “by the sacrifice of strict scientific reasoning.” Mill concludes the original Preface with the assertion that, “though [the author] desires that his treatise should be more than a mere exposition of the abstract doctrines of Political Economy, he is also desirous that such an exposition should be found in it” (PPE xxviii). Each of these statements points to Mill’s desire to retain full scientific authority for his treatment of economic theory, even as he extends his investigation beyond abstract economic theory itself. While he returns to Smith as a model for the “applications” of his projects, he retains his Ricardian allegiances in the abstract principles that are the basis for those applications. The question of just how “true” are Mill’s allegiances to Ricardian economic theory has been debated by economic historians for years, and I cannot answer it here. Certain aspects of Mill’s relationship to Ricardo are, however, generally agreed upon. There is a sense that in most cases Mill retained the traditional aspects of Ricardian economic theories, but that his qualifications, extensions, and applications of those theories more or less changed their essential meaning. For my purposes, the general consensus that Mill was working from a Ricardian framework will suffice to suggest the basic theoretical parameters of Mill’s project: Mill retained the labor theory of value, the population principle, and a version of the wages fund theory.

Mill’s critique of scientific political economy is a critique not of the theoretical substance of Ricardian economics but rather of the isolation of that substance from the potentially modifying influences of practical application and social theory—the “human element.” In fact, the central tension of Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* lies in his desire both to broaden the focus of political economy and to retain the authority of “strict scientific reasoning.” The nature of this tension is the same schism between “science” and moral or political philosophy that we saw in Ricardo’s movement away from Smith and Malthus.

Mill’s *Principles* retains the abstractions of Ricardian economics as its scientific basis but attempts to reach beyond those abstractions. Mill’s goal is not
to connect abstract economic speculations to other sets of abstractions but rather to connect economic abstractions to a more complex conception of human nature and human experience. But the tension between science and social philosophy, and between abstraction and practical application, is not fully resolved by this synthetic structure. Mill's main strategy for retaining scientific authority while creating space for the “human element” is his opposition between the laws of production and those of distribution. I will examine this opposition more closely, but first I want to turn to one of the specific moments at which the difficulty of reconciling these tensions is registered in Mill’s text—Mill’s discussion of competition, custom, and the regulation of prices and wages.

Mill’s discussion of competition falls within the “distribution” section of his treatise—the section in which economic activity is seen to be less materially determined and more a product of adjustable, historically relative human institutions. Mill contends that the influence of competition has been privileged and exaggerated by political economists, and that these same economists have failed to take account of custom as an “other and conflicting principle” in the determination of wages and prices. Mill sees this error as a product of political economists’ attempts to render their theories scientific: “This is partly intelligible, if we consider that only through the principle of competition has political economy any pretension to the character of a science. . . . Assume competition to be their exclusive regulator, and principles of broad generality and scientific precision may be laid down, according to which [prices and wages] will be regulated” (PPE 242). Mill goes on to justify this exclusivity: “The political economist justly deems this his proper business: and as an abstract or hypothetical science, political economy cannot be required to do, indeed cannot do, anything more” (emphasis mine, PPE 242).

In the next sentence, Mill qualifies this assertion by invoking “the actual course of human affairs.” In this sphere of actuality, he argues, custom very often either banishes competition altogether or qualifies and alters its effect. Mill then enumerates a series of examples in which custom is a more significant factor than competition. It would seem that Mill is trying to expand “science” per se to include the “calculation” of variables that, according to Mill’s definition of science, are incalculable.

After discussing custom for several pages, Mill concludes: “These observations must be received as a general correction to be applied wherever relevant, whether expressly mentioned or not, to the conclusions contained in the subsequent portions of this treatise. Our reasonings must, in general, proceed as if the known and natural effects of competition were actually produced by it. . . . Where competition, though free to exist, does not exist, or where it exists, but has its natural consequences overruled by any other agency, the
conclusions will fail more or less of being applicable” (emphasis mine, PPE 247). In this passage Mill seems to back away from an attempt to expand the science of political economy itself and seems content instead to call for what is essentially a humbling of the scientific role. Only competition, he concedes, can be scientifically calculated—and his own treatise will proceed as if competition has the same influence that “political economists generally” have ascribed to it. At the same time, he self-consciously attempts to hedge his own reasoning and predictions with a significant qualification: where his economic theory of competition meets the human force of custom, his conclusions will “fail . . . of being applicable.” By asserting the limitations of abstract reasoning at the same time that he goes forward with such reasoning, Mill exposes the gap between theory and practice, economics as abstract theory and economics as a complex, embedded social discourse. Even though he cannot resolve this tension, Mill goes forward with his synthetic project, using various discursive and analytical strategies to mitigate the tension.

Mill’s most successful attempt to reconcile the conflicting forces is his opposition between the laws of production and the laws of distribution. Mill introduces this opposition in his “Preliminary Remarks”:

The production of wealth . . . is evidently not an arbitrary thing. It has its necessary conditions. Of these, some are physical. . . . Combining with these facts of outward nature other truths relating to human nature, [political economy] attempts to trace the secondary or derivative laws, by which the production of wealth is determined. . . .

Unlike the laws of Production, those of Distribution are partly of human institution: since the manner in which wealth is distributed in any given society, depends on the statues or usages therein obtaining. (PPE 21)

In this formulation, scientific abstraction is linked to scientific necessity—the necessity of physical and human nature acting in concert according to fixed laws. The human nature Mill mentions in his discussion of the laws of production is the narrow, self-interested, wealth-seeking nature to which he refers in the 1844 essay “On the Definition of Political Economy; and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It” (cited in chapter 1) rather than the “human element” described in the Autobiography. In the opening paragraphs of book 2, “Distribution,” Mill formulates the necessitudinarian aspect of the laws of production even more strongly: “The laws and conditions of the Production of wealth partake of the character of physical truths. There is nothing optional or arbitrary in them. Whatever mankind produce, must be produced in the modes and under the conditions, imposed by the constitution of external things, and by the own inherent properties of their own mental and bodily

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structure” (emphasis mine, *PPE* 199). Here human nature is left out of the equation altogether, and humanity has been reduced to a “mental and bodily structure.” The laws of production do not allow the political economist to legislate, but they do, according to Mill, provide him with the a priori basis for abstract speculation and scientific predictions. In short, they are positive rather than normative.

Just before Mill moves from this backward glance at the laws of production to the laws of distribution, he makes a comment that goes far toward revealing the intentions behind his construction of this opposition. Mill refers to the possibility for future developments within the sphere of production, then adds: “But, howsoever we may succeed in making for ourselves more space within the limits set by the constitution of things, we know there must be limits. We cannot alter the ultimate properties either of mind or matter” (emphasis mine, *PPE* 199–200). While the laws of production allow the political economist to aspire to the status of the natural scientist, these same laws severely limit the space of human agency, subjectivity, and relations. All the scientific political economist can do is describe and make predictions based on the givens of physical nature and human psychology.

“It is not so,” Mill writes, “with the Distribution of wealth. That is a matter of human institution solely. The things once there, mankind, individually or collectively, can do with them as they like” (*PPE* 200). The laws of distribution, in other words, are structurally almost a complete inverse of the laws of production. They create a much larger space for human agency, on the part of not only the economic subject but also the political economist himself. The economist of the distributive sphere may not yet be able to legislate, but he is able to warn, enjoin, rally, instruct, and generally pave the way for what he perceives to be positive social and economic change. Where the laws of production partake of the natural sciences, the more normative laws of distribution introduce history, veer toward social philosophy, and position the political economist accordingly.

By differentiating between the laws of production and distribution, Mill creates a space both for the abstract and scientific aspects of political economy and for the less scientific and rational, more human and ethical elements with which he is concerned. Abstract science has absolute authority within the sphere of production, but its role within the sphere of distribution is subservient to human institutions. Social scientists can calculate the effects of those institutions, but because institutions are always subject to change, they cannot make the same transhistorical claims for those calculations as for calculations in the physical sciences (*PPE* 200). By treating private property, inheritance, and landed wealth as institutions, rather than as inevitable social givens, Mill denaturalizes them. While Mill grants institutions significant
power in the shaping of individuals and societies, he also delimits that power, linking it to a particular historical moment and implicitly marking it as artificial and arbitrary. One effect of Mill’s denaturalization is that the future is always, for him, potentially a clean slate on which human beings can write whatever institutions they can imagine and create. This effect allows for changes not only in the order of society but also in the individual human agent, to the extent that that agent is a product of human institutions.

Mill’s entire discussion of socialism and private property is underwritten by the assumption that the very constitution of human individuals can and will change. For example, while the institution of private property assumes and reinforces self-interest as the primary motivation of the human agent, Mill entertains the possibility that “large bodies of human beings may be trained to feel the public interest as their own” (PPE 206). According to Mill, “the present age,” rather than human nature, is responsible for the estranged relationship between individual and public interest. With education and a change in community opinion, the apparently fundamental role of self-interest in human activity might be replaced with not-yet-imagined forms of interest and agency. In fact, Mill offers his most unambiguous praise for socialist theorists precisely in their role as visionaries of human potential.

I will return to Mill’s discussion of socialism. At this point, I want to examine the role of history and change in Mill’s Principles more directly. Book 4 of the Principles is titled “Influence of the Progress of Society on Production and Distribution.” Here, Mill announces, he turns from the “statics” of his subject to the “dynamics.” The first five chapters of Book 4 explain the economic mechanisms that eventually and inevitably slow the economic progress of a society and lead to the stationary state. In the last two chapters, “Of the Stationary State” and “On the Probable Future of the Labouring Classes,” Mill engages in his most explicit speculations about the possibilities for future change—both in social organization and in the constitution of the individual. Through these speculations, Mill reveals his own moral and social ideals and comes closest to outlining a prescription for the healthy moral development of capitalist societies.

In his discussion of the stationary state, Mill makes one of his most significant breaks with Ricardian economic theory. His biographer Alan Ryan writes succinctly: “What is striking in Mill’s account is the way he almost uncritically accepts his predecessors’ premises but rejects their gloomy conclusions.” Mill accepts the idea that the stationary state is inevitable, but for him that inevitability is positive and full of social possibilities. Rather than a state of economic stagnation and general misery, Mill sees the stationary state as “on the whole, a very considerable improvement on our present condition” (PPE 748).
The first benefit of the stationary state would be the expenditure of public moneys on nonproductive philanthropic projects. In an advanced, populous country—that is, one approaching the stationary state of minimal returns upon profits—the government can literally afford to invest its money in “industriously unproductive” projects. Because the economic limit in such countries results not from a shortage of capital and savings but from the exhaustion of fertile land, funds can be diverted into nonproductive projects without damaging the economic well-being of the nation. Such an expenditure of public funds, Mill predicts, would “either be drawn from that portion of the annual savings which would otherwise be sent abroad, or . . . subtracted from the unproductive expenditures of individuals for the next year or two” (PPE 741). This kind of government expenditure would in fact “make room” for more money to be saved before the economy reached the point at which money would flow into overseas investments or unproductive consumption. Thus, Mill concludes, “the utmost expense which could be requisite for any of these [philanthropic] purposes, would not in all probability deprive one labourer of employment, or diminish the next year’s production by one ell of cloth or one bushel of grain” (PPE 741).

With these economic justifications established, Mill creates a space for such government projects as “the industrial regeneration of Ireland” or “a comprehensive measure of . . . public education” (PPE 741). The former he includes under the rubric of a “great object of justice,” the latter under the label of “philanthropic policy.” Mill’s revisions in economic theory, then, are very directly linked to his desire to reconnect such theory with ethical values and imperatives. Mill explicitly differentiates this national economic situation from that of a poor, less developed country, where the legislator is still hedged in by economic necessity. This contrast serves to reinforce Mill’s claims that different national situations involve very different sets of governmental responsibility. History, again, allows Mill to move beyond the constraints of Ricardian economic theory—in this case to revise aspects of that theory itself as well as to reconnect political economy with social ethics and philosophy.

Mill’s discussion of the possibilities of the stationary state are strikingly different from those of Ricardo or James Mill—not only in content but also in tone. The whole tenor of Mill’s prose changes from that of the analytical thinker and scientist to one more evocative of Carlyle and Coleridge. In differentiating himself from his Ricardian predecessors, Mill writes: “I confess I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other’s heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind, or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial
progress” (PPE 748). Later Mill adds: “Those who do not accept the present very early stage of human improvement as its ultimate type, may be excused for being comparatively indifferent to the kind of economic progress which excites the congratulations of ordinary politicians; the mere increase of production and accumulation” (PPE 749). Together these passages criticize and trivialize the conception of human nature that had been promulgated by the popularizers of scientific political economy, if not by the economic theorists themselves. Those human traits—including the bourgeois virtues of industry and abstinence—celebrated as essential and natural by such writers as Harriet Martineau and J. R. McCulloch are relegated by Mill to “one of the phases of industrial progress” and disparaged as “disagreeable symptoms.” The goals of “increase[d] . . . production and accumulation” are minimized with the adjective “mere” and presented as the product of “the present very early stage of human improvement”—implicitly in contrast with the more advanced and developed stages toward which humanity should aspire.

Mill spends the remaining pages of the chapter “Of the Stationary State” describing his image of what humanity might look like in those more advanced stages of improvement. First, as a result of increased national prosperity, individual prudence, and wise legislation, Mill imagines that there will be a much better, more even distribution of property. According to Mill, this improvement will allow for “a more well-paid and affluent body of labourers” and also for a “much larger body of persons than at present, not only exempt from the coarser toils, but with sufficient leisure, both physical and mental, from mechanical details, to cultivate freely the graces of life, and afford examples of them to the classes less favourably circumstanced for their growth” (PPE 750). Both the laborers and the members of this latter class would be in a much better position than at present to pursue “mental culture”—that Millian watchword of human growth and development. Through such mental culture, in turn, would come “moral and social progress” and improvements in “the Art of Living.” In fact, the art of living would, in Mill’s stationary state, in large part replace the bourgeois “art of getting on” (PPE 751).

In addition to mental culture, Mill calls for population limitation within the stationary state—less for economic than for spiritual well-being. Mill is concerned that overcrowding would limit the spiritual potential of humanity by eliminating the chance for solitude. Sounding almost Wordsworthian, Mill writes: “It is not good for man to be kept perforce at all times in the presence of his species. . . . Solitude, in the sense of being often alone, is essential to any depth of meditation or of character; and solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur, is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without” (PPE 750). Mill’s concern with solitude clarifies his commitment to mental culture.
“Mental,” for Mill, includes much more than the intellectual, the analytical, or, as he calls them in the *Autobiography*, the active capacities of humankind. Solitude is linked to interiority and the “passive susceptibilities” of an individual—to “depth of meditation or of character.” In Mill’s ideal social state, all members of a culture would have moral, psychological, or spiritual interiors.

Such interiority at the level of the individual would, in turn, allow further development or advancement on the level of the community. “Man” as conceptualized by scientific political economy—“solely as a being who desires to possess wealth”—would be completely subsumed within a more advanced individual human nature. In effect, the scientific approach would no longer be the appropriate way to study human life—either individually or socially—because that life will have become an *art*. When “the Art of Living” replaces the “art of getting on” in the stationary state, the very nature of “art” changes—from lowercase to uppercase, from calculations and activity to the intangibilities of the romantic, developmental self.\(^\text{12}\)

Mill discusses a second important facet of his social ideal in the next chapter, “On the Probable Future of the Labouring Classes.” In the first paragraph, Mill asserts that general social progress depends fundamentally “on the opinions and habits of the most numerous class, the class of manual labourers” (*PPE* 752). Without development and improvement at this, the “bottom” level of society, Mill implies that his social ideal can never be achieved, precisely because a general improvement of all classes is his social ideal. While aspects of Coleridge’s clerisy appeal to Mill, and traces of intellectual elitism dot his writings, Mill links his advocacy for an educated elite to its role in raising up the economic, social, and mental condition of those below it in the social hierarchy. While Mill does not seem to envision total equality for all social classes, he does repeatedly insist upon an economic lowering of the most financially privileged classes and, more importantly, an economic, social, and moral elevation of the least privileged members of the community. “On the Probable Future of the Laboring Classes” draws a series of pictures of what that elevation might look like.

The overarching theme of Mill’s ideal for the laboring classes is “self-dependence.” Mill explicitly contrasts this theory with the competing Victorian theory of working-class improvement, “dependence and protection.” Mill sees the paternalist theory of dependence and protection as essentially nostalgic, if not reactionary. The problem with this backward-looking vision of protection and generosity on one side, dependence, gratefulness, and loyalty on the other, is that its “virtues and sentiments . . . belong emphatically to a rude and imperfect state of social union” (*PPE* 755). The only thing that gave this social organization validity in the past, Mill argues, were the real needs for protection of certain members of society. Once the original threats
are removed, the relationship between protector and protected turns sour: the relationship forces and reinforces the weakness and vulnerability of the “protected” and fosters tyranny in the “protectors.” The result, according to Mill, is that “the so-called protectors are now the only persons against whom, in any ordinary circumstances, protection is needed. The brutality and tyranny with which every police report is filled, are those of husbands to wives, or parents to children” (PPE 755). This situation is the result of artificial inequities in power that have outgrown their social usefulness, as must all such inequities if society is to progress toward Mill’s future ideal.13

For Mill, then, the future of the laboring classes must be one of social, political, and economic empowerment rather than dependence and loyalty. Mill sees this future as part of a process that the laboring classes—at least of England and other “advanced countries of Europe”—have already embarked upon. Because the laboring classes have already begun to become self-dependent, they have begun to reject “the patriarchal or paternal system of government.” Mill states this point forcefully and repeatedly: “The working classes have taken their interests into their own hands, and are perpetually showing that they think the interests of their employers not identical with their own, but opposite to them” (PPE 756). Mill perceives the working-class movements of the 1830s and the 1840s—on the continent and in England—as the irreversible first steps in a necessary and desirable process of social amelioration and reorganization. For Mill, the future depends on the continuation of this developmental process, the end point of which is a laboring population made up of independent and rational individuals.

It is precisely Mill’s emphasis on the individual that problematizes his relationship to socialism. His sympathies toward socialism seem to have been discussed by every historian who has even briefly considered Mill’s economic ideas. These historians have argued about just how sympathetic to socialism Mill was, how much his ideas changed through the course of his life, and Harriet Taylor’s impact on his ideas.14 One of the major foci of the debate has been the revisions Mill made in his discussions of socialism in later editions of the Principles—especially in the third edition (1852).15 Amidst all the debate, one can glean a general consensus about certain important aspects of Mill’s discussion of socialism. First, there is a sense that the changes between the second and third editions express an increased sympathy with socialism but that these changes are largely matters of tone rather than substance. Second, historians agree that Mill’s sympathy toward socialism is what most sets him apart from his contemporary political economists. Third, economic historians point out that Mill’s discussion of socialism was a response to English and French socialist theory rather than to the more revolutionary continental developments associated with the First International. Finally, there is general
agreement that Mill had three major sets of reservations about nineteenth-century communist and socialist theory. Since Mill's own text provides ample support for each of these points of consensus, my discussion will be based on my reading of his text rather than secondary accounts. I will look first at Mill's support for and defense of socialist theory and experimentation and then turn to the three major areas in which Mill qualifies his support: competition, the future potential of private property, and individual liberty under socialism.

Most of Mill's explicit discussion of socialism falls within section 3 of his chapter “Of Property” (book 2, chapter 1). This section was added in the 1852 edition of *Principles*. The first point Mill raises in this section concerns individual motivation to work under a system of communal labor and ownership. According to nineteenth-century critics of socialist theory, such social organization would result in each person trying to avoid his or her fair share of labor. While Mill grants this point as a “difficulty” of the communist scheme, he turns the objection back against the critics by showing how little personal interest a factory operative has in his or her work—less, according to Mill, “than a member of a Communist association, since he is not, like him, working for a partnership of which he is himself a member” (*PPE* 204–5). Mill also explores the ways in which the tendency to avoid labor would, in a communist community, be counteracted by the power of opinion; instead of being under the eye of one master, the communist laborer would be under the eyes of the whole community. Thus, for Mill, the dangers of loss of productivity under socialism would be largely, if not completely, mitigated by the incentive of personal interest vis-à-vis membership in a partnership and by the augmented power of public opinion.

The power of public opinion is also the factor that Mill believes would make the communist scheme desirably effective in terms of population control. Mill writes that under communism, “any augmentation of numbers which diminished the comfort or increased the toil of the mass, would then cause (which it does not now) immediate and unmistakable inconvenience to every individual in the association. . . . In such altered circumstances opinion could not fail to reprobate . . . this or any other culpable self-indulgence at the expense of the community” (*PPE* 207). The force of public opinion, that is, would be augmented on the question of population control because the effects of failure to limit population would be at once obvious, and obviously detrimental to all members of the community. In the current situation of private property and wage labor, the natural effects of sexual “intemperance,” according to Mill, are often blamed on social inequities—“the avarice of employers, or the unjust privileges of the rich”; with those inequities removed under communism, the true dynamics of population growth would be perceived by the laborers themselves. While population growth has the same effects in
either the capitalist or the communist system, the latter would enable the
community to perceive more readily the inevitable effects and dynamics of
this natural law. Ironically, in other words, through the power of public
opinion, personal interest would again be mobilized to effect what Mill perceives
to be the desired result—a responsible and voluntary limitation of population
growth.

For Mill, then, communism as imagined by such figures as Robert Owen
and M. Louis Blanc had certain major advantages over the system of private
property as it was organized in nineteenth-century England and Europe. This
was true, however, in relation only to communism's and socialism's ideas
about private property, not their criticism of competition. While Mill seems
ambivalent about competition in his discussion of the stationary state, he
emphatically critiques nineteenth-century communism's extreme demoniza-
tion of competition. His most explicit criticism occurs at the end of his chap-
ter “Of the Probable Future of the Labouring Classes,” where it falls like a
scythe across what had seemed to be a logical progression from profit-sharing
to cooperation and on to socialism. Invoking “the natural indolence of
mankind,” Mill argues that competition is a necessary counterforce and stim-
ulus. Mill characterizes humans as having a “tendency to be passive, to be the
slaves of habit, to persist indefinitely in a course once chosen” (PPE 793).
Apparently such passivity is, for Mill, an essential rather than incidental
aspect of the human constitution, for he doesn’t see humankind as “outgrow-
ing” it. The best that Mill seems to hope for is that competition might become
a less prominent aspect of human relations and that, economically, it might
be moved from the level of the individual to that of the group (i.e., instead of
being “between labourer and labourer,” competition would occur “between
association and association” [PPE 793]). These reformulations allow Mill
both to critique the institution of private property and to retain the “stimu-
lating effects” of competition, to embrace cooperation as a social ideal with-
out renouncing competition.

Even while Mill explicitly critiques the institution of private property, he
carefully qualifies his critique by differentiating between the institution of
private property as practiced in nineteenth-century Europe and a reformed
institution of private property as it could be practiced sometime in the future.
“To judge of the final destination of the institution of property,” Mill writes,
“we must suppose everything rectified which causes the institution to work in
a manner opposed to that equitable principle, of proportion between remu-
neration and exertion, on which every vindication of it that will bear the light
it is assumed to be grounded” (PPE 209). In other words, many, if not all, of
the evils of the present social system have less to do with the institution of pri-
vate property per se than with its unjust and inequitable legislative manage-
ment. Thus, before private property can be dismissed as a viable form of social organization, society must aspire toward a more just ideal of the institution. Mill points out that socialism and communism as imagined by their advocates are also social ideals rather than realities; thus, it is deceptive to compare “Communism with all its chances, and the present state of society with all its sufferings and injustices” (PPE 208). Mill concludes: “We are too ignorant either of what individual agency in its best form, or Socialism in its best form, can accomplish, to be qualified to decide which of the two will be the ultimate form of society” (PPE 209). Mill’s reservations, in this case, are less about socialism itself than about whether such a drastic change in social organization is necessary to attain the equity to which he aspires.

While Mill’s reservation about the need for socialism is, in essence, a question about the future potential of private property, his discussion of spontaneity and freedom under socialism expresses a concern about the future potential of socialism itself. While Mill seems to welcome the effects of an augmented public opinion when discussing motivation to work and population control, he also sees that augmented force as the most serious liability of the socialist system: “The question is, whether there would be any asylum left for individuality of character; whether public opinion would not be a tyrannical yoke; whether the absolute dependence of each on all, and surveillance of each by all, would not grind all down into a tame uniformity of thoughts, feelings, and actions” (emphasis mine, PPE 210–11). The source of this danger, according to Mill, is the “absolute dependence of the individual on the mass” within socialist organizations. Mill sees that dependence as having a negative, repressive power even in its attenuated forms within “the existing state of society” (PPE 209). In his social ideal, there would be more room for individuality, “eccentricity,” and “diversity of tastes and talents” than in the current social state; and socialism, he fears, would further curtail rather than facilitate such freedom and diversity.

Mill discusses the forms of socialism he considers less extreme than the full communalism and equity of communism. To the extent that these schemes, such as Fourierism, incorporate elements of competition and provisions for individual liberty, Mill supports their social experiments; but to the extent that they partake of the liabilities of their more extreme theoretical cousin, communism, Mill’s reservations remain. Mill concludes his discussion of socialism with a double gesture, first reaching toward the future, then turning back to the present:

It is for experience to determine how far or how soon any one or more of the possible systems of community of property will be fitted to substitute itself for the “organization of industry” based on private ownership of land and
In the meantime we may, without attempting to limit the ultimate capabilities of human nature, affirm, that the political economist, for a considerable time to come, will be chiefly concerned with the conditions of existence and progress belonging to a society founded on private property and individual competition; and that the object to be principally aimed at, in the present stage of human improvement, is not the subversion of the system of individual property, but the improvement of it, and the full participation of every member of the community in its benefits. (emphasis mine, PPE 216–17)

In this statement, Mill explicitly creates a space for socialist theory and experimentation, but he locates that space almost entirely outside the domain of the political economist. While he begins with the apparently pragmatic placement of the political economist “in the meantime,” he then extends this temporal location into the indefinite future of “for a considerable time to come”—hence suggesting that the association of the political economist with private property is more than simply pragmatic.

It would be easy simply to conclude from this, as many economic historians have, that Mill’s reservations about socialism ultimately outweigh his sympathies. This conclusion is accurate as far as it goes, but its generality glosses over important details of Mill’s discussion. Mill’s sympathies and reservations about socialism reveal significant elements of his social philosophy that go beyond his discussion of socialist theory. One aspect of Mill’s attraction to socialism, for example, is captured by the statement that “mankind are capable of a far greater amount of public spirit than the present age is accustomed to suppose possible” (PPE 206). Mill sees socialism as aspiring toward a conception of human nature in which self-interest is balanced by a “public spirit”—the individual identifying his or her interest with that of the community. Such a broadened conception of human nature allows the social idealist and philosopher in Mill to imagine a social evolution toward economic and political equity.

The expanded identification of the individual with the group that attracts Mill to socialist theory is also the source of his greatest concern. For Mill, any and all social progress is ultimately registered in terms of the individual. Here Mill’s upbringing in eighteenth-century philosophy and his conversion to romanticism converge: these two traditions involve radically different conceptions of the individual, but they are both firmly rooted in this idea. Mill departs from his utilitarian and scientific roots for the most part not to qualify the role of the individual but to create space for a more complex and multifaceted individual. One aspect of this Millian ideal is an enlarged capacity for “public spirit,” but at least equally important is an enlargement of the individual’s capacity for self-reflection, solitude, communion with self and
nature, and the other “passive susceptibilities” that Mill associates with individual autonomy and a kind of spiritual depth—what might be characterized as a romantic version of bourgeois virtue.

Nor does Mill see such development as remaining at the level of the individual alone; he also sees it feeding back into the individual’s social identity and relations. Because of Mill’s privileging of the individual in any type of social development, he fears that any great extension of the power of the social will infringe on the cyclical process of individual and social evolution. Once institutionalized at the level of the community, even the most idealized conception of human nature could become frozen, fixed by the power of government and public opinion. Not only would spontaneous and diverse individual development be discouraged by these conditions, but such development, even when it emerged, would fail to feed back into and revitalize the social community. Mill’s decision to locate the role of the political economist—and thus, implicitly, his own role—within the institution of private property indicates a deep philosophical allegiance to the individual and a distrust of institutionalized social power.

With the institution of private property as a framework, protecting the rights and autonomy of the individual in theory, if not in current nineteenth-century practice, Mill moves away from socialism to theories of how to reform the existing economic structure to make it more equitable—specifically, so that it would protect the rights of all individuals, not simply those of large property owners. Mill first examines current systems of “peasant proprietorship.” Much of his discussion consists of a series of long quotations describing and praising the success of peasant proprietors—mostly on the continent. Mill sets the general tone of the two chapters he devotes to this topic in his introductory paragraph, contrasting the system of peasant proprietorship with that of slavery: “In the regime of peasant properties, as in that of slavery, the whole produce belongs to a single owner, and the distinction of rents, profits, and wages, does not exist. In all other respects, the two states of society are the extreme opposites of each other. The one is the state of greatest oppression and degradation to the labouring class. The other is that in which they are the most uncontrolled arbiters of their own lot” (emphasis mine, PPE 256). Knowing the high value Mill places on self-dependence—particularly as a means to ameliorate the condition of the laboring classes—it is easy to understand the ethical underpinnings of his polarization of slavery and the system of peasant property ownership. The former is the most extreme form of the paternalism he decries, while the latter provides the economic basis for the individual self-dependence he heralds as the key to the cultural advancement of the laboring classes.

Peasant proprietorship, as it was already practiced through much of Europe, exhibited many of the qualities Mill wished to see more generally
diffused throughout the laboring classes. Independence from the wage structure creates a sense of autonomy and self-determination that encourages the peasant proprietor to take responsibility for his own fate and the fate of his children, rather than trusting in paternalist institutions to provide for their present needs and future security. Thus, according to the authorities Mill cites, peasant proprietors are "the most industrious [people] in the world" and are constantly working to augment their small holdings of capital through savings (\textit{PPE} 283, 274–75).

According to Mill, the peasant proprietor’s independent situation also has the potential to result in the attainment of two of Mill’s most important social goals—a high level of intellectual and moral development and the self-regulation of population growth. In discussing this potentiality, Mill’s mode of argumentation shifts from quoting the observations of others to an a priori reasoning of his own. While Mill acknowledges that peasant proprietors receive little formal education, he asserts that their situation involves the constant mental stimulus of “turning to practical use every fragment of knowledge acquired” (\textit{PPE} 286). The resulting “mental habit” renders even the relatively small amount of knowledge such peasants receive through schooling or reading very fruitful, so that it goes much further than such knowledge often does. The independent economic situation of the proprietors also fosters the “moral virtues of prudence, temperance, and self-control” (\textit{PPE} 286). The same circumstances that lead the peasant to be inordinately industrious and concerned to save for the future influence other areas of his or her character. One of the most important of these ancillary areas, for Mill, is sexual temperance. Mill admits that population has increased rapidly among peasant proprietors, but he blames that increase on a low standard of living rather than on the economic organization of proprietorship. Mill contrasts the structure of peasant proprietorship with that of wage labor to determine which has the most potential to encourage such self-regulation. Peasant proprietorship is more effective, Mill concludes, because unlike the wage laborer, “every peasant can satisfy himself from evidence which he can fully appreciate, whether his piece of land can be made to support several families in the same comfort as it supports one” (\textit{PPE} 289).

Mill uses a similar combination of cited authority and independent a priori reasoning in his discussion of profit-sharing and cooperatives in the chapter on the future of the laboring classes. In his discussion of these forms of social organization, Mill retains the broad structure of private property but reimagines that structure so that it can accommodate certain socialist-like economic forms. The key differences between Mill’s profit-sharing and cooperatives and the socialist forms from which he shies away are their extent and their relationship to the governmental or political structures of the society:
the social experiments Mill cites in this chapter are relatively small and local, and explicitly economic rather than political. What links them in Mill’s thinking is their departure from the system of wage labor, in which productive industry is divided between capitalist and laborer. Both profit-sharing and cooperatives give the laborers a direct economic interest in their labor and more control over the conditions of their labor. In contrast, the traditional system of wage labor pits employer against employed in such a way as to diminish overall productivity and keep laborers in a position of increasingly hostile dependence. Mill predicts that as society continues to develop, “there can be little doubt that the status of hired labourers will gradually tend to confine itself to the description of workpeople whose low moral qualities render them unfit for anything more independent: and that the relation of masters and workpeople will be gradually superseded by partnership in one of two forms: in some cases, association of the labourers with the capitalist [i.e., profit-sharing]; in others, and perhaps finally in all, associations of the labourers among themselves [i.e., cooperatives]” (PPE 763–64). This passage is from the 1848 edition of Principles; the formulation is even stronger in the 1852 edition, where profit-sharing is said to be at most “temporary,” and cooperatives are no longer “perhaps” the future but simply the final destination of all wage labor (emphasis in the original, see note 1, PPE 764).

Mill cites at length stories of successful profit-sharing and cooperative experiments. He dwells on two areas of improvement in his discussion of these experiments: changes in the habits and morality of the workpeople and increased productivity. For Mill, however, profit-sharing represents only the first stage of improvement in the position and conditions of labor; cooperation is the ultimate goal: “The form of association . . . which if mankind continue to improve, must be expected in the end to predominate, is not that which can exist between a capitalist as chief, and workpeople without a voice in the management, but the association of the labourers themselves on terms of equity, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves” (PPE 772–73). With this vision of cooperation, Mill pushes the limits of private property as far as they will go. Capitalists will remain, but they will gradually—without violence or revolution—be forced to cede control over production to the associations of laborers whose efficiency, productiveness, and competitiveness will win a larger and larger share of the market. Mill predicts that owners of capital will increasingly find it to their advantage to lend their capital to such cooperative associations, rather than continuing their own productive operations within the “old system” (PPE 791). The laboring population, in turn, will achieve independence and freedom as well as economic advantage. Mill hopefully predicts
the results of “the co-operative principle” in terms that clearly establish such a form of organization as his social ideal:

Eventually . . . we may, through the co-operative principle, see our way to a change in society, which would combine the freedom and independence of the individual, with the moral, intellectual, and economical advantages of aggregate production; and which, without violence or spoliation . . . would realize, at least in the industrial department, the best aspirations of the democratic spirit, by putting an end to the division of society into the industrious and idle, and effacing all social distinctions but those fairly earned by personal services and exertions. (PPE 791)

There are competition and individuality in Mill’s ideal social order, but these are at once counterbalanced by and channeled through an organization of production that ensures competition on fair terms and individuality justly rewarded. No longer will individual economic and moral development be the sole province of the leisured, or “idle,” classes; rather, competition and independence in the economic sphere will garner for the industrious laborer his or her just reward in economic well-being and in the increased possibilities for individual development provided by a better standard of living.

Cooperation represents for Mill the ideal possibilities and limits of the economic system of private property. Other aspects of Mill’s ideal social order involve more direct political intervention. Mill is not content to remain solely within the realm of economic possibility in the Principles; he also ventures outside the sphere of the purely economic in order to advocate measures and changes he believes are necessary for a just, ethical social order. These measures are focused on the individual.

I have already discussed Mill’s encouragement of government spending on philanthropic projects in a country approaching the stationary state. Similarly, in book 5, which Mill devotes to the role and influence of the government, he supports “government intervention” in certain areas seen by laissez-faire political economists as the responsibility of the private sector. While economic historians agree that Mill’s overall discussion of the government comes down on the side of laissez-faire, they note Mill’s explicit exceptions to this principle. In specific cases, Mill even advocates economic assistance to individuals, arguing that “energy and self-dependence are . . . liable to be impaired by the absence of help, as well as by its excess” (PPE 967). In cases where an individual’s situation is so dire that he or she has no hope of succeeding, wise and limited government intervention can actually stimulate rather than depress the individual’s energy and exertions and establish or restore that individual’s self-dependence.
The twinned principles of independence and self-dependence also guide Mill's consistent advocacy for the legal and economic equality of women. Mill argues that "women are as capable as men of appreciating and managing their own concerns, and the only hindrance to their doing so arises from the injustice of their present social situation" (PPE 959). Mill attacks laws that seek to limit women's independent economic opportunities, such as factory work, and give husbands control over their wives' earnings. Mill recognizes that such laws reflect widespread social attitudes. Thus, his call for their repeal is in its own way interventionist: Mill is demanding that the government set a higher standard of fairness than is generally socially recognized, at the same time equalizing the legal opportunities available to adult men and women. This dual interventionist/anti-interventionist position is suggested by his call for fundamental legal reform in the treatment of women: "It is the great error of reformers and philanthropists in our time to nibble at the consequences of unjust power, instead of redressing the injustice itself: If women had as absolute a control as men have, over their own persons and their own patrimony or acquisitions, there would be no plea for limiting their hours of labouring for themselves, in order that they might have time to labour for the husband, in what is called, by the advocates of restriction, his home" (first emphases mine; last emphasis in original, PPE 959). In short, if the law gave women their most basic rights in their own persons and property, it would not have to be constantly intervening on their—or their husbands'—behalf.

Mill's most emphatic statements about the need for government action concern the moral and intellectual development of the community as a whole, especially through education. Mill argues that education is an area in which a consumer often cannot judge the best "commodity" or means of selecting such a commodity. "The uncultivated," he writes, "cannot be competent judges of cultivation. Those who most need to be made wiser, usually desire it least, and if they desired it, would be incapable of finding the way to it by their own lights" (PPE 953). Mill stresses the need for a comprehensive system of basic primary education to be provided by the government. Mill's justification of the need for this more specific form of education points to the impulses behind his privileging of government-sponsored educational measures generally. Mill argues that if parents fail to educate their children in certain basic skills and bodies of knowledge, they do a disservice both to the child and to "the members of the community generally."

On one level, this seems to be simply another example of Mill's distrust of parental or familial authority: for Mill, the family is one of the last bastions of tyranny and despotism, and this tyranny comes directly from the power that society grants parents and husbands over their children and wives. Parents' authority to educate—or not educate—their children has been a part of
such power. But Mill’s formulation suggests other motivations and attitudes. For Mill, children are one of the few groups that require paternalistic protection by the government. Yet Mill’s characterization of the “uncultivated” as incapable of selecting the best means for their own cultivation betrays a more general paternalism as well. Mill’s justifications for government education suggest that in certain areas and at least temporarily, “self-dependence” is an inadequate social policy.

The policy is inadequate not only for the individuals needing (according to Mill) to be educated but also for the community that needs its members to be educated. Mill’s paternalism toward the “uncultivated” goes hand in hand with his sense that, in the sphere of education, the needs of the group are more important than the needs or desires of the individual. Mill is careful to leave some space for the individual in this area, for he demands that the state, while offering and perhaps even mandating education for all, should never monopolize education or require everyone to choose the government’s educational institutions. Thus, the individual would always retain a choice between government and private educational institutions, but the more fundamental choice of whether or not to pursue formal education—for oneself or one’s children—would apparently not be available. Mill places such a high social and moral value on education that it becomes one of the rare cases in which he is willing to sacrifice the freedom of the individual.

Another instance in which Mill privileges the group over the individual is in the question of the maintenance of a “learned class.” Mill argues that because “the cultivation of speculative knowledge” renders services to the community as a whole, rather than to its individual members, it is unlikely that such services will be remunerated by the private sector. If such cultivation of knowledge is to continue and to attract those most fitted to it, then, Mill insists, it must be supported by public funds. While this support only indirectly impedes the freedom of the individual (e.g., in the form of slightly increased taxation), the concept reinforces the exceptionality, for Mill, of education and learning. Mill’s emphatic belief in individual freedom and autonomy is subtly but firmly underwritten by a specific definition of the individual; likewise, embedded in Mill’s belief in the improbability of human nature is a significant caveat. Mill firmly believes that individual human nature is malleable, but he just as firmly, if less overtly, believes that this malleability must be actively and self-consciously cultivated in order to produce wisely self-dependent, public-spirited, and moralized individuals.

Mill’s belief in the possibilities of such cultivation and his commitment to the process of individual cultivation are the factors that take him furthest from the scientific political economy of Ricardo; Senior; and Mill’s father, James Mill. The focus of that cultivation on the individual, however, and
Mill’s commitment to the individual in general link him to Ricardian economics and to the individualist strain within eighteenth-century moral philosophy that is the common root of both Ricardo’s and J. S. Mill’s economic theories. Because so many of Mill’s ideals focus on the individual, he is constantly drawn to the need to protect the individual against external threats when he moves from abstract theory to application. In many cases Mill identifies and defines such threats differently than other nineteenth-century political economists, but the fundamental theoretical bias behind such protection is the same: both Mill and the Ricardian economists locate and naturalize the individual as the basic element in any social or economic system. Such systems can function properly—and, for Mill, advance or evolve—only if the individual is allowed to act freely within that system. For Ricardo and other scientific political economists, the individual needs to be protected from the constraints of monopolies, government regulation, excessive taxation, and so forth; for Mill, the individual also needs to be protected from “enslaving” want and poverty, ignorance, the excessive power of community opinion, and overcrowding.

While Mill’s differentiation between the inevitable laws of production and more arbitrary laws of distribution to some extent denaturalizes the individualist mandate, that mandate returns in a very different, but almost equally powerful, form in the guise of moral and ethical injunction. For many critics of scientific political economy—critics whom Mill specifically had in mind when writing *Principles*—the structural shift from natural inevitability to moral injunction addressed many of their basic concerns. Yet the individualist content of Mill’s vision continued to determine his vision of social and economic change. One telling evidence of the effect of Mill’s individualism is his withdrawal from the brink, as it were, of socialism and the reasons he gives for that withdrawal. Another significant effect of Mill’s individualism is his almost obsessive Malthusian concern with population control. Mill repeatedly emphasizes the need to limit population growth: he praises communism and the system of peasant proprietors because of their potential to control population growth; he argues that the empowerment of women will curtail population growth; and his ideals for individual moral development in the stationary state are predicated upon the stabilization of population. To some extent, Mill’s concern with population growth can simply be read as a Malthusian holdover, or as the site where the inevitable laws of production impede the more flexible laws of distribution. But if we add to these readings of Mill’s concern the question of why population becomes the critical point in the transition between the “old” and the “new” (or Millian) political economy—or between the laws of production and distribution—then the issue of population takes on broader significance.
Population, for Mill, is critical because the autonomy of the individual is always threatened by the natural force of population growth; the social aggregate is always threatened by the prospect of becoming an indiscriminate social mass. Mill’s insistent advocacy of population limitation is his way of trying to ensure enough social and natural space so that the boundaries of the individuals that make up the aggregate do not blur. In fact, Mill’s ideal society is one in which those boundaries are much stronger than he perceived them to be in mid-nineteenth-century England. The individual may become more “public-spirited,” but such spirit must emerge from within the individual will rather than being forced upon the individual by the group. Similarly, competition can operate as a positive social force and stimulus for the individual only if there are not too many people competing for too few resources—only if individual activity can ensure enough resources that the agent can develop and retain a largely privatized interiority through education, contemplative solitude, and leisure.

Population control is an essential, rather than incidental, aspect of Mill’s social and economic vision. Ironically, the centrality of the issue to Mill’s vision makes his Principles, in certain ways, more a return to Malthus than a return to Smith. The difference is that for Malthus the population principle is a manifestation of divine will and providence—that is, the population principle is a natural, biological fact of human existence, but such “facts” are themselves manifestations of divine intention. The growth of population is, for Malthus, a divinely ordained goad to human self-improvement. As such, the population principle is continuous with the theological framework that for Malthus constitutes “the meaning of human existence.” In contrast, Mill’s version of human meaning is centered on the private and autonomous individual. Individual human agents must make life meaningful for themselves and their societies. By threatening the interiority of the individual, the population principle is much more fundamentally problematic in Mill’s schema than in Malthus’s. Despite the grand space-clearing gesture of separating the laws of production from those of distribution, Mill’s individualism, combined with his scientific naturalization of certain economic laws, locks him into a space delimited by the ratio of population to resources. Even more damaging to Mill’s vision is the fact that space—the space of human meaning—is not only delimited by the biological force of population but always threatened by it.

Mill’s “conservatism,” as exemplified by his distrust of socialism and his retention of the Malthusian population principle, is a fundamental result of his attempt to preserve political economy as a science while reconnecting that science with the “human element” of social philosophy, ethics, and romanticism. Mill’s Principles of Political Economy represents one of the last attempts made from within the scientific tradition of economic theory to
integrate scientific analyses with nonscientific social philosophy and theory without privileging one of these elements over the other. Viewed as a function of that attempt, Mill’s obsession with the question of population control is striking less as an anachronistic blind spot in an otherwise progressive project than as a particularly telling trace of the ambitiousness and exceptionality of that attempt. Mill’s individualistic philosophy presented him with some significant theoretical problems and led him to some untenable solutions, but it also served as the bridge between two discursive traditions that, after Mill, became increasingly unbridgeable.

Perhaps the crucial weakness in Mill’s vision is the ideal of individual identity as autonomous, rather than intersubjective, as Smith had imagined it in The Theory of Moral Sentiments. Mill’s return to Smith, in other words, was limited to a reading of Smith’s The Wealth of Nations from which the psychologized morality of the earlier text had been largely erased. For Smith, an intersubjective model of the individual subject was crucial to both his conception of economic development and his ethical reservations about that model. Mill’s very different set of reservations about social and economic development makes visible the difference between the nineteenth century’s conceptualization of the individual—whether romantic or economic/utilitarian—and Smith’s eighteenth-century moral philosophy. Instead of being interdependent and mutually constituted, Mill’s individual moral and economic subjects are imagined as privatized and autonomous. Dependence and social interaction, rather than constituting the individual subject, are seen as a constant threat to it.

Just as Mill was unable to think of the individual in the intersubjective terms of Smith’s moral philosophy, so he was unable to make the analytical and imaginative leap performed by his contemporary Karl Marx. Marx, more than the English and French socialists upon whom Mill drew, identified the “individual” as a reified, historically specific effect of capitalist economics. If Mill had been able to make this conceptual leap, he might have perceived socialism as the answer rather than as a threat to the moral and ethical foundations of his system. Such an answer, however, would have involved a reframing of the economic and ethical questions posed by his texts as questions of politics as well as economics and ethics. The failure of Mill’s synthetic attempt to create an ethical economic science, then, needs to be read in terms of his inability to articulate an ethical vision outside the discursive and ideological categories not only of classical political economy but also of classical liberalism.

In my final chapter, I trace the legacy of Mill’s failure in two very different “economic” critiques of his project: those of John Ruskin in Unto This Last and William Stanley Jevons in Theory of Political Economy. While connections
have legitimately been made between their criticisms of Mill’s Principles. Ruskin’s and Jevons’s economic writings are most significant in their divergences. Ruskin takes Mill’s “human element” and, instead of positioning it as secondary and subordinate to scientific economic “laws,” makes it the center of his definition of economic value and of what he sees as a true economic “science.” The result is a text is now canonized within English, rather than economics, departments. In contrast, Jevons’s project is an attempt to render political economy more narrowly and authoritatively scientific. While rejecting Ricardo’s (and thus also Mill’s) value theory, Jevons’s Theory can be seen as a formal return to and refinement of Ricardo’s mathematically structured economic discourse. The distinction Mill draws between the natural and invariable “scientific” laws of production and the historically malleable principles of distribution is rendered insignificant by Jevons’s redirection of economic theory from production to consumption, from the labor theory of value to the marginal utility theory of value. With Jevons, scientific political economy becomes explicitly mathematical: a science of quantities and calculations rather than a science of social values.