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Chapter 6

‘Is it true? ... what is the meaning of it?’: Bentham, Romanticism and the fictions of reason

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Introduction

The founding document for any understanding of Bentham’s relation to British Romanticism is John Stuart Mill’s essay on Coleridge, published in *The London and Westminster Review* in March 1840. Mill draws what would become an influential distinction between the ways in which the two thinkers approached human belief:

By Bentham, beyond all others, men have been led to ask themselves, in regard to any ancient or received opinion, Is it true? and by Coleridge, What is the meaning of it? … Bentham judged a proposition true or false as it accorded or not with the result of his own inquiries. … With Coleridge, on the contrary, the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men, and received by whole nations or generations of mankind, was … one of the phenomena to be accounted for.¹

Mill’s remarks are framed by his concerns about the relationship between Church and social progress, or more broadly, between tradition and custom on the one hand and social justice and reason on the other. England, he claims, had reached an impasse, a point at which the middle
ground between radical reform and conservative consolidation could no longer hold. By neither embracing new, radical ideas nor quite managing to shut them out, by muddling along:

England had neither the benefits, such as they were, of the new ideas nor of the old. We were just sufficiently under the influences of each, to render the other powerless. … This was not a state of things which could recommend itself to any earnest mind. It was sure in no great length of time to call forth two sorts of men … the one pressing the new doctrines to their utmost consequences; the other reasserting the best meaning and purposes of the old. The first type attained its greatest height in Bentham; the last in Coleridge.²

As Mill sees it, Bentham collects the torch of radicalism from his eighteenth-century Enlightenment precursors and shines it upon present-day institutions and the language that underpins them. The test he applies to such institutions is one of correspondence to fact: does our current polity, he asks, have a basis in truth? Coleridge, in contrast, resists this impulse. Where the fundamental imperative in Bentham’s thought is epistemological and empirical, according to Mill, in Coleridge it is hermeneutic and aesthetic. Instead of testing the empirical validity of the traditions, customs and attachments of the people, Coleridge interprets them as expressions of the spirit of the age. For Coleridge, interpreting this expression, discovering its meaning, precedes the act of understanding itself. Mill, of course, has little time for Coleridge’s more fundamental claim that the empirical understanding itself was inadequate for the purpose of comprehending historical change. Unlike Coleridge’s followers (Carlyle, Emerson and the American Transcendentalists, most notably), Mill sides firmly with Locke and Bentham on questions of metaphysical principle. ‘We see no ground for believing that anything can be the object of our knowledge except our experience,’ he insists: ‘We are therefore at issue with Coleridge on the central idea of his philosophy.’³ Nonetheless, Mill’s essay attempts to mediate between the polarized Benthamites and Coleridgeans by suggesting that, despite its flawed metaphysics, Coleridge’s conservative, hermeneutic approach to history and politics was not without its merits.

In dividing early nineteenth-century thought into a reformist, fact-obsessed utilitarianism on the one hand, and a conservative, aestheticized Romanticism on the other, Mill introduces a binary into modern intellectual history that has remained surprisingly durable. What, after all, could
be more contrary than Benthamite utility and Romantic feeling? I want to complicate this picture of Bentham’s relation to his Romantic contemporaries. Indeed, even before it is brought under scrutiny, it is apparent that the great intellectual stand-off Mill describes between hard-nosed, forward-looking utilitarians and tender-hearted, homesick Romantics does not run on all fours, not least because Romantic writers do not always line up in ways one might expect. For example, although the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley sides with Coleridge by basing his defence of the autonomy of poetry upon a transcendent language of imagination, unlike Coleridge he explicitly endorses Bentham in redirecting this imaginative energy towards the goal of radical political change. The essayist William Hazlitt, meanwhile, attacks both Bentham and Coleridge: the first for his misbegotten attempt to achieve a perfect transparency in language by purging it of feeling and metaphor; the second for developing a poetics of metaphysical obscurity that was by instinct (and here Hazlitt would have agreed with Mill) politically reactionary. I will return to Hazlitt in the final section of this chapter.

I am not just arguing that Mill’s binary is too simple adequately to describe the complicated philosophical and political alignments of many of the writers we think of as Romantic; nor do I want to turn it into a straw man by assuming that Mill would have pressed it too far. What I am interested in is the way in which questions of ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’ become entangled in a period in which the reform of language and the language of reform are incandescent topics. To understand how this happens, we need to examine the way in which the scepticism of David Hume ultimately lays the foundations for Bentham’s theory of real and fictitious entities by destabilizing the relationship between truth and meaning. My argument is that the influence upon Bentham of Hume’s account of the ‘fictions’ of reason leads the former to abandon the kind of positivist empiricism Mill defends and instead prioritize matters of meaning over matters of ‘fact’. Conversely, the aestheticization of language in Romantic writers signifies not the abandonment of an Enlightenment model of ‘truth’, but its elegiac idealization.

**Hume’s conventionalism**

The polarization Mill perceived in contemporary thought between those who prioritize questions of ‘truth’ and those who emphasize issues of ‘meaning’ has its roots in Hume’s conventionalist treatment of language. Although Hume did not produce a fully developed theory of language,
he made a number of remarks and observations on the subject, and his interest in the way that customs shape human nature drew him towards an account of language as social and conventional. One of the more celebrated of his comments arrives at the end of Section 2 of An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748). Here, Hume notes that one of the reasons why people are often hoodwinked by philosophical jargon is that they too readily assume that well-established and familiar terms have definite meanings attached to them in the form of determinate ideas. However, since all ideas are, by their very nature, faint and languid, and impressions and sensations are strong and vivid, Hume proposes that ‘[w]hen we entertain ... any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion.’ The semantic thesis implied by this statement is what M.A. Box, borrowing a term from Jonathan Bennett, classes as 'meaning-empiricism', that is, the thesis ‘that meaning can be determined by demanding the birth certification in experience of an idea’.5 Hume’s suggestion that the meanings of terms must be cashed out into the currency of sense-experience, and that by ‘bringing ideas into so clear a light we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute’, would have far-reaching repercussions. It would ultimately inspire attempts by logical positivists in the early twentieth century to establish sensation (through various forms of verification principle) as the semantic index of scientific and philosophical discourse, an ambition crystallized in A.J. Ayer’s declaration that ‘[i]t is the philosopher’s business to give a correct definition of material things in terms of sensations.’6 Despite this legacy, Hume himself remained doubtful about the possibility of providing ‘correct’ definitions of things purely in terms of sense-experience. Indeed, he finally denies that meaning must ultimately rest upon non-linguistic entities, regardless of whether these entities are understood to be intellectual essences or the raw data of sensation. For Hume, language is best understood as a set of conventions determined by and within social contexts.

To support this claim, Hume appeals to Berkeley’s argument regarding the formation of abstract ideas. One of the paradoxes thrown up by Locke’s corpuscularian epistemology was the notion of an idea that was simultaneously particular and general, encompassing the qualities of the members of the class it represented while being, in Locke’s words, ‘all and none of these at once’. Since general ideas lack corresponding particular objects, they remain ‘Fictions and Contrivances of the Mind’, and, therefore, Locke acknowledges, ‘marks of our Imperfection’.7
Berkeley had attempted to overcome the empirical problem of how a single abstract idea could contain within itself all possible variants and instances of the thing conceived. For Berkeley, Locke’s paradox exposes the fact that all knowledge is of particulars alone. The error that leads Locke to view general ideas as epistemologically suspect is that of supposing that the world can be divided into ‘primary’ (inherent) and ‘secondary’ (mind-dependent) qualities. This dualism can be seen to be both unnecessary and unhelpful, Berkeley maintains, once one grasps the full implications of the principle that to conceive of something is to have a sensation of that thing. If the esse of objects is percep, then there is no fundamental difference, epistemologically, between ideas of general things and ideas of particular things. Particular ideas become general ideas simply through a process of nomination; in other words, ‘an idea, which considered in itself is particular, becomes general, by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort’.

Hume considers this claim, as he puts it, ‘that all general ideas are nothing but particular ones, annexed to a certain term’ to be ‘one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that has been made of late years in the republic of letters’. Less palatable, however, was Berkeley’s idealism, underpinned as it was by the assumption that all human perception is providentially supported by a ‘spirit infinitely wise, good and powerful’. Uncoupling Berkeley’s theory of abstraction from theology, Hume argues instead that abstract ideas are constructed through communicative contexts. By being attached to a word, individual ideas acquire a new signification, whereby a ‘particular idea becomes general by being annex’d to a general term; that is, to a term, which from a customary conjunction has a relation to many other particular ideas, and readily recalls them in the imagination’. By forging a close connection between reference and custom, Hume offers a naturalistic account of the meaning of general terms that extends the nascent pragmatism of Berkeley’s nominalism: now it is habit and convention, rather than raw sensation, that determines the meaningfulness or otherwise of general terms. Linguistic customs become for Hume what Annette Baier describes as the ‘social roots of reason, roots from which it draws its nourishment and its powers’. In this way, Hume effectively recalibrates the basic relationship between language, thought and reality, abandoning the Lockean view of language as a system of signs arbitrarily assigned to individual ideas in favour of one in which the conventions of language constitute part of the fabric of social contexts that determine rational thought.

Viewing language as a convention can easily provoke doubt over the assumption that language represents thought. Accordingly, following
the linguistic turn instigated by Locke and extended by Condillac, eighteenth-century empiricism undergoes a further, pragmatic turn, which itself draws upon insights from classical rhetorical theory as well as more recent philosophy. Of these, the most pertinent for the present purpose is an emerging awareness of the ‘non-correspondence between form and function or language and thought’. As Brigitte Nerlich and David D. Clarke have documented, these developments were in turn ‘fed by a slow trickle-down of novel ideas’, suggesting that language had functions other than the representation of thought; for example, the expression of emotion and the persuasion of other people. Such ideas would eventually culminate in ‘the rejection of a reductionist notion of the sentence as statement, affirmation, judgement, representation of thought or proposition’ by Thomas Reid and others. Indeed, this shift in paradigms becomes one of the main currents of ‘protopragmatics’ that would eventually lead to the emergence of pragmatics itself as a clearly defined sub-discipline of linguistics in the twentieth century.

The importance of Hume to this development lies not just in his linguistic conventionalism, but also in the way in which he highlights the referential poverty of certain sentences, a move that enables later thinkers such as Reid to construct a more comprehensively performative theory of language. The locus classicus for this shift in outlook is Hume’s analysis of the obligation of promises in the Treatise, in which he argues that only the necessity of custom and convention can explain the moral authority of something that is itself ontologically and epistemologically ‘unintelligible’, namely, an obligation that is created by a verbal utterance. By treating promises as the issuing of ‘a certain form of words … by which we bind ourselves to the performance of any action’, Hume identifies the promise with a communicative act that, while philosophically dubious, is nonetheless ‘requisite to beget mutual trust and confidence in the common offices of life’. He repeats this claim in the second Enquiry by arguing that linguistic customs and the conventions of language are entangled with human customs and habits. Tellingly, this issue arises for Hume not in the context of discussing language per se, but amid his considerations concerning ‘the social virtue of benevolence’ in the Appendix. What Hume seeks to underline here is the tacitly intersubjective basis of moral norms, which, he notes, ‘may be compared to the building of a vault, where each individual stone would, of itself, fall to the ground; nor is the whole fabric supported but by the mutual assistance and combination of its corresponding parts’. Using the analogy of rowing, Hume maintains that not all conventions depend upon the explicit performance upon which promises are based. The
sense of justice, Hume explains, is a convention that ‘each man feels in his own breast, which he remarks in his fellows, and which carries him, in concurrence with others, into a general plan or system of actions, which tends to public utility’. In the same way that pace and rhythm are essential to the functioning of oarsmen in a boat, he continues, ‘speech and words are fixed by human convention and agreement’.21

The virtues that keep morality afloat, then, depend upon the very same implicit conventions that make human communication possible. Above all, Hume emphasizes that it is the performance of these virtues that sustains both benevolence and meaning in the absence of an objective moral law and determining referents for words or sentences. Here, Hume’s position on language is broadly in line with his epistemology and his moral theory, insofar as he claims that the inadequacy of our sensory input for the purposes of validating our cognitive, ethical and communicative lives indicates the constitutive nature of human habits, customs and behaviour in each of these spheres. What his Appendix to the Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals makes clear is that human conventions do not form the foundation of these spheres, but exist in a circular relation of mutual dependence with them: only ‘if all perform their part’ do they persist. Nicholas Phillipson expresses the virtuously circular relationship envisaged by Hume in the following way: ‘the more stable a system of language was, the more reliable our understanding of the world would be and the better would be our power of judgement. But linguistic stability presupposed social stability.’22 Essential to maintaining the balance of this delicate ecosystem, once again, is trust. As Baier notes, for Hume ‘[s]peech is our co-operative and trust-facilitated activity par excellence’.23 From this standpoint, the interdependent relationships that exist between implicit conventions, the performance of social roles, and the maintenance of mutual trust form the conditions of possibility for human language and reason.

Hume’s account of the finely balanced economy maintained by trust, language and custom in sustaining the fictions of belief necessary for civilized human life would have powerful repercussions for late eighteenth-century empiricism. In different ways, Thomas Reid and Jeremy Bentham would be led by its implications towards theories of language that prioritized social action rather than representations or mental states as their leading terms. Common sense thinkers such as Reid and Dugald Stewart would seek to cement Hume’s pragmatic linking of truth and the (social) conventions behind language into apodictic philosophical first principles, while linguistic materialists such as John Horne Tooke and utilitarians such as Bentham seized on the opportunity that Hume’s
account appeared to offer to detach meaning from mental contents and to understand the fictions of human belief as linguistically and socially constructed. This involved taking seriously the proposition, as Leslie Stephen put it, that ‘if reason is fiction, then fiction is reason’. It’s this idea that Bentham’s theory of real and fictitious entities eventually internalizes.

**Bentham: What is the meaning of it?**

Bentham turns to address some of the problems of knowledge and language relatively late in his career, and he approaches them with some reluctance. His impatience with metaphysical questions, however, is not simply a manifestation of the intolerance of the legal reformer for ‘theory’. Instead, it is rooted in the conviction that any attempt to separate the ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ of human life is an error. Bentham assessed philosophical questions in relation to utility. This in turn means that, for Bentham, the epistemologist’s mission to abolish error from the grounds of knowledge must ultimately be subordinated to *eudæmonics*, or an understanding of proper human functioning and the good life. Accordingly, as he indicates in the Appendix to his 1815 work, *Chrestomathia*: *Eudæmonics … may be said to be the object of every branch of art, and the subject of every branch of science.*

While Bentham’s tone sounds confident here, by the time he wrote *Chrestomathia* he had already spent several decades attempting to overcome the philosophical problems that he had recognized early in his career and which are apparent in his great work on jurisprudence, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. In the *Introduction’s* important chapter ‘Of Motives’, Bentham’s discussion of the notion of ‘motivation’ swiftly encounters difficulties due to his realization that the word ‘motive’ has two meanings: one literal and legitimate, the other figurative and fictitious. The first denotes ‘any of those really existing incidents from whence the act in question is supposed to take its rise’; the second, ‘a certain fictitious entity, a passion, an affectation of the mind, an ideal being’. Bentham realizes that the *Introduction* is not the best place to work through these problems. Indeed, it is not until the early 1810s that he finally turns to address the issues in which he had become entangled. He does so in a series of essays, which include ‘A Fragment on Ontology’, the ‘Essay on Logic’, the ‘Essay on Language’ and ‘Fragments on Universal Grammar’.

Logical fictions such as ‘motive’ differ importantly from poetical fictions like centaurs in that they cannot
be extirpated from thought. As Bentham observes in ‘Fragment on Ontology’, ‘[i]n the mind of all, fiction, in the logical sense, has been the coin of necessity; – in that of poets of amusement – in that of the priest and the lawyer of mischievous immorality’. Nonetheless, he ultimately perceives that fictitious entities in law are linked to a web of figuration that stretches much further into human thought and language than he had previously imagined. The language of reform and the reform of language could not, in the end, be separated:

Confining himself to the language most in use, a man can scarce avoid running, in appearance, into perpetual contradictions. ... To obviate this inconvenience, completely, he has but this one unpleasant remedy; to lay aside the old phraseology and invent a new one.

To Bentham, it appeared that utilitarianism, could not, after all, simply muddle through without a thoroughly worked-out ontology, an epistemology and a theory of logic or language. The first two of these would jointly distinguish between real entities like physical bodies and ‘individual perceptions’ on the one hand and fictitious entities such as ‘[f]aculties, powers of the mind, dispositions’ on the other. The task of the theory of logic and language, meanwhile, was to ‘give direction and assistance’ to human thought by converting the discourse of fictitious entities (as far as possible) into that of real entities. For Bentham, this in turn meant translating highly figurative language into a less figurative language that was based in sensations of pleasure and pain. By doing this, Bentham reinforced his eudæmonics with the epistemological argument, as stated in A Table of the Springs of Action (1817), that ‘[p]leasures and pains [are] the basis of all other entities’. Furthermore, the same utilitarian principle leads Bentham to deny that any psychological phenomenon is epistemically privileged: all human awareness, he maintains, regardless of immediacy, is mediated via the ‘receptacles’ of pleasure and pain. This denial that sensation is ‘pure’ or value-neutral in turn supports Bentham’s pragmatic insistence in the ‘Essay on Logic’ that ‘in no place is anything to be known, but in the same place there is something to be done’. It also forms the immediate context for his development of a new ‘phraseology’, which, based upon the translation of abstract statements into a lexicon of pleasure and pain, was indifferent to the Cartesian problem of whether, and to what extent, the ‘mind’ corresponded to the ‘world’.
At this point, however, another problem confronted Bentham: that of the method of analysis by which such a translation could take place. In a footnote to A Fragment on Government (1776), he had already dismissed the traditional method of definition per genus et differentiam favoured by D'Alembert and the encyclopédistes. Fictitious entities or abstractions, he argues, cannot have examples or instances, and so cannot be defined in terms of a superior genus. Accordingly, when Bentham asks, rhetorically, ‘what is a disposition?’ He imagines the reply: ‘“A disposition is a …”: and there we stop. The fact is, a disposition has no superior genus: a disposition is not a … , any thing’. Conventional analysis is inadequate for interpreting fictitious entities because the meaning of fictitious entities is always over-determined. As Bentham puts it in the ‘Essay on Logic,’ unlike physical aggregates, such as a bushel of apples, logical aggregates are indeterminate, in that they remain open to ‘the unlimited powers, of decomposition and recomposition possessed by the human mind’. For Bentham, the standard view of analysis and synthesis as ‘counterpart’ processes is a myth: it is not possible to ‘unpack’ an abstract idea in the same way that one would unpack a suitcase.

Similarly, the Lockean method of explicating individual terms by tracing such units back to simple ideas or primitive perceptions assumes the presence of an accessible field of neutral data (ideas or impressions), the existence of which Bentham does not accept. Instead, his theory of real and fictitious entities, which pragmatically presupposes the already evaluative status of sensation, allows that language itself endows ideas with a kind of ‘verbal reality, so to speak, … without which the matter of language could never have been formed’. By accepting that linguistic figuration descends even to the referent, Bentham draws the sting from the claim that reason and metaphor cannot be distinguished. As Esterhammer observes, in this way ‘Bentham's theory ... embraces the principle ... that language does in fact succeed in creating immaterial objects and endowing them with at least a form of reality’. By conceiving meaning as holistic and relational rather than psychological and causal, Bentham is able to allow that it is possible for a word to be used correctly and successfully by individuals who might associate it with different ideas (or even with no ideas). The meaning of a term is ultimately determined not by its causation, but by its context.

For Bentham, this position has two significant consequences. First, the fundamental basic units of meaning are now seen not as single terms, but as whole statements, speech acts or propositions. As he argues in the ‘Essay on Language’: ‘Every man who speaks, speaks in propositions, the rudest savage, not less than the most polished orator, – terms taken by
themselves are the work of abstraction, the produce of a refined analysis: – ages after ages must have elapsed before any such analysis was ever made. Second, in order to create his ‘new phraseology’, Bentham now develops a method of contextual definition, which he terms ‘paraphrasis’. He gave many different accounts of this method, but one of the clearest can be found in the ‘Essay on Logic’: ‘By the word paraphrasis may be designated that sort of exposition which may be afforded by transmuting into a proposition, having for its subject some real entity, a proposition which has not for its subject any other than a fictitious entity.’ Crucially, paraphrasis exhausts the metaphysical field of enquiry. As the non-foundation search for meaning, it is to be distinguished from ‘Archetypation’, or the tracing of an idea to its psychological origin. For Bentham, this new method obviates the ontological embarrassment encountered by empiricists such as Locke and even John Horne Tooke: the very point of paraphrasis is that what counts as a ‘real entity’ is ultimately a matter of coherence within a linguistic community, not one of correspondence between word and object. As W.V. Quine notes of Bentham; ‘[h]e recognized that to explain a term we do not need to specify an object for it to refer to’. Paraphrasis enables one ‘to explain talk of bodies in terms of talk of impressions by translating one’s whole sentences about bodies into whole sentences about impressions, without equating the bodies themselves to anything at all’. Viewed from this perspective, Bentham’s theory of fictitious entities signals a reorientation in language theory and epistemology towards recasting the ‘problem’ of truth as a sub-category of the question of meaning.

Hume’s conventionalist account of the primacy of the social function of language in the formation of general ideas had granted constitutive status to logical fictions or metaphors – in other words, to customary and habitual figures of speech that could not be distinguished in principle from the supposedly more ‘literal’ words and statements through which common-sense principles and the elements of reason were articulated. Even those who accepted Hume’s conventionalist linguistics were troubled by this apparent outcome. Nonetheless, Bentham’s refusal to put epistemology before ethics, and his thoroughly utilitarian approach to the contextual definition of logical fictions, enables him to adopt a more pragmatic view of the constitutive role played by figurative language in human speech acts. Ultimately, he does so by subordinating the question ‘is it true?’ to the question ‘what does it mean?’
Hazlitt: Is it true?

This essentially pragmatic approach of Bentham to questions of truth can be contrasted with that of one of his antagonists, the quarrelsome Romantic essayist, William Hazlitt. Hazlitt was Bentham’s tenant at 19 York Street, Westminster, between 1813 and 1819. During this time Hazlitt never encountered his famous landlord, who lived close by. For his part, Bentham seems to have been aware of the essayist only as a source of rent, for the non-payment of which Hazlitt was duly evicted in the winter of 1819. However, in his biting pen portrait of Bentham five years later, Hazlitt recounts Bentham’s original plan to pull down number 19, which had once been the home of John Milton, to make ‘a thoroughfare, like a three-stalled stable, for the idle rabble of Westminster’. In Hazlitt’s profile, later the leading essay in his collection of portraits The Spirit of the Age (1825), Bentham’s indifference to the fate of the ‘cradle of Paradise Lost’ is presented as symptomatic of an age dominated by abstraction, which, by seeking to ground all human life in factual truth, loses sight of the non-rational powers of the human mind:

[Bentham has] reduced the theory and practice of human life to a caput mortuum of reason, and dull, plodding, technical calculation. … If the mind of man were competent to comprehend the whole of truth and good, and act upon it at once, and independently of all other considerations, Mr. Bentham’s plan would be a feasible one, and the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, would be the best possible ground to place morality upon. But it is not so.

The great irony of Bentham’s work, Hazlitt suggests, is that its obsession with acquiring clear-sighted and comprehensive knowledge of life is the very thing that blinds it to truth. Abstracted, ‘like an anchoret in his cell’, Bentham’s eye ‘glances not from object to object, but from thought to thought’. Nowhere is this more evident than in his use of language, which, in insisting on neutrality, betrays its own rationalistic bias; by striving for transparency, it achieves only technocratic opacity:

Mr. Bentham’s method of reasoning, though comprehensive and exact … is rather like an inventory, than a valuation of different arguments. … The construction of his sentences is a curious framework with pegs and hooks to hang his thoughts upon, for his own use and guidance, but almost out of the reach of every body else.
It is a barbarous philosophical jargon, with all the repetitions, parentheses, formalities, uncouth nomenclature and verbiage of law-Latin … . In short, Mr. Bentham writes as if he was allowed but a single sentence to express his whole view of a subject in … .

For Hazlitt, Bentham’s thinking reflects some of the great philosophical blights of the age: empiricism in epistemology, materialism in ontology and egoism and utilitarianism in moral theory. That the last of these ills stemmed from the first two (which he saw as mutually sustaining) he spells out clearly in his *Prospectus of a History of English Philosophy* (1809). According to the ruling philosophy in Britain, he complains, ‘the mind itself is nothing, and external impressions everything. All thought is to be resolved into sensation, all morality into the *love of pleasure*, and all action into *mechanical impulse*.’ In opposition to this tradition, Hazlitt makes it a cornerstone of his philosophy that ‘[t]he mind has laws, powers, and principles of its own, and is not the mere puppet of matter.’

Hazlitt maintains that the error of ‘people of sense’, such as Bentham and Shelley, is that by mistaking the abstract, rational forms that quantify experience for the ‘pith and marrow’ of the thing itself, they come to know only ‘the form, not the power of truth’. Against this perspective, Hazlitt pits his moral idealism, his belief that the mind forms experience, and hence its own moral objectives (self-interested and disinterested alike). He accepts Hume’s conclusion that the exhaustive determination of belief by sense-experience (the perfect correspondence of idea and world) is not a viable model for knowledge. But while for Hume this meant jettisoning the language of representation and deflating individual consciousness into an epistemology based upon custom and the social sentiments, Hazlitt responds to the same crisis of representation by *inflating* the cognitive function of consciousness still further. Consequently, knowledge for Hazlitt comes to consist in the *projection* of concepts or ideas upon the world by a powerful mind. For instance, in the *Plain Speaker* essay ‘On Reason and Imagination’, he defends ‘natural feeling’ against Benthamite considerations of the ‘pros and cons … of utility and inutility’. He also introduces a range of quasi-epistemic concepts, including ‘sympathy’, ‘*moral sense*’ and ‘instinctive perception’, all of which are deployed to mediate between the estranged realms of bloodless calculation and passionate feeling. Expressing a hatred for ‘people who have no notion of any thing but generalities’, Hazlitt argues that ‘Logic should enrich and invigorate its decisions by the use of imagination.’ He insists that mental powers like common sense and
genius, by operating at the border between abstract comprehension and an incommensurable world of infinitely plural truths, have the capacity to transcend abstraction through feeling and intuition. Accordingly, Hazlitt introduces a quasi-cognitive level of ‘experience’ that functions at the bounds of the knowable. In the ‘Preface’ to his *Abridgement of the Light of Nature Pursued* (1807) by Abraham Tucker, he mocks ‘the grave professors of abstract reasoning’ for ‘attending only to one aspect of things’ and ‘leaving out always those minute differences and perplexing irregularities which disturb the sluggish uniformity of our ideas, and give life and motion to our being’. Fundamentally, he avers, abstraction is a mental adaptation to environment, ‘a trick to supply the defect of comprehension’, since the ‘moulds of the understanding may be said not to be large enough to contain the gross concrete objects of nature’. Given this condition, anyone ‘who disdains the use of common sense … is like a person who should deprive himself of the use of his eye-sight, in order that he might be able to grope his way better in the dark!’ This analogy forms, in turn, the basis for Hazlitt’s distinction between:

| Two sorts of philosophy; that of those who believe what they feel, and endeavour to account for it, and that of those who only believe what they understand, and have already accounted for. The one is the philosophy of consciousness, the other that of experiment; the one may be called the intellectual, the other the material philosophy … . The first of these is the only philosophy that is fit for men of sense, the other should be left to chymists and logicians. |

And yet, Hazlitt also attacks the tendency to romanticize nature and humanity. He worries that the Romantic aestheticization of the epistemological might produce an intellectual culture in which the boundary between reason and imagination, fact and fiction, blur into a form of indifference. Indeed, it is this very elision of poetic imagination and prosaic fact that he decries in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who has, ‘by an ambition to be every thing, become nothing. His metaphysics have been a dead weight on the wings of his imagination – while his imagination has run away with his reason and common sense.’ Thus, he muses, although ‘[r]eason and imagination are both excellent things … perhaps their provinces ought to be kept more distinct than they have lately been’. This determination not to collapse the boundary between imagination and reason, fiction and truth, highlights the parallels between Hazlitt’s epistemology, with its concern for twilight knowledge, and his aesthetics of the sublime. In the essay, ‘Why Distant Objects
Please’, for instance, the gap between the two drives of human nature is invoked to explain the enchanting effects of spatial and temporal distance. Thus, as Hazlitt notes:

[i]t is not the little, glimmering, almost annihilated speck in the distance that rivets our attention and ‘hangs upon the beatings of our hearts’: it is the interval that separates us from it, and of which it is the trembling boundary. … Into that great gap in our being ‘come thronging soft desires’ and infinite regrets.\(^{55}\)

Indeed, sublimity has a more general function in Hazlitt’s thought. By arguing that knowledge rests upon mind-formed fictions of abstraction and imagination, Hazlitt metaphysically inflates the status of Hume’s fictions by relocating them from the sphere of tacit social conventions to that of mental constructions. In Hazlitt’s hands, empirical intuition is privatized and sublimed into the noumenal, indeterminate territory of a hypostatized ‘common sense’.\(^{56}\) Thus, the aesthetics of the ‘trembling boundary’ are not merely the product of his philosophy of knowledge and identity, but are also an integral part of his metaphysics.

Many will recognize this aestheticization of knowledge, whereby the para-epistemological agencies of creative imagination and ineffable common sense are established as the moderators of reason, as a characteristically Romantic response to the epistemological challenge of Hume. Accordingly, Uttara Natarajan observes that ‘[f]ollowing Hume, Hazlitt recognizes the sensory constraint upon imaginative capacity. But this theory, unlike Hume’s, allows for such constraints to be altogether surpassed by the cultivation of the imagination.’\(^{57}\) Natarajan is right to contrast Hume’s deflationary account of the ‘faint and languid’ perceptions of imagination (as thought recedes from sensation and memory) with the dynamic faculty, which, in Hazlitt’s Essay, ‘creates the object’ of perception and ‘pushes … ideas beyond the bounds of … memory and sense’.\(^{58}\) Seen this way, Hazlitt’s argument follows a familiar pattern of Romantic logic, whereby, as imagination is elevated and reason subordinated, philosophy’s loss becomes art’s gain. While Hume had sought merely to counterbalance the philosophical perspective of the anatomist with the civilizing, aesthetic skills of the painter, Hazlitt elevates the latter to a new level of precedence. Accordingly, ‘the poet and painter of imagination are superior to the mere philosopher or man of science, because they exercise the powers of reason and intellect combined with nature and passion’.\(^{59}\)
And yet, what is lost from Hume’s picture in Hazlitt’s new arrangement of philosophy and art is a constitutive role for intersubjectivity in human intellectual life. The ‘internal principle’ of Hazlitt’s immanent idealism secures for the imagination a projective power that is won at the cost of sociability. As Hazlitt describes it in his Examiner article ‘Coriolanus’ (1816), the poetic imagination, by reversing the process of abstraction, ‘presents no immediate or distinct images to the mind’. Instead, insofar as it ‘puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right’, the ‘language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power’. At the same time, the indeterminacy of experience, which for Hume is the result of the social intellect’s dependence upon dialogue and conversation, is reinterpreted by Hazlitt as the sublime horizon of knowledge produced by the power of abstraction, a ‘trembling boundary’, navigable only by the quasi-cognitive faculty of common sense. This exchange of the pragmatics of conversation for aesthetic enchantment reflects a fundamental shift from communication to power, and from ‘meaning’ to ‘truth’, as the precondition of thought.

Conclusion

Behind the efforts of Bentham and the Romantics to address the relationship between meaning and truth lies what Ian Duncan has described as the Humean drama of a life doubled between ‘a sceptical disillusionment from reality and a sentimental attachment to reality as illusion’. Recognizing the constitutive role played by fictions of reason in thought and life leads, in turn, to the acceptance that ‘[t]ruth arises neither in alienated reflection nor in forgetful habituation, nor in some cognitive synthesis of the two, but in the temporal oscillation between them’. The boundary between ‘cognitive synthesis’ and ‘temporal oscillation’ identified by Duncan is often subtle and difficult to determine, but it remains crucial. To distinguish between the two is to differentiate between the endeavour to lay new foundations for thought and the pragmatic acknowledgement of dividedness as a condition of human life. For this reason, as Duncan observes, it is important to distinguish between the pragmatic imagination of Hume’s empiricism, which maintains an ironic oscillation between belief and the consciousness of necessary fictions, and ‘the Kantian-Coleridgean “lyric” model … which casts the imagination as trace of an alienated transcendental cognition’.
Bentham’s theory of logical fictions takes its cue from Hume by reducing epistemological problems to hedonic considerations of human well-being: on this analysis, those fictions that are least likely to promote happiness are those that we are under the strongest moral obligation to discard. Similarly, Hazlitt’s ‘trembling boundary’ reflects the complexity of his response to a growing awareness, post-Hume, of the constitutive role played by epistemological fictions in thought. And yet, while Bentham’s management of fictitious entities was progressive in the way that it anticipated the removal of residual fictions from social life through the systematic proliferation of information, Hazlitt’s Romantic imagination explores the liminal ground between truth and fiction, evoking the shadows of lost certainties. In their different ways, both thinkers acknowledge that there is no way of answering Hume’s scepticism on its own epistemological terms. Bentham’s strategy is inherently pragmatic, subordinating final verification to paraphrasis. Hazlitt’s response, in contrast, is to idealize truth by subliming it into an indeterminate ground between reason and imaginative fiction. Like the transcendental metaphysics of his youthful mentor Coleridge, Hazlitt’s philosophy insists upon the overriding importance of truth by memorializing its absence.

In this essay I have tried to outline some ways in which the relationships between utilitarianism and Romanticism need to be rethought. Mill’s ‘truth/meaning’ binary, though intuitively appealing, is less convincing once one begins to read Bentham as a proto-pragmatist and the Romantics as thwarted objectivists. What W.V. Quine, among others, has demonstrated is that Bentham always treats the question, ‘is it true?’ as subordinate to the question, ‘what does it mean?’ – that is, ‘how does it translate in paraphrase?’ For Bentham, the literal and the figurative, the factual and the fictional, shade into each other. As he writes in the ‘Essay on Language’: ‘The discourse that … is not figurative is the discourse in which … no other fictions, – no other figures are employed than are absolutely necessary.’ The final words in this statement are crucial: they suggest that Bentham sees his task as ameliorating the effects of logical fictions in discourse, not removing them. Indeed, as Angela Esterhammer observes, Bentham’s acknowledgement of the priority of the figurative over the psychological means that he embraces the performativity of language, with all its contingencies and breakdowns, precisely because he sees fiction as inescapable. Conversely, for Hazlitt and many other Romantic writers, the fictions of reason are hypostatized as an ineffable territory that only art and feeling can access. In Hazlitt, the sublime ‘power of truth’ comes to reside at the ‘trembling boundary’ between
reason and imagination. In the final analysis, then, Mill’s characterization is only half right: Bentham’s vision of truth is certainly progressive and reforming, while that of Hazlitt and his fellow Romantics is, more often than not, fundamentally nostalgic; and yet, it is the latter who asks, ‘is it true?’ and Bentham who demands, ‘what is the meaning of it?’

Notes

1 Mill, 1840, 139–40.
2 Mill, 1840, 153.
3 Mill, 1840, 144–5.
4 Hume, ed. Selby-Bigge, 1975, 22.
5 Box, 1991, 67.
7 Locke, ed. Nidditch, 1975, 596.
8 See Berkeley, ed. Luce and Jessop, 1949, 42. Berkeley declares of objects that ‘[t]heir esse is percepri, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds of thinking beings which perceive them’.
9 Berkeley, 1949, 32.
14 Nerlich and Clarke eds. 1996, 11. Nerlich and Clarke identify the three other main sources of ‘pragmatic insight’ as: (1) classical categories of mood; (2) a theory of deixis, particularly in Humboldt, ‘accounting for the linguistic anchoring of speech in the situation of discourse’; (3) rhetorical theories, particularly those of Aristotle, which focus upon an essentially ‘pragmatic model of communication’ (9–10).
15 Nerlich and Clarke eds. 1996, 374.
16 Nerlich and Clarke eds. 1996, 11.
20 Hume, ed. Selby-Bigge, 1975, 305.
23 Baier, 1994, 175.
24 Stephen, 1902, 49. See also Clingham, 1998, 14. Clingham argues that the eighteenth century is the crucible of postmodernism’s insight into ‘the place of the fictive in the production of the real’.
28 These four essays appear to have been intended as parts of a general study of logic and language but, as with much of his later writing, Bentham made little effort to prepare the material for the press. There is no authoritative modern edition of these works, though C.K. Ogden attempted to synthesize the manuscript sources in Bentham’s Theory of Fictions (Ogden, 1932). Consequently, all references to the above essays are based on John Bowring’s flawed but workable The Works of Jeremy Bentham, 11 vols (Bowring, 1843).
29 Bowring, 1843, viii. 199.
31 Bowring, 1843, viii. 196.
33 Bowring, 1843, viii. 218.
37 Esterhammer, 2000, 72.
38 Bowring, 1843, viii. 321.
39 Bowring, 1843, viii. 246.
40 Bowring, 1843, viii. 246. For further discussion of the relation between paraphrasing and archetypation in Bentham see Harrison, 1983, 61–3 and Skorupski, 1993, 27.
41 Quine, 1969, 72. This is in marked contrast to Elie Halévy, who dismissed the technique as vague and inferior to ‘genetic definition’: Halévy, trans. Morris, 1972, 459. Halévy’s reading was in turn criticized by C.K. Ogden: Odgen, 1932, p. xxx.
42 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, xi. 6. For further background on Hazlitt’s tenancy see Grayling, 2000, 157–8, 252.
43 For the background to this issue see Park, 1971.
44 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, xi. 8–9.
45 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, xi. 6.
47 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, ii. 113–14.
50 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, xii. 45, 49, 51.
51 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, xii. 44–5.
52 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, i. 124–5.
53 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, i. 127.
54 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, xvi. 137.
55 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, viii. 257.
56 See Tomalin, 2009, 90–1, arguing that Hazlitt’s account of ‘a feeling, an inarticulable non-rational hunch’ presents ‘a creakingly precarious account of common sense’.
57 Natarajan, 2005, 118.
59 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, iv. 76.
60 Hazlitt, ed. Howe, 1934, ii. 147.
63 Duncan, 2007, 122.
64 Duncan, 2007, 124.
65 Bowring, 1843, viii. 331 (my emphasis).
66 See Esterhammer, 2000, 71: ‘Like Derrida … Bentham recognizes that the ever-present possibility of failure or abuse is part of what constitutes even the successful speech act.’

References
