

Mill on History

Christopher Macleod

The final version of this paper is forthcoming in A Companion to John Stuart Mill, edited by C. Macleod and D.E. Miller, to be published by Wiley-Blackwell.

[W]hoever desires to know either the best which has been accomplished, or what the most advanced minds think it possible to accomplish, for the renovation of historical studies, must look to the Continental and by the Continent we mean, of course, in an intellectual sense, Germany and France. (Michelet's History of France, XX: 219)

John Burrow, in his 1998 *Whigs and Liberals*, argues that Mill's historical thinking is broadly continuous with the Scottish Enlightenment tradition. That Mill shares much with his British predecessors is a point well taken. It would be easy to be misled by Mill's contrast of the eighteenth and nineteenth century – the former “abstract and metaphysical,” the latter “concrete and historical” (*Coleridge*, X: 125) – into supposing that his views on the relevance of historical studies to philosophy were formed solely by what he heralded as the “new historical school” (*Armand Carrel*, XX: 187) emerging in his own time.¹ That would be a mistake. We should not forget that John Stuart's father, James Mill, was the author of *A History of British India*, and was educated at Edinburgh by Dugald Stewart. This backdrop could not fail to play a crucial role in forming Mill's sense of the nature and purpose of the philosophical study of history – and any account of his thought that ignores that, via his father, Mill stands as a direct intellectual descendant of the tradition of conjectural history would be highly implausible.²

Nevertheless, Burrow's argument that Mill inherits much from the tradition of the eighteenth century philosophers of progress is itself only one side of the truth. Though there is continuity, there is also much change: Mill's ideas *do* diverge in significant ways from the eighteenth century tradition of historical philosophy. Stefan Collini (1999: 138) suggests that Mill “never really took the measure of [the] cultural sea-change” that romanticism generated in historiography – and that, as a result, Mill “remained a man of the Enlightenment” in his view of history. In this chapter, I will argue that this impression is mistaken. Though Mill maintains some views which we typically associate with the eighteenth century – most obviously, a concern for charting the natural stages of development through which societies must pass in the process of civilization – he also moves towards doctrines associated with the historicists of the nineteenth century. He believes in the historical variability of human nature, the need to understand historical periods in their own terms, and of progress driven not according to timeless laws but by an inner principle of development. As with so many other things, Mill's view of history is guided by an attempt to reconcile and combine the best of eighteenth-century British philosophy with nineteenth-century Continental developments.

Directionalism and Historicism

The term ‘historicism’ has had an awkward history – it has been used to signal different positions between, and even within, disciplines. To those working in Anglophone philosophy, it is perhaps still most commonly associated with Karl Popper, who used the

term to designate the claim that there are “universally valid ... laws of historical development” (Popper 1960: 41). Popper’s choice of terminology was unfortunate – for the term ‘historicism’ was already in use. On the Continent, ‘historicism’ had already become associated with the view – originating with the work of Chladenius, and finding its high point in the work of Herder, Humboldt, and Ranke – that because the human world is entirely a product of history, a sophisticated appreciation of historical setting is necessary to understanding human beings, their actions, and their institutions (Beiser 2011). This is not the place to chart the complicated history of the term, however.³ For the purposes of clarity, I will use the term ‘directionalism’ for historicism in Popper’s sense, reserving ‘historicism’ for views that resemble those of the central figures of the German historicist movement.

Directionalism, then, is the claim that history displays a pattern. Such a pattern is not merely ‘read into’ history, but is supposed to be of genuine explanatory value – not merely a story to tell to help us understand the past, but at some level an account of what is genuinely happening throughout history. Societies, the directionalist holds, proceed along identifiable and historical pathways, which can be specified by generalizable historical laws. The nature of such laws – the variables to which they appeal, and the grand narrative they present – of course depend on the directionalist’s specific account. History could be a story of the realising of some ideal, of continuous progress or decline, or of ongoing cycles of repetition. But the overall claim is that, rather than being “one damn thing after another,” history is in some sense endowed with an identifiable form – and that it is engagement with this form, as well as the detailed contents, which affords proper historical understanding.

Such understanding will involve placing historical agents, institutions, and events within historical processes larger than themselves – processes which might be opaque to the individuals involved. This view might seem to make individuals merely victims of history – to render their actions inevitable, in some way troubling for human freedom. This need not be so. The laws that directionalism appeals to *may* be deterministic, though they *need* not be. And even if deterministic, it is not obvious that determinism from above is any more problematic than determinism from below: it is not clear, that is to say, that the fact that *history* is subject to generalized laws should be any more worrying for human freedom than the fact that our psychology or brain chemistry is subject to generalized laws. We should also resist the temptation to think that the general laws of history are to be elevated to a status beyond that of other other general laws into claims about fate.

Directionalism comes in many forms. It certainly does not *originate* in the eighteenth century – the idea that history has a meaningful shape of course formed a central part of Christian thought long before then (Graham 1997: 166–200) – but it does gain a maturity and self-consciousness in that period. With an increasing confidence in the man’s ability to discover the laws which govern the *natural* world and *its* history came the anticipation that the laws which govern the *human* world and *its* history could be discovered. Adam Smith, for instance, argues that “[t]here are four distinct states which mankind pass thro: – 1st, the Age of Hunters; 2^{ndly}, the Age of Shepherds; 3^{rdly}, the Age of Agriculture; and 4^{thly}, the Age of Commerce,” and offers an explanation of why how each stage leads naturally to its successor (Smith 1978: 14). But it was a common concern of philosophers of the period to attempt to specify the laws which describe societies’

movement from a state of ignorance and barbarism to that of enlightenment and civilization – one shared by figures as diverse as Vico, Kant, and John Millar.⁴

The nineteenth-century philosophers of history learnt much from such works, but their distinctive contribution to the philosophical study of history was quite different, and has come to be known as ‘historicism’. The growing confidence in man’s ability to gain a rational understanding of his own past led to an increased awareness of the extent to which human beliefs and practices are conditioned by their historical context. The philosophers of the Enlightenment had undermined the transcendent place of faith and authority by use of reason – the historicists deepened their critical examination, questioning whether reason itself was transcendent, or historically determined. If, indeed, the practice of giving reasons and finding meanings were determined by local particularities, the attempt to understand the past through the prism of our own norms would be quite wrongheaded.⁵

The historicists claimed, therefore, that historical understanding must be understanding “from the inside” – making sense of actions involves making sense of reasons and meanings, and to do *this*, we must come to possess the concepts and mental categories that local agents used. If we assume that institutions and practices play the same role in past periods as outwardly similar actions and institutions do to us, we will either draw an interpretive blank, or misunderstand the past. Making sense of the *strangeness* of the past involves coming to see the period as local agents saw it. As Humboldt puts it “[e]verything depends on this fusion of the inquiring intellect and the object of the inquiry” (1967: 59).⁶

Understanding the past, then, is fundamentally a hermeneutic task: uncovering how agents themselves viewed the world often involves discovering unspoken assumptions, and such assumptions cannot be read off the pages of the chronicles, but must be reconstructed by a sympathetic act of interpretation. Reliable interpretation, however, can only be formed by a process of immersing oneself in the details of the past – understanding the formative background of the everyday world is a necessary prerequisite to understanding the great events traditionally treated by history. For the historicists of the nineteenth century, this new method of understanding the past also necessitated a new method of communicating it. The writing of history in this period comes to be an attempt to help others come to see the past as local agents saw it. The task was not merely to relate what happened, but to share what the past was like; not to document, but to recreate the past.

The shift that historicism brought about is perhaps most clearly marked by the changing view of human nature as itself historical. Hume could write that “[i]t is universally acknowledged, that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same” (Hume 1975: 83). Not all, but by far the larger proportion of Enlightenment thinkers would have agreed. For the eighteenth-century philosopher, history could be seen as a dataset, from which we can abstract, uncovering a fixed human nature. Perinetti (2006: 1122) makes a useful distinction:

First, there were philosophies of history that held that a theory of human nature can be arrived at independently of history. ... History is the progressive unfolding of innate and uniform natural faculties, a process that enables individuals

to gain consciousness of their own nature. An understanding of history is, thus, *derivative* from the metaphysics of human nature. ... Secondly, there was the contrary view that a theory of human nature cannot be arrived at independently of history. On this approach the very nature of human beings is subject to evolution and cannot be understood independently of the exertion of human faculties in history. History is, thus, *constitutive* of the metaphysics of human nature.

It is clear that whereas the first approach dominates the eighteenth century, the second approach dominates the nineteenth. For the former, human nature lies behind and *guides* history; for the latter human nature is imminently determined *by* history (Mandelbaum 1974: 141–269).

Yet, for all this, the historicists of the nineteenth century did not *abandon* directionalism. Herder could still speak of “the universal connection between time periods and people,” and “development, progress, steps on the ladder” between civilizations (2002: 287, 281, 299); Humboldt would remain comfortable with talk of the “world-historic dimensions” of events, and “universal destiny” of mankind (1967: 66). Rather, they sought (like, as we shall see, Mill) to *integrate* directionalism into a historicist framework. It may seem confused to attempt simultaneously to determine general laws of history while focusing on the uniqueness and individuality of historical episodes. Whether this is so, we shall consider below.

Mill on Directionalism and Historicism

Mill on Directionalism

Mill is clear in his endorsement of directionalism. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that one of the principal goals of his work is to establish the “laws which regulate the succession between one state of society and another” (*Logic*, VIII: 912) – not only for its own sake, but because “universal history ... is acknowledged to be one of the requisites of a general system of social doctrine” (*Logic*, VIII: 830). Knowing the general trends of history can help us in “determining what artificial means may be used, and to what extent, to accelerate the natural progress in so far as it is beneficial; to compensate for what may be its inherent inconveniences or disadvantages” (*Logic*, VIII: 829–30).

Mill’s philosophical motivation for directionalism has its roots in his basic commitment to naturalism. According to this view, man is wholly part of nature, and humans are objects broadly continuous with other simpler objects which we encounter in experience. As such, Mill believes that human beings are themselves subject to natural laws – primarily, the laws of associationist psychology. Given that *individuals* are subject to such laws, there is little reason to think that the societies *composed* of individuals will not be subject to natural laws (*Logic*, VIII: 879). Indeed, Mill’s method for discovering the laws which govern societies’ transition from one phase to another – the “inverse historical method” – involves confirming these laws by their deduction from the ethological and psychological laws on which they supervene (*Logic*, VIII: 915–7).

Mill argues that “the general tendency is, and will continue to be, saving occasional and temporary exceptions, one of improvement; a tendency towards a better and happier state ... there is a progressive change both in the character of the human race, and

in their outward circumstances so far as moulded by themselves” (*Logic*, VIII: 914). Of course, such progress is, and must remain, contingent. As with other causal laws, Mill holds that the laws of history are always subject to counteracting causes (*Logic* VII: 332–4). Indeed, Mill’s depiction of “Chinese stationariness” makes it clear that he thinks the natural progress of civilizations can be interrupted (*Bentham* X: 108; *Liberty*, XVIII: 273–4). When Mill suggests that “[t]he order of human progress” is guided with “a sort of necessity established ... by the general laws of human nature,” then, he merely means to claim that it is not accidental or unexpected that progress *does* occur amongst human societies (*Logic*, VIII: 938).

What is meant by ‘progress’, of course, is in need of clarification, in order to spell out the substance of Mill’s directionalism. Mill commonly thinks of progress in terms of the process of growing equality. Such an account appears, for instance, in the essay *Civilization*, in which history is portrayed as the story of the rise of the middle class, and their gradual dominance over the political institutions and social norms (*Civilization*, XVIII: 120–1). Mill’s impression of the pervasiveness and importance of the historical movement towards equality was deepened by reading Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. “Reading through the pages of our history,” Tocqueville writes, “we shall scarcely find any great events which did not promote the cause of equality over the last seven hundred years” (Tocqueville 2003: 14). “The gradual unfurling of equality in social conditions is ... a providential fact ... it is lasting and it constantly eludes human interferences; its development is served equally by every event and every human being” (Tocqueville 2003: 15).

Mill agrees. Tocqueville’s characterisation of the growth of equality as steady and law-like in its operation impressed him deeply – as did his analysis of its effects on the situation, character and intellect of humanity. *Democracy in America*, he wrote, “constitute[s] the beginning of a new era in the scientific study of politics” (*De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II]*, XVIII: 157). He finds no major disagreement with Tocqueville’s claim that there is an “irresistible tendency to equality of conditions” manifest throughout history (*De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [II]*, XVIII: 157). Indeed, such an account of history sets the agenda for much of Mill’s social philosophy, which attempts to preserve high ideals and freedom from tyranny in a society that will inevitably become dominated by greater and greater levels of equality.

Such is Mill’s general account of progress in broadly *social* terms – but he also thinks of progress in *intellectual* terms. The laws that govern history tend to promote greater and greater equality, but, importantly, they also promote a gradual growth of the intellectual abilities of mankind. Indeed, Mill’s considered opinion seems to be that *intellectual* progress is fundamental, it being the driving force behind *social* progress, rather than *vice versa*. “[T]he state of the speculative faculties, the character of the propositions assented to by the intellect, essentially determines the moral and political state of the community” (*System*, VIII: 926).

Mill’s account of intellectual progress is heavily indebted to that of Auguste Comte. For Comte the story of history is the rise of science, understood as humans’ ability to achieve control over phenomena *via* their predictive power. He describes history as humanity’s advancement as the law like progression through three stages of engaging with the world intellectually: Theological, Metaphysical, and Positive. As Raymond Aron puts it,

In the first, the mind explains phenomena by ascribing them to beings or forces comparable to man himself. In the second phase ... the mind explains phenomena by invoking abstract entities ... Finally, in the third phase, man is content to observe phenomena and to establish the regular link existing among them ... He abandons the search for the final principle behind the facts. (Aron 1968: 65–6)

This sequence takes place in each area of human activity: “each branch of our knowledge is necessarily liable in its course to pass in its turn through three different theoretical states: the theological or fictional state, the metaphysical or abstract state; the scientific or positive state” (Comte 1998: 81). The simplest branches of human knowledge, Comte claims, are those which rise to the level of science first, and Europe lies on the brink of positivising the most important science of all: the science of man. “[P]olitics must today rise to the rank of the sciences of observation” (Comte 1998: 47).

Mill describes Comte as one of the great minds of the age, and in the *Autobiography*, he wrote that he was a “long and ardent admirer” of Comte’s work (*Autobiography* I: 219; Letter to Auguste Comte, 8 Nov, 1841, XIII: 490). It is indicative of Mill’s high estimation of Comte’s early work that just the first chapter of *Auguste Comte and Positivism* is longer than essays on Bentham, Coleridge, or Whewell. And it was, in particular, Comte’s historical narrative that attracted Mill to his system – “by far his greatest achievement.” His view of progress is praised as “profound and comprehensive,” and Mill writes that he can “find no fundamental errors in M. Comte’s general conception of history” (*Auguste Comte*, X: 318, 324, 322).

Of course, Mill does not believe that either Tocqueville or Comte have had the *final word* on the laws that govern history. “Trac[ing] the filiation of states of society one from another ... is rather a possibility to be one day realized” (*Michelet History of France*, XX: 225). Much remains to be done, he believes, in the effort to construct an account of the laws of history. Nevertheless, he holds that Comte and Tocqueville have made significant progress on that task, and makes his commitment to the aspirations of directionalism clear.⁷

Mill on Historicism

If Mill is clear in his commitment to directionalism, he is, as we shall see, equally clear in his commitment to historicism. We cannot, he holds, fully understand a historical period without understanding its agents, and cannot understand its agents without attempting to enter into their perspective, and understand and perceive the world as they did. As with his directionalism, Mill’s subscription to this general outlook ultimately has its roots in his naturalism. Human beings, he believes, are natural beings, without *direct* or *intuitive* access to modes of apprehending and engaging with the world.⁸ As such, human understanding of the world is deeply historically conditioned – we understand the world as we do because of our acculturation within certain communities.

In Mill’s work, this naturalistic approach takes the form it does because of his associationist psychology. Such is Mill’s associationism that he believes that individuals vary enormously from one historical period to another: our nature is malleable. “[I]f there are some tendencies of human nature [...] which are the same in all ages and

countries, these never form the whole of the tendencies” (*Spirit of the Age*, XXII: 256-7). Human nature exhibits “astonishing pliability” throughout different historical periods (*Civilization*, XVIII: 145). Our nature is such that we can “amend it,” and it is this sense in which man is a “progressive being” (*Nature* X: 397; *Liberty*, XVIII: 224). We cannot truly understand the meanings of historical agent’s actions without “framin[ing] a connected outline of the inward structure of that person’s mind, so as to know and feel what the man is, and how life and the world paint themselves to his conceptions” (*On Genius*, I: 333). Indeed, for Mill, meaning *itself* is a product of historical circumstance (*Logic*, 686–97). “Without knowing the language of a people, we never really know their thoughts” (*Inaugural Address*, XXI: 226).⁹

There are, for Mill, then, no *transcendent* or *timeless* ways of interacting with the world. Indeed, one benefit to the study of history is that it reminds us that ways of being which seem absolutely given and unarguable are not in fact so, being the result of a historical process rather than a natural law (cf. *Autobiography*, I: 45; *Inaugural Address* XXI: 227). Mill holds that a vast range of ends can be made a motivation to action, given the appropriate psychological background (Crisp 1997: 88–90). Such is another way of saying that what is taken and offered by agents as *reasons for action* can vary enormously between different cultures. Mill’s naturalism is not the sort of naturalism which claims that certain ways of behaving or understanding are naturally ordained or given – it is, rather, to use a phrase of Allen Wood’s, a “historicized naturalism” (Wood 1990: 33–5).

If we are truly to understand history, then, we must get inside the minds of historical agents – and Mill offered high praise for those writers who did just that. In an 1844 review of Michelet’s work, Mill recognized the author as “a subjective historian, one who looks, above all, to the internal moving forces of human affairs,” and somebody who examines not the externalities of individual action but “their internal life; their thoughts and feelings in relation to themselves and their destination; the habitual temper of their minds” (*Michelet’s History of France*, XX: 235, 233). He approved of this method, writing that appreciating “the inward mental workings” was the only way to understand the *individuals* of other periods and the events they took place in (*Michelet’s History of France*, XX: 232). This was to be done with “[t]he reproduction of past events in the colours of life, and with all the complexity and bustle of a real scene”: we come to understand an age when we “feel with its sufferings, rejoice in its hopes” (*Michelet’s History of France*, XX: 225, 232).

Detailed appreciation of the minutiae of how day-to-day life was conducted, for Michelet, was everything. It was only by this method that we could truly see the world as historical figures had seen it. In order to see the world from another vantage point, though, it was not merely a study of facts that was necessary, but the active reconstruction of a way of life. This was a sympathetic and creative project, as much as an intellectual one. In order to communicate the essence of a historical period, as Hayden White puts it, Michelet aimed to avoid the common confusion of “accuracy in the details ... with truth of the meaning of the story” (1973: 142). And, indeed, Mill approved of such a method of writing history: “[t]he spirit of an age is a part of its history which cannot be extracted literally from ancient records, but must be distilled from those arid materials by the chemistry of the writer’s own mind ... it is a mistake to suppose that a

man of genius will be oftener wrong, in his views of history, than a dull unimaginative proser” (*Michelet’s History of France*, XX: 233).

To bring back to life the essence of an age was the project of history, and it was because of Michelet’s success in this project that Mill possessed “the warmest admiration” for his work (Letter to Gustave D’Eichthal, 7 May 1840, XIII: 432). He describes Michelet as a “great writer” (*Coleridge*, X: 139), and at one point queries whether a correspondent is “fully aware of the importance of Michelet as a European thinker” (Letter to Macvey Napier 3 Mar 1842, XIII: 505). Others, too, come in for high praise for their hermeneutic approach to historical study. Carlyle’s *History of the French Revolution* is described as the “truest of histories,” and a landmark work of “genius,” because of the immersion it offers in the “spirit of that period” (*Carlyle’s French Revolution*, XX: 133, 134, 137). Mill contrasts Carlyle’s history to that written in the eighteenth century:

Take, for example, Hume’s history ... Does Hume throw his own mind into the mind of an Anglo-Saxon, or an Anglo-Norman? Does any reader feel, after having read Hume’s history that he can now picture to himself what human life was, among the Anglo-Saxons? ... [D]id any one ever gain from Hume’s history anything like a picture of what may actually have been passing, in the minds, say, of Cavaliers or of Roundheads during the civil wars? (*Carlyle’s French Revolution* XX: 135)

Such histories convey information, but do not enable us to *understand* the past. Carlyle, in contrast, throws us into the period: he “brings the thing before us in the *concrete*,” rather than by way of “mere shadows and dim abstractions” (*Carlyle’s French Revolution*, XX: 134, 158). He allows us to see events as historical agents saw them, to find meaning in events (*Carlyle’s French Revolution*, XX: 136). Such a portrayal allows “a deeper understanding of what it is; the power to conceive, and to represent, not the mere outside surface and costume of the thing ... but an image of the thing itself in the concrete” (*Carlyle’s French Revolution*, XX: 138).

Combining Directionalism and Historicism

Mill, then, endorses both directionalism and historicism – indeed, it is this that most clearly sets him apart from his eighteenth-century predecessors. His goal was to understand civilisation as progressing in a law-like way, while at the same time doing justice to the independent and autonomous character of each period. This goal was of course not Mill’s alone – it was a common cause of the early nineteenth century. Nor was it a niche interest, of localized concern to those within the philosophy of history. It was, rather, reflective of the deeper struggle to integrate the world of reasons and the world of causes in to a unified vision.

Mill’s attempt to combine directionalism and historicism can profitably be compared to that of the greatest of all nineteenth-century philosophers of history: George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel too, famously sought to understand history as the *development* of humanity. “The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom” (Hegel 1956: 19). And yet he nevertheless insists that to understand a period, we must understand it from the inside, on the basis of its own “inherent distinctness of character” (Hegel 1956: 226). Because each period of history

is informed by humanity's self-understanding – because it is impossible to understand a historical action, object, agent, or theory, in abstraction from how humanity at that time understands itself – it is impossible to understand the *development* of humanity without such understanding. As Beiser puts it,

Hegel stresses that the philosopher of history must not rest content with *external* necessity, 'a necessity that originates causes that are themselves no more than external circumstances', and that he should strive to explain the *internal* necessity of things, why they happen from their underlying purpose or inherent form. (Beiser 2005: 274)

Though Hegel attempts to understand the progress of humanity as proceeding in a law-like way, such laws are not seen as something *external* to human understanding, but are driven by such understanding *internally*. "Principle – Plan of Existence – Law – is a hidden undeveloped essence, which *as such* – however true in itself – is not completely real" (Hegel 1956: 22). Geist is self-positing, with Reason imposing ends upon itself; as ends are internally generated, so too is the process by which history progresses. Terminology aside, Mill's thought is remarkably similar.

[H]istory is conceived as a progressive chain of causes and effects; or (by an apter metaphor) as a gradually unfolding web, in which every fresh part that comes to view is a prolongation of the part previously unrolled, whether we can trace the separate threads from the one into the other, or not. (*Michelet's History of France*, XX: 225)

The correction of his initial characterization of history as "a progressive chain of causes and effects" in favour of "an unfolding web, in which every fresh part that comes to view is a prolongation of the part previously unrolled" is telling – and reminiscent of the process of Hegelian *aufheben* (cf. *Guizot's Essays and Lectures on History*, XX: 260). The language of unfolding emphasizes the importance of the internal: progression happens by unpacking that which is already immanently contained in the present. The metaphor of 'unfolding' is repeated in the essay on *Coleridge*, where Michelet is said to have

made a science of causes and effects; who, by making the facts and events of the past have a meaning and an intelligible place in the gradual evolution of humanity, have at once given history, even to the imagination, an interest like romance, and afforded the only means of predicting and guiding the future, by unfolding the agencies which have produced and still maintain the Present. (*Coleridge*, X: 139–40)

The attempt to combine the directionalist's appeal to *causation* with the historicist's appeal to *meaning* is ultimately an attempt to incorporate two ways of looking at historical events. As objects of natural study, historical episodes are subject to law like generalizations. But at the same time, they are the product of self-directing agents acting

from reasons. The aim is to integrate the two perspectives – to see human beings as at once members of the world of reasons and the world of causes.

That aim, of course, is intimately related to Mill's ongoing attempt to integrate the insights of the two schools Mill sees as dominant in European philosophy during his period. The radical, empiricist, liberal school was precise, clear thinking, but excessively narrow in its ability to understand the possibilities of human nature. The conservative, metaphysical, romantic school was profound and imaginative, but intellectually undisciplined. The two schools of philosophy are best represented by Bentham and Coleridge.

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? The one took his stand *outside* the received opinion, and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it; the other looked at it from within, and endeavoured to see it with the eyes of a believer in it. (*Coleridge*, X: 119)

Mill sought to combine and reconcile the two schools, preserving the rigour of the former and the depth of the latter. “[W]hoever could master the premises and combine the methods of both, would possess the entire English philosophy of their age” (*Coleridge*, X: 121). His attempt to fuse the explanatory and hermeneutic perspectives in history – one taking its stance outside the perspective of agents, and treating episodes as subject to general directional laws; the other taking its stance inside the perspective of agents, treating episodes in their historical specificity – was one part of this overall goal.

There are, Mill claims, three stages to the study of history. In the first stage, historians “transport feelings and notions back into the past, and refer all ages and forms of human life to the standard of that in which the writer himself lives” – they neglect the fact that historical agents acted and thought with reasons and concepts of their own. Such a style of history is unsuccessful, giving “an exceedingly false notion of their qualities and circumstances.” In the second stage, this fault is corrected, with an attempt being made “to regard former ages not with the eyes of a modern, but, as far as possible with that of a contemporary; to realize a true and living picture of the past time, clothed in its circumstances and peculiarities.” The highest stage of historical writing, however, involves incorporating this into a more systematic understanding of the past. “There is yet a third, and the highest stage of historical investigation, in which the aim is not simply to compose histories, but to construct a science of history” (*Michelet's History of France*, XX: 223–5).

Mill's belief in the possibility of a *science* of history is not a claim that we can, in understanding the movement of history, bypass the human viewpoint – the science of history can no more do without the language of reasons and concepts than the science of ethology or associationist psychology. “[B]efore we can trace the filiation of states of society one from another, we must rightly understand and clearly conceive them, each apart from the rest” (*Michelet's History of France*, XX: 225). Though Mill sees real use for mathematical methods in understanding history, it would be anachronistic to think of Mill's thought as an early attempt at quantizing the study history as some attempted in the twentieth century (*Logic*, 931–4).¹⁰ A science of history is the ultimate aim, but

we should not assume that Mill thought it possible to rid such a science of the everyday vocabulary we use to understand humans.

Nevertheless, the attempt to construct a science of history might seem to at odds with the historicist claim that each culture is unique and to be understood in its own terms. Even if the aim to render the study of history scientific does not exclude the *human* viewpoint, we might wonder whether there is a universalist aspiration behind that aim which is in tension with the historicist claim that human viewpoints are *irreducibly many and varied* – whether the attempt to generalize over historical periods must involve an imperializing use of foreign concepts to describe local particularities. Mill never addresses this issue directly. But if there is a tension here, it seems clear where his commitments lie. Mill takes historicist insights extremely seriously, and these insights altered and deepened his approach to history – much as his encounter with conservative ideas altered and deepened his approach to politics, and his encounter with Coleridge altered and deepened his approach to philosophy more broadly. But though his thinking was deeply influenced by these encounters, Mill never abandons a liberal, utilitarian and cosmopolitan outlook on the unity of mankind, and never wavers in his belief that human beings and their communities can be subject to scientific investigation.

Notes

¹ See also, for instance, *Coleridge*, X: 138–9, *Autobiography* I: 169.

² Indeed, the more theoretical passages of *History of British India* follow very much in the tradition of conjectural history. See Thomas (1975: xiii) and *Comments on the Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, XIII: 99.

³ See Lee and Beck (1954) for a useful history of the term.

⁴ See Perinetti (2006: 1121–34) for useful discussion of the directionalism in the eighteenth century.

⁵ So stated, of course, the historicist doctrine is connected in important ways to central claims of modern communitarianism (see, for instance MacIntyre 1988) – and thereby connects Mill to these movements, also.

⁶ See Moore (2003: 48–51) for extremely useful discussion of what it means to come to possess another’s concepts.

⁷ A case could also be made that Guizot is enormously influential on the character of Mill’s directionalism. Guizot’s attempt to construct a directionalist account of *European* history comes in for much praise, being “one of the most successful ... partial efforts” at constructing an account of the general laws of history (*Guizot’s Essays and Lectures on History*, XX: 262). Because that effort *is* partial, however, I will not address his contribution in this chapter.

⁸ This is connected in important ways to Mill’s general denial of intuitionism. See Macleod (2013; 2014).

⁹ It is interesting to compare John Stuart Mill and James Mill on the necessity of possessing the language of a people in order to understand them, and write their history. John Stuart Mill, criticizing a historian of France for not having mastery over the French language: “The very first and simplest requisite for a writer of French history, a knowledge of the French language, Mr. Alison does not possess in the necessary perfection” (*Alison’s History of the French Revolution*, XX: 117). James Mill, defending his lack of mastery over Sanskrit: “In the first place, it appeared to me, that a sufficient stock of information was now collected in the languages of Europe, to enable the inquirer to ascertain every important point, in the history of India” (J. Mill 1826: vol. 1, ix).

¹⁰ See Bentley (1999: 129–37) for a useful overview of twentieth-century attempts to quantize the study of history. See also Beiser (2011: 6–10) on the danger of anachronism in approaching the German historicists’ attempt to construct a ‘science’ of history.

References

- Aron, R. 1968. *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, vol. 1. London: Penguin Books.
- Beiser, F. 2005. *Hegel*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- _____. 2011. *The German Historicist Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bentley, M. 1999. *Modern Historiography: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Burrow, J. 1998. *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Collini, S. 1999. *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Comte, A. 1998. *Early Political Writings*. Edited by H.S. Jones. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crisp, R. 1997. *Mill on Utilitarianism*. London: Routledge.
- Graham, G. 1997. *The Shape of the Past: A Philosophical Approach to History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1956. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover.
- Herder, W. 2002. *Philosophical Writings*. Edited and translated by M.N. Forster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Humboldt, W. 1967. "On the Historian's Task." *History and Theory* 7(1): 57–71.
- Hume, D. 1975. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Moral*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, W.E. and Beck, R.N. 1954. "The Meaning of Historicism." *The American Historical Review*. 59(3): 568–77.
- MacIntyre, A. 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth.
- Macleod, C. 2013. "Mill, Intuitions, and Normativity." *Utilitas* 25(1): 46–65.
- _____. 2014. "Mill on the epistemology of reasons: a comparison with Kant." In *Mill's System of Logic: Critical Appraisals*, edited by A. Loizides, 151–69. London: Routledge.
- Mandelbaum, M. 1974. *History, Man and Reason: A Study in 19th Century Thought*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Mill, J. 1826. *A History of British India*, 3rd edition, vol. 1. London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy.
- Moore, A.W. 2003. *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty: Themes and variations in Kant's moral and religious philosophy*. New York: Routledge.
- Perinetti, D. 2006. "Philosophical Reflection on History." In *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-century Philosophy* vol. 2, edited by K. Haakonssen, 1107–40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Popper, K. 1960. *The Poverty of Historicism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Smith, A. 1978. *Lecture on Jurisprudence*. Edited by R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael and P.G. Stein. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, 1975. "Editor's Introduction." In J. Mill, *The History of British India*, xi–xli. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Tocqueville, A. 2003. *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America*, translated by G.E. Bevan. London: Penguin Books.
- White, H. 1973. *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Wood, A. 1990. *Hegel's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.