

MILL ON FREEDOM, NORMATIVITY, AND SPONTANEITY

Christopher Macleod

The influence of ‘Germano-Coleridgean’ thought on Mill – philosophy he associated with nineteenth century, rather than the eighteenth century – is clearest in his practical philosophy. The ways in which Mill incorporates nineteenth century concerns into his moral, social and political philosophy are well known. Mill’s utilitarianism expands beyond its Benthamite origins by focusing on the culture of the individual; his social analysis is more firmly grounded in a historical nature of society’s progression; liberty becomes in his hands a means not primarily for pursuing one’s interests and desires, but for their authentic development.

There are corresponding changes in Mill’s theoretical philosophy, though these are less often noticed. I wish, in this paper, to highlight various advances Mill made upon his British forbearers concerning the nature of agency. In particular, I will highlight Mill’s attempt to account for the existence of normativity, free will, and spontaneity in the context of his associationist psychology. Each of these moves were made in response to evolving concerns of German idealists about the British empiricists’ ‘mechanistic’ conception of mind. I will not here attempt to tell the story of the historical transmission of these concerns from German philosophy to Mill – though such a story of this sort could certainly be told.¹ Rather, I will show various ways in which Mill engaged with the problem of agency, and attempted to “elicit dynamical conclusions” from the “mechanical premises” of associationism (*Letter to Carlyle*, XII: 221).²

As will be seen, Mill’s attempt to grapple with these issues did not issue in entirely satisfactory results. Sometimes, philosophical progress is made by the resolution of difficulties – but sometimes simply by recognising and taking difficulties sufficiently seriously as to be *in need* of attempted resolution. It is the latter which was the case here. Mill saw the difficulties associationism faced as an account of human agency, and deserves credit for engaging with those difficulties rather than brushing them to one side. Taken together, his attempts to do justice to the fundamental *activity* of human beings show a noteworthy engagement with themes emerging from Kantian and post-Kantian schools of thought.³

I. The Determinacy of Mind

Mill’s philosophical outlook is naturalistic through and through: human beings, he holds, are wholly a part of nature, and are subject to natural causal laws. This applies equally to *mind* as to *body*. Mill holds that the substantive laws that govern the operation of mind can, like other causal laws, only be discovered by observation and induction. And, by observation and induction, Mill holds, it can be established that Associationism – “the theory which resolves all the phenomena of the mind into ideas of sensation connected together by the law of association” (*Blakey’s History of Moral Science*, X: 23) – is the correct theory of the human mind.

Human beings are causally receptive to the outside world – which is to say capable of *sensation*. But, equally importantly, they are capable of recollecting sensation by way of *ideas*:

Whenever any state of consciousness has once been excited in us, no matter by what cause, an inferior degree of the same state of consciousness, a state of consciousness resembling the former, but inferior in intensity, is capable of being reproduced in us, without the presence of any such cause as excited it at first. Thus, if we have once seen or touched an object, we can afterwards think of the object though it be absent from our sight or from our touch. [...] [I]n the language of Hume, [...] every mental *impression* has its *idea*. (*System*, VIII: 852)

Ideas are excited by sensation, but also by two fundamental laws of association that hold between ideas: the law of *similarity*, and the law of *contiguity*. According to the first, if two ideas are similar, one idea will tend to recall the other. According to the second, when ideas are experienced contiguously – when they occur in close succession or simultaneously – again, the ideas will tend to give rise to one another even when encountered individually. Subject to various clarifications, Mill holds that all mental phenomena can be accounted for on the basis of sensation and the combination of resultant ideas by these laws.

Which ideas are combined in processes of association is clearly a matter of both the natural and the cultural order. The physical nature of fire determines that the sensation of fire is often experienced alongside the sensation of heat; as such the corresponding ideas are repeatedly experienced contiguously and become associated, and the idea of fire thereby comes to recall the idea of heat. The connection between the sensation of a particular colour and the name ‘red’ is not itself dictated by nature; nevertheless, when a red sensation occurs and the corresponding idea arises, the idea of ‘red’ is often also presented, and as such the ideas become closely associated.⁴

Strength of association is increased by the frequency with which two ideas are experienced together (*System*, VIII: 852), and it is an important feature of the associationist account that ideas can become *so* closely associated that it becomes “impossible for us to think the one thing disjoined from the other [...] the idea called up by association become[s], in our consciousness, inseparable from the idea which suggested it” (*Examination*, IX: 178). A useful case in point is the association of our idea of *matter* with that of the *primary qualities*. The idea of matter itself, Mill indicates, is nothing but the idea of groups of “permanent possibilities of sensation” – sensations themselves may be fleeting, but where we can *return* to groups of sensations after a period of absence, we have the ideas of “the permanency and externality which belong to Matter”. Though our idea of matter is simply this idea of the permanent possibility of groups of sensations, Mill notes that “as we are actually constituted” groups of sensations are united “through the connexion which they all have, by laws of coexistence or of causation, with the sensations which are referable to the sense of touch and to the muscles; those which answer to the terms Resistance, Extension, and Figure” (*Examination*, IX: 213). The constant experience of matter alongside resistance, extension and figure, means that the ideas become so associated that we cannot imagine matter *without* these ‘primary’ qualities.⁵

Indeed, ideas can become so closely bound up with one another that the resulting idea is entirely novel. “When many impressions or ideas are operating in the mind together, there sometimes takes place a process of a similar kind to chemical combination” in which a “combination of two substances produces [...] a third substance with properties different from those of either of the two substances separately, or of both of them taken together.” (*System*, VIII: 853, 371).

Mental phenomena, joined together by association, [...] may merge into a compound, in which the separate elements are no more distinguishable as such, than hydrogen and oxygen in water; the compound having all the appearance of a phenomenon *sui generis*, as simple and elementary as the ingredients, and with properties different from any of them [...] a truth which, once ascertained, evidently opens a new and wider range of possibilities for the generation of mental phenomena by means of association. (*Bain’s Psychology*, XI: 347)

The processes of association are iterative – and over time, can run deep into the human mind. Association can transform our very conception of what it *is* that we perceive; interpretations and inferences that are the products of initial observations can themselves become so associated with our perceptions as to enter into our idea of *what we observe*. To offer a familiar example: where once I repeatedly inferred from my perceived visual field that *this object is a face*, by gradual processes of association, over time, the act of perception and inference become “intimately blended”, and I come to see the object *as a face* (*System*, VIII: 641–2). Intentional content enters *into* what I take myself to perceive.⁶

A great part of what seems observation is really inference [...] For in almost every act of our perceiving faculties, observation and inferences are intimately blended. What we are said to observe is usually a compound result, of which one-tenth may be observation, and the remaining nine-tenths inference. (*System*, VIII: 641–2)

Close and attentive analysis of what we take to be observations *may* reveal the originally given content from which present ideas have emerged – but that field may simply be irretrievably lost in the process of associative combination and interpretation. This, of course, makes it difficult to feel confident that we are able fully to trace the paths that association has taken solely by means of introspection. Furthermore, Mill holds that some ideas which enter into combinations and become transformed by association may themselves not always rise to the level of conscious awareness – again, making them unavailable to introspection (*Notes on the Analysis*, XXXI: 117–9).

The complex and progressive nature of the process of association means that “nothing approaching” exact prediction of effects from causes is possible in any given case. “[E]ven if our science of human nature were theoretically perfect [...] still, as the data are never all given, nor ever precisely alike in different cases, we could neither make positive predictions, nor lay down universal propositions” (*System*, VIII: 846). For this reason, the generalizations that we can make will always be, at best, “approximately true”. Despite this, however, Mill does not waver on the fact that the processes of mind are at root deterministic, in the same sense that all causal laws are deterministic. “[T]here exist uniformities of succession among states of mind” (*System*, VIII: 851).

II. Mechanism and Normativity

Associationism is a causal account of mind which aims to explain all mental phenomena – the generation of simple ideas, but also the complex phenomena of desire and belief. Such an account, however, clearly faces questions about whether the existence of causal explanations for belief and desire are compatible with our experience of these states the outcome of processes of reasoning. If beliefs and desires are *causally* determined, in what meaningful sense can they be said to be the results of an agent's rational judgement? If they are generated by the association, how can we understand them as products of norm-guided inferences?

Mill takes the worry very seriously. His particular comments on the relationship between the normativity and causal determinism of belief come in the context of an examination of his father's account of belief as inseparable association. According to that theory, "to believe a succession or coexistence between two facts is only to have the ideas of the two facts so strongly and closely associated, that we cannot help having one idea when we have the other." To believe that *Peter is tall*, for instance, is merely to have a particularly strong and inseparable association between the ideas of 'Peter' and 'tall'. When I encounter Peter and often have the idea of tallness, I come eventually to associate those ideas so closely that I cannot help thinking of Peter without thinking of tallness – a mental state constitutive of belief.

As Mill notes, if subjective association, however strong, is taken as an *exhaustive* account of how beliefs are formed, though, it neglects the form of endorsement that is distinctive of belief as aiming at objectivity.

[I]f belief is only an inseparable association, belief is a matter of habit and accident, and not of reason. Assuredly an association, however close, between two ideas, is not a sufficient ground of belief; is not evidence that the corresponding facts are united in external nature. The theory seems to annihilate all distinction between the belief of the wise, which is regulated by evidence, and conforms to the real successions and coexistences of the facts of the universe, and the belief of fools, which is mechanically produced by any accidental association that suggests the idea of a succession or coexistence to the mind: a belief aptly characterized by the popular expression, believing a thing because they have taken it into their heads. (*Notes on the Analysis*, XXXI: 162–3)

This is not to deny that particularly strong association can itself issue in belief; this, Mill holds clearly can and does occur in some cases. "[A]n association, sufficiently strong [...] produces a kind of mechanical belief" (*Notes on the Analysis*, XXXI: 179). But beliefs which are the result of processes of reasoning do not conform to this model.

Some beliefs are the product of "mechanical" association, but some are the products of the agent engaged in active processes of reasoning. Two things need to be done in order to understand the relationship between these two sources of belief: firstly, to establish how, notwithstanding the force of association, one can *withhold* belief from certain propositions where the relevant subjective association holds, and secondly, the nature of the process of reasons which can generate beliefs in its own distinctive fashion. On the former, Mill is clear that that process by which we can resist beliefs where association holds is itself a process which can be explained in associative terms. While *a* might be strongly and inseparably associated with *P* – such that, other things being equal I would form a belief that *a* is *P* –

where *other* associations are sufficiently strong, they will call to mind conflicting ideas which neutralise the effect of that initial association.

[T]he processes by which this belief is corrected, or reduced to rational bounds, all consist in the growth of a counter-association, [...] There are two ways in which this counter association may be generated. One is, by counter-evidence; by contrary experience in the specific case, which, by associating the circumstances of the case with a contrary belief, destroys their association with the original belief. But there is also another mode of weakening, or altogether destroying, the belief, without adducing contrary experience: namely, by merely recognising the insufficiency of the existing experience; by reflecting on other instances in which the same amount and kind of experience have existed, but were not followed by the expected result. (*Notes on the Analysis*, XXXI: 179)

This is a process of *resisting* beliefs. The process which enables us to generate *new* beliefs is also associative. By coming to associate some associations with disappointment and some with successful expectation, we associate the *circumstances* of successful association with successful association. Having associated the association of a_1 with P_1 , a_2 with P_2 , *etc.*, with frustration or success, that is to say, I come in turn to associate some *conditions* of belief-formation with success – *i.e.*, I form *rules* for the successful formation of belief.

[A]s disappointment nevertheless not unfrequently happens notwithstanding a considerable amount of past experience on the side of the expectation, the mind is put upon making distinctions in the kind of past experiences, and finding out what qualities, besides mere frequency, experience must have, in order not to be followed by disappointment. In other words, it considers the conditions of right inference from experience; and by degrees arrives at principles or rules, more or less accurate, for inductive reasoning. (*Notes on the Analysis*, XXXI: 179)

Some rules, of course, can be learnt without instruction, though some must be imparted as explicit precepts *via* the process of education. Whatever their source, the rules of belief can be incorporated into our belief-forming mechanisms – and it is this process of incorporating norms of the “Art of Thinking” (*Examination*, IX: 261) into our mental life that is constitutive of our rationality.

Mill’s discussion of normativity in this context is focused largely on *theoretical* reasoning – correcting mechanical belief formation by reasoning. But the point applies also to *practical* reasoning: reasoning about which objects we ought to pursue. In somewhat simplified terms, Mill holds that initially, pleasure is the only object we desire, and that other objects become desirable by association with pleasure. These processes, too, can occur by ‘accidental’ association, as for instance when money becomes associated with pleasure and become an object of desire beyond all rational bounds. So too can they be corrected by counter-association which can be generated by associating some *conditions* of association with insufficiency or sufficiency – building up rules which can be incorporated into our practical reasoning or the “Art of Life” (*System*, VIII: 949).

In answer to the question of how our beliefs can be the product of the rational judgement if they are causally determined, then, Mill offers the argument rational judgement is itself an associative phenomenon built from the association of certain rules with ends. Processes of reasoning are accounted for as particularly complex forms of association – but association,

nonetheless. As a way to account for the possibility of normativity within a deterministic outlook, this might strike us unsatisfactory – for rational judgements simply turn out to be causal processes, rather than being issued from a distinctive source. Two things are perhaps worth noting, however. The first is that, of course, if seen as an attempt to conjure non-deterministic normative judgements from a deterministic mind, Mill’s account of normativity is not, and could not expect to be, successful. But if seen as an attempt to show how there can be two views of the same underlying processes, the does not obviously fail. Mill offers two standpoints from which we can view reasons – they can be seen as results of processes of association, or as the results of incorporating rules of belief into our mental life.⁷

The second is that although Mill seeks to retain a causal and deterministic account, he quite clearly feels the pressure of accounting for normativity against the backdrop of the potential charge of being ‘mechanistic’ – a term, indeed, that he applies to his father’s account of belief, while correcting it. At its roots, the charge was that associationism could not account for how an agent could be actively engaged in processes reasoning, if their thoughts were simply the outcome of process of association. Most notably, in England, Coleridge argued against associationism – “the scheme of pure mechanism, [...] manufacturing mind our of sense and sense out of sensation, which reduces all form to shape and all shape to impression from without” (Coleridge 2002: 145–6) – as “neither tenable in theory, nor founded in facts” on the grounds of “the utter incompatibility of such a law (if law it may be called, which would itself be a slave of chances) with even that *appearance* of rationality” (Coleridge 1985: 106, 116).⁸ Mill aims to show how the associationist account can be retained, while averting this charge of ‘mechanism’.

III. Mechanism and Will

Mill’s deterministic account of mind inevitably gives rise to worries not just about human rationality, but also human freedom.⁹ Even if it could be established that human beings can act from reasons, the question would still remain whether such action was *free*. Such worries occupied Mill deeply, during his ‘mental crisis’.

[T]he doctrine of what is called Philosophical Necessity weighed on my existence like an incubus. I felt as if I was scientifically proved to be the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances; as if my character and that of all others had been formed for us by agencies beyond our control, and was wholly out of our control, and was wholly out of their power. (*Autobiography*, I: 174–6)

The focus on *character* is perhaps worthy of comment. The proximate cause of our willing any action, according to Mill, is in all cases *desire*. Desire is thus formally characterised in Mill’s work as “the initiatory stage of Will”. “[I]n every case, the will is called into action by a motive. The motive, like all other motives, is a desire” (*Notes on the Analysis*, XXXI: 215, 248). Though Mill holds that, originally, pleasure is the only object of human desire, other objects can become objects of desire by processes of association. Initially desiring only pleasure, I can come to desire, *i.e.*, companionship, if companionship is often enough experienced alongside pleasure – indeed, having come themselves to be objects of desire, such objects can continue to be desired even if they cease to be experienced alongside pleasure. “Although, from some change in us or in our circumstances, we have ceased to find any pleasure in the action, or perhaps to anticipate any pleasure as the consequence of it, *we still continue to desire the action, and consequently to do it*” (*System*, VIII: 842, my emphasis). Such is the process of the formation of habits of willing, and it is only when such

habits “have become independent of the feelings of pain or pleasure from which they originally took their rise, that we are said to have a confirmed character” (*System*, VIII: 483). Although, that is to say, Mill expresses his concerns about freedom primarily in terms of the determinism of character, they can equally well be expressed in terms of the determinism of desire.

It is true, Mill acknowledges, that our actions are determined according to “Laws of Mind” (*System*, VIII: 849). “[O]ur actions are determined by our will, our will by our desires, and our desires by the joint influence of the motives presented to us and of our individual character” (*Examination*, IX: 466). Indeed, “if we knew the person thoroughly, and knew all the inducements which are acting upon him, we could foretell his conduct with as much certainty as we can predict any physical event” (*System*, VIII: 836–7). Yet this does not threaten our freedom. I act as I do because of the particular desires I possess, in combination with the situation I find myself in. But, *had I preferred to act otherwise*, I would have done so. Indeed, that our actions are linked to our desires in this is itself a mark of our freedom. It is exactly this connection that means that it is *not* the case that “[w]hatever our wishes may be, a superior power, or an abstract destiny, will overrule them, and compel us to act, not as we desire, but in the manner predestined” (*Examination*, IX: 465).

Nevertheless, the fact that *had I preferred to act otherwise, I would have done so*, Mill acknowledges, would be scant comfort if we had no control over those desires, for it would provide a wholly unrealisable counterfactual. But, he suggests, this is not the case, for individuals *do* have control over their character and desires. Our desires are themselves a product of forces of association, but that does not preclude one of those forces being our own desire to change.

He has, to a certain extent, a power to alter his character. Its being, in the ultimate resort, formed for him, is not inconsistent with its being, in part, formed by him as one of the intermediate agents. His character is formed by his circumstances, (including among these his particular organisation), but his own desire to mould it in a particular way is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least influential. (*System*, VIII: 840)

Despite the reality of determinism, then, individuals *can* change their character and desires, if they desire to do so. Mill is deeply realistic about the nature of our ability to change, however. It cannot be achieved by a revolutionary choice of *gesinnung*¹⁰, but must instead involve practised and gradual retraining. This process of *reforming* our character, that is to say, draws on exactly the same processes as are involved in the initial formation of our character by education and upbringing.

We cannot, indeed, directly will to be different from what we are; but neither did those who are supposed to have formed our characters directly will that we should be what we are. [...] We are exactly as capable of making our own character, if we will, as others are of making it for us. (*System*, VIII: 840)

Whether we *do* desire to change our character and desires remains, of course, a pivotal question, and one, again, over which we have only indirect control. Someone who does not possess the desire to change their desires will not act to do so. But “to think that we have no power of altering our character, and to think that we shall not use our power unless we desire to use it, are very different things” (*System*, VIII: 840).

Although we act in accordance to our “strongest present desire or aversion” (*Examination*, IX: 452), then, the process is rather more complex than we might expect. The desires that we possess form a dynamic system, capable of self-correction. Once again, then, Mill attempts to resist the idea of the human action as generated mechanically – in this case, by avoiding a model under which desires are uninterruptably direct in their determination of action. Instead, Mill wishes to show an alternative view of the relation between will and desire is compatible with associationism – one under which a more active engagement with, and reflexive detachment from, our own desires is possible. Once again, Mill attempts to retain a causal and deterministic account of mind, while incorporating a view of the human being as active.

A further aspect of Mill’s account is also worthy of note, for it too sits at some distance from a mechanical view of the influence of desire on the will. While Mill certainly regards desires as determining our action, we should not think of desires as stable entities which exert a set force on the will. Rather, we are to think of our preferences as themselves live and changing, actively struggling to assert themselves and never “for any two successive instances the same.”

[T]he hurricane does not level the house or blow down the tree without resistance [...] Far less does victory come without a contest to the strongest of two moral, or even two vital forces, whose nature it is to be never fixed, but always flowing, quantities. In a struggle between passions, there is not a single instant in which there does not pass across the mind some thought, which adds strength to, or takes it from, one or the other of the contending powers. (*Examination*, IX: 452)

Mill resists the image of our desires as a system of point vectors which can be resolved by summation. Desires themselves are taken to be fluid states – forces which by their nature are moving rather than static. Here, too, Mill attempts to avoid the charge of ‘mechanism’ by showing how desires *themselves*, as well as the will they influence, are forces which must be understood in dynamic terms.¹¹

IV. Mechanism and Spontaneity

Mill’s theory of freedom, then, is compatibilist. Our actions and thoughts are determined by causal laws, but if they are caused in the right way – a result of our *own* desires, which are themselves amenable to change by us – we are free.

[W]e shall find that this feeling, of our being able to modify our own character *if we wish*, is itself the feeling of moral freedom which we are conscious of. A person feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist; that were he desirous of altogether throwing them off, there would not be required for that purpose a stronger desire than he knows himself to be capable of feeling.

Such compatibilist accounts are of course subject to the basic objection that although some forms of causal determination for our actions might seem preferable to others – *i.e.*, causal determination which emanates from within our own character – nevertheless, being determined in such a manner does not amount to *freedom*. As Kant puts it: “if the freedom of our will were none other than the latter [...] then it would at bottom be nothing better than

the freedom of a turnspit, which, when once it is wound up, also accomplishes its movements of itself” (CPrR, 5:79). An individual whose behaviour was determined in this manner would ultimately be passive in the face of causal forces beyond their control.

True freedom, according to this line of thought, would require that we were capable of initiating activity in a deeper sense than the compatibilist can accommodate – originating action spontaneously.¹² Even when action arises from within our true character, if that action is determined by causal laws, “the inner principle was determined by an external principle” rather than by “spontaneity which is without qualification” (LM, 28: 276). “The transcendental idea of freedom [...] is that of the absolute spontaneity of an action” (CPR A448/B476). Such spontaneity would be possible only if the will “can be efficient independently of alien causes determining it”, *i.e.*, can act independently of the causal order (GW 4: 446).

Mill, of course, disagrees that such independence from the causal order is either necessary for freedom, or indeed possible. He does, however, acknowledge that prior associationist accounts have failed to adequately acknowledge and explain the active elements of mind – and have as such depicted human beings as almost entirely passive. An inability to do justice to the spontaneity of mind renders those theories incomplete because “the necessity, incumbent on any theory of the mind, of accounting for our voluntary powers.”

Those who have studied the writings of the Association Psychologists, must often have been unfavourably impressed by the almost total absence, in their analytical expositions, of the recognition of any active element, or spontaneity, in the mind itself. Sensation, and the memory of sensation, are passive phenomena; the mind, in them, does not act, but is acted upon; it is a mere recipient of impressions; and though adhesion by association may enable one of these passive impressions to recall another, yet when recalled, it is but passive still. [...] The mind, however, is active as well as passive; and the apparent insufficiency of the theory to account for the mind’s activity, is probably the circumstance which has oftenest operated to alienate from the Association Psychology any of those who had really studied it. (*Bain’s Psychology*, XI: 354)

Despite his commitment to the theory, then, Mill certainly feels the force of criticisms of association’s ability to account for human activity, and recognises that an account of spontaneity is needed for a complete metaphysics of voluntary action.¹³ Associationism, he holds, certainly need not be rejected, but it must be significantly *expanded* if it is meet this challenge – for genuine spontaneity cannot itself be derived from previously recognised laws of association. “Activity cannot possibly be generated from passive elements; a primitive active element must be found somewhere” (*Bain’s Psychology*, XI: 354). As such, Mill embraces Alexander Bain’s account of spontaneity as grounded in the stimulus provided by nutrition.

He holds that the brain does not act solely in obedience to impulses, but is also a self-acting instrument; that the nervous influence which, being conveyed through the motory nerves, excites the muscles into action, is generated automatically in the brain itself, not, of course, lawlessly and without a cause, but under the organic stimulus of nutrition. (*Bain’s Psychology*, XI: 354)

Mill aims to draw on a *naturalised* vision of spontaneity to support his view of the human being as active, rather than passive. The conversion of nutrition into energy offers a source of vitality which contains the seeds of an agent's ability to engage in self-movement. "This doctrine [...] supplies him with a simple explanation of the origin of voluntary power" (*Bain's Psychology*, XI: 354).

Mill's consciousness that some theory of the origin of spontaneous action is necessary comes in the context of a growing understanding and internalisation of the principle of the unity and conservation of force in Victorian British thought.¹⁴ Mill had studied, struggled with, and come to appreciate, ideas about the unity of heat and mechanical force in early 1860s. By the end of the decade, he would note that "[w]ithin the present generation several large & comprehensive generalizations have made their way in to Science[, including] the Unity & Conservation of Force" and incorporate comments on the principle to the *System of Logic*.¹⁵ Self-movement could not, if the lessons of conservation of force were to be learnt, be generated *ex nihilo* – but it could be understood as the output of a process of the transformation of energy from one form into another and transmitted to the will.

In this period, significant advances had also been made in understanding what Mill termed the "material conditions of our mental operations" (*Bain's Psychology*, XI: 348). The science of the physiology of mind had "assumed almost a new aspect, from the important discoveries which had been made in all its branches, and especially in the functions of the nervous system" (*Bain's Psychology*, XI: 352). Mill had therefore also become more confident that physiology could make genuine and independent explanatory contributions in attempts to understand the workings of mind. "[P]hysiology is rendering more and more probable [...] that our mental feelings, as well as our sensations, have for their physical antecedents particular states of the nerves," and the associationism of Mill's father and of Hartley could therefore be augmented by drawing on "the much greater knowledge since acquired of the functions of our nervous organism and their relations with the mental operations" (*Examination*, IX: 282; *Notes on the Analysis*, XXXI: 102).

Mill, with Bain, aims to incorporate these insights into associationism. The energy provided by nutrition, it was now understood, could find spontaneous outlet and generate muscular movement *via* the nerves – and though such drives initially result in unchecked movement rather than action, they can be marshalled by the will, *via* associationist forces with pleasure, into forms of action. Initially merely the uncontrolled outpourings of stimulated nerves, spontaneous movement, that is to say, can be brought under the control of our desires.

Among the numerous motions given forth indiscriminately by the spontaneous energy of the nervous centre, some are accidentally hit on, which are found to be followed by a pleasure, or by the relief of a pain. In this case, the child is able, to a certain extent, to prolong that particular motion, or to abate it; and this, in our author's opinion, is the sole original power which we possess over our bodily motions, and the ultimate basis of voluntary action. (*Bain's Psychology*, XI: 355-6)

The form of spontaneity to which Mill here appeals – a *naturalistic* form of spontaneity – would of course not be regarded as satisfactory by those who demand that spontaneity involve an *uncaused* initiation of action. The stimulation and functioning of the nervous system which gives rise to spontaneity remains, under Mill's theory, causal and law bound. And, of course, even on its own terms, the theory leaves much to be explained – as Mill himself acknowledges. But, once again, Mill is concerned to address the criticism levelled

against associationism – that it is ‘mechanistic’ and cannot adequately account for a central aspect of human freedom – by incorporating nineteenth-century insights into theory, and attempting to derive dynamic conclusions from mechanical premises.

Notes

¹ The story would most obviously involve Mill's close engagement with the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle, both of whom were significant importers of German philosophical currents into England. On the historical transmission of these Kantian and post-Kantian ideas into England, see Ashton (1980) and Wellek (1931).

² All quotes from Mill are taken from Mill (1963-91), and are given by (*short title*, volume: page).

³ I mean, therefore, to offer a picture of Mill's concerns which places him at a further distance from British Empiricism than is sometimes realised. See, *i.e.*, Fumerton (2009: 147ff.)

⁴ Whether ideas are *contiguous* will clearly be subject to variation between different cultures. Mill seems to believe that whether ideas are *similar* is, in contrast, a matter of brute fact. One could of course endorse an alternative view, according to which the relations of contiguity and similarity are *themselves* associationistically malleable, meaning that the similarity relation was subject to cultural variation. Mill's observation that "many of the complex cases of suggestion by resemblance may be analysed into the elementary case of association by resemblance, combined with an association by contiguity," however, seems to suggest that he prefers to view the relation as primitive, albeit then combined with contiguity in complex, and presumably culturally relative, ways. See *Notes on the Analysis*, XXXI: 121.

⁵ The point is not merely a semantic one – Mill is clear that without the sense of touch, which is the basis of our ideas of resistance, extension, and figure, we could still have the idea of matter, but it would be associated with different ideas. "[W]e might, in this supposed case, have had an idea of Matter, that idea would necessarily have been of a very different complexion from what we now have" (*Examination*, IX: 213). The relation between meaning and association is of course a difficult one – but insofar as that distinction can be maintained, it is clear Mill sees the primary qualities not as part of the *meaning* of, but rather inseparably associated with the *idea* of, matter.

⁶ See Macleod (2019) for further discussion of Mill on 'seeing as'.

⁷ Compare, of course, Kant's transcendental idealism, under at least one interpretation. See Alison (2004: 3ff.).

⁸ For the German post-Kantian context that influenced Coleridge heavily in his criticism of 'mechanism', see Beiser (2003: 131-152).

⁹ Unlike Mill's treatment of rationality and spontaneity, his theory of free will has been discussed by various commentators. See, in particular, Ryan (1987: 103-115) and Skorupski (1989: 250-255). I aim here to expand and supplement these accounts, putting them in the broader context of Mill's concerns about activity.

¹⁰ I contrast, of course, with Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Rel, 6.48). References to Kant are given by Akademie Edition, drawing on the translations offered in Kant (1995-). I use the following abbreviations: CPR = Critique of Pure Reason; GW = *Groundwork*; ML = Lectures on Metaphysics; CPRR = Critique of Practical Reason; Rel = Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason.

¹¹ Given Mill's argument that the existence of free will *is* compatible with our being subject to causal forces, we might of course wonder about the origin of our particular anxiety about this issue. Mill's account is clear: our worries about the compatibility of free will and causality can be traced to the particular association of the idea of *causality* with that of *necessity*. The idea of 'necessity' "stands for the operation of those causes exclusively, which are supposed too powerful to be counteracted at all [...] The application of the same term to the agencies on which human actions depend as is used to express those agencies of nature which are really uncontrollable, cannot fail, when habitual, to create a feeling of uncontrollableness in the former also. This, however, is an illusion" (*System*, VIII: 839). We should not confound being natural beings subject to *causal forces* with being subject to some form of *indefeasible force* which cannot be counterbalance – yet the term 'necessity' tempts us to make exactly that mistake. "I do not believe in anything real corresponding to the phrases Necessity [...] I acknowledge no other link between cause and effect, even when both are purely material, than invariability of sequence, from which arises possibility of prediction" (*Letter to Hazard*, XVI: 1065).

¹² On the Kantian notion of spontaneity, see particularly Pippin (1997).

¹³ It is also fitting given the centrality of the properties of activity and spontaneity as an ideal of character in Mill's ethics. (See, for instance, Riley (2015: 991-101).) It would be extremely jarring if Mill could *not* accommodate spontaneity as native to the will, given that his *On Liberty* III represents a paean to the value of an "active and energetic" character, rich in the "raw material of human nature" – and which bemoans the progress of bourgeois culture in which "spontaneity is hardly recognized by the common modes of thinking as having any intrinsic worth, or deserving any regard on its own account" (*On Liberty*, XVIII: 262, 263, 261).

¹⁴ See Knight (2009) for a useful account of the progress of the science of force and energy in the period, including its connection with post-Kantian *Naturphilosophie*.

¹⁵ See, *i.e.*, in 1863 *Letter to J. Stuart Stuart-Glennie*, XV: 871 and *Letter to Alexander Bain* XV: 902; in 1864 *Letter to Alexander Bain*, XV: 927-8, and *Letter to Alexander Bain*, XV: 970; in 1868/9 *Letter to Edward Livingstone Youmans*, XVII: 1570; *Theism*, X: 437; and in 1872 *System*, VII: 353.

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