John Stuart Mill was raised to be the Lenin of the revolutionary movement that we remember as utilitarianism, and whose members at the time were called the “Philosophical Radicals”. And as many philosophers know, Mill’s youth was brought to a close by a bout of depression—what he called his “Mental Crisis”—that amounted to a crisis of commitment. Sandwiched between his training and his first breakdown (of three) we find two epiphanies that get little or no attention, and I want to go some distance towards rectifying that omission. I think they will explain Mill’s Crisis, and why he never became the Lenin of utilitarianism—but also why utilitarianism turned out not to be the sort of movement that needed a Lenin.

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In his Autobiography, Mill describes “an epoch in my life; one of the turning points in my mental history” (I:67/A 3:2).\footnote{I’m grateful to Jerry Ravetz, Henry Richardson, Philip Schofield, William Twining, and an audience at the University of Parma for helpful discussion, to Chrisoula Andreou, Janice Carlisle, Ben Crowe and Bruce Kinzer for comments on an earlier draft, and to Buket Korkut Raptis and Candace Vogler for comments on and discussion of related material. Thanks also to the University of Utah for research and travel support, and to Margaret Bowman for research assistance.} First, a bit of background. Mill had spent time in France, and by his mid-teens, he spoke and read French

\footnote{References to Mill’s writing by volume and page in the standard edition of Mill’s works (1967–1989); the Autobiography and the System of Logic will be given slashed cites, with A chapter:paragraph and book:chapter:section, respectively, following the uniform citation.}
fluently. A good deal earlier than that, Jeremy Bentham, the father of utilitarianism and his mentor, had shipped off a very large pile of manuscripts to Étienne Dumont, who translated, edited, abridged and rewrote them into the *Traités de législation civile et pénale*, since retranslated into English under the title *Theory of Legislation*. Mill is about to describe what it was like to read Dumont’s French rendering of Bentham.

My previous education had been, in a certain sense, already a course of Benthamism. The Benthamic standard of ‘the greatest happiness’ was that which I had always been taught to apply... Yet in the first pages of Bentham it burst upon me with all the force of novelty. What thus impressed me was the chapter in which Bentham passed judgment on the common modes of reasoning in morals and legislation... and characterized them as dogmatism in disguise imposing its sentiments upon others under cover of sounding expressions which convey no reason for the sentiment, but set up the sentiment as its own reason. It had not struck me before, that Bentham’s principle put an end to all this. The feeling rushed upon me, that all previous moralists were superseded, and that here indeed was the commencement of a new era in thought... But what struck me at the time most of all, was the Classification of Offences... my previous training, had given me a strong relish for accurate classification... when I found scientific classification applied to the great and complex subject of Punishable Acts, under the guidance of the ethical principle of Pleasurable and Painful Consequences... I felt taken up to an eminence from which I could survey a vast mental domain, and see stretching out into the distance intellectual results beyond all computation. As I proceeded further, there seemed to be added to this intellectual clearness, the most inspiring prospects of practical improvement in human affairs... at every page he seemed to open a clearer and broader conception of what human opinions and institutions ought to be, how they might be made what they ought to be, and how far removed from it they now are. When I laid down the last volume of the *Traité* I had become a different being. The ‘principle of utility’, understood as Bentham understood it, and applied in the manner in which he applied it through these three volumes, fell exactly into place as

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2Bentham, 1830 (originally published in 1802); the 1840 translation by Richard Hildreth can be found in Ogden’s edition (Bentham, 1931).
the keystone which held together the detached and fragmentary component parts of my knowledge and beliefs. It gave unity to my conceptions of things. I now had opinions; a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy; in one among the best senses of the word, a religion; the inculcation and diffusion of which could be made the principal outward purpose of a life. And I had a grand conception laid before me of changes to be effected in the condition of mankind through the doctrine... the vista of improvement which he did open was sufficiently large and brilliant to light up my life, as well as to give a definite shape to my aspirations. (I:67/A 3:3)

This is Mill’s first epiphany, the moment when he realizes what the meaning of his life is, and unlike most such ‘realizations,’ Mill lived up to this one. Just for instance, the passage emphasizes the importance of displacing disguised appeals to what people already think or feel with transparent Benthamite cost-benefit analysis; Mill went on to write his System of Logic, the book that made him famous in his own lifetime, partly in order to delegitimize appeals to self-evident (that is, apriori) knowledge, and to moral intuitions. And of course Mill stayed a utilitarian until the day of his death.

Mill was sixteen, give or take a bit. About two years later, Bentham had a favor to ask, and it must have gone something like this: “John, you know, there’s this book I’ve tried to write three times, and wasn’t ever able to finish.” (Sorry, I’m too American to even try for an in-period, British rendering!) “Why don’t you take these three enormous piles of handwritten manuscript, fold them together, clean it all up, and we’ll publish it. It’ll be great for your career.” Mill couldn’t very well say no to the great man, and it was in any case a genuine opportunity: he had had the home-school equivalent of a very good PhD or two, and this would have been his postdoc: no longer merely a homework exercise, but a contribution to a substantial publication. His father, James Mill, must have encouraged him;

3Here is how Mill remembers it:

Mr. Bentham... bethought himself of me as capable of preparing [his papers on Evidence] for the press... I gladly undertook the task... Mr. Bentham had begun this treatise three times, at considerable intervals, each time in a different manner, and each time without reference to the preceding... These three masses of manuscript it was my business to condense into a single treatise... I had also to unroll such of Bentham’s involved and parenthetical sentences, as seemed to overpass by their complexity the measure of what readers were likely to take the pains to understand. (I:117, 119/A 4:15)
Mill senior had written up a lengthy abstract of this very book, and probably he had originally intended himself to do the task his son was taking on. Mill then produced the five-volume *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*, totaling some 3300 pages, which he describes as having “occupied nearly all my leisure for about a year” (I:117/A 4:15). Having myself tried the exercise of transcribing Bentham’s nearly illegible handwriting into fair copy that you might plausibly send off to a publisher, I can advise you not to take the word “leisure” to suggest a part-time hobby or relaxed pastime; that Mill was able to finish it off in this time frame is nothing short of remarkable.

The year Mill turned twenty brought the onset of his Mental Crisis, and as you no doubt expect, I’m going to suggest that the timing wasn’t a coincidence. Here is Mill’s own much-quoted description of it:

> From the winter of 1821, when I first read Bentham… I had what might truly be called an object in life; to be a reformer of the world. My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object… This did very well for several years, during which the general improvement going on in the world and the idea of myself as engaged with others in struggling to promote it, seemed enough to fill up an interesting and animated existence. But the time came when I awakened from this as from a dream. It was in the autumn of 1826… it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself, “Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?” And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, “No!” At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for. (I:139/A 5:2)

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4 Bentham, 1838–1843, vol. vi, pp. 1–187. Because the younger Mill is the protagonist of the story I’m telling, a freestanding “Mill” will always refer to him; his father, James Mill, will always be called by his full name.

Mill’s friend, protege and biographer, Alexander Bain, put the lengthy “dejection” down to “over-working the brain,” and, looking at the Rationale, it’s not an unreasonable initial hypothesis. But I don’t in fact think that’s all, or even nearly all, of the explanation.6

Notice this very terse remark in the Autobiography: “My name as editor was put to the book [that is, the Rationale] after it was printed, at Mr. Bentham’s positive desire, which I in vain attempted to persuade him to forego” (I:119/A 4:15). First, let me render that into my crude American, and in due course I’ll argue that what I’m about to give you is the right rendering. At one of the final prepublication stages, Bentham becomes aware that Mill has left his name off the title page of the finished book, and sends him a note telling him that he’s done a lot of work and should have his name on it. Mill modestly replies: “Oh, no—this is your book! I just did copyediting; I really don’t deserve that sort of credit... and I also wouldn’t want to look like I’m trying to take credit.” Bentham says: “No, I insist.” Mill tells him that really he doesn’t deserve it, really; Bentham absolutely insists; in the end, Mill’s name appears, in small letters, listed as the editor, on the title page of one of the five volumes, and, again at Bentham’s express insistence, at the end of the Preface.7

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6Bain, 1882, p. 38; the Mental Crisis is much discussed, and among the better treatments are Vogler, 2001, and Carlisle, 1991.

7This must have been an awkward moment, because although the Mills and Bentham lived around the corner from each other, the back and forth was conducted as correspondence, most of which we still have. Here’s the long version from which I drew the colloquial summary (Bentham, 2006, pp. 347–349):

It is a matter of no small surprise to me [Bentham begins] to see the title page without your name to it. Nothing could be more clearly understood between us than that it should be there...

I certainly did not understand you [Mill replies] to have expressed any desire that my name should be in the title page. Nevertheless, if you positively require it, I am willing that it should be so rather than that you should imagine I had taken less pains with the work under the idea of its being... anonymous. But I confess I should greatly prefer that my name should be omitted...if my name were annexed to it people would think that I wished to make a parade either of your good opinion [of] me, or of the few notes which I have added...& I should be very sorry to be suspected of wishing to obtain a reputation at a cheap rate by appearing before the public under the shelter of your name.

[Bentham replied curtly in two notes:]

Your name is of far too great importance to the work to be omitted in the titlepage to it.

P.S. Name at end of the Preface.
Mill is polite, but we academics recognize what’s just happened. This is the moment when you tell your collaborator that it’s really his work, because you’ve realized that you don’t want to be associated with it, and the reason you don’t want to be associated with it is that it’s embarrassingly bad. I’m going to defend that reconstruction of the course of events in a moment, but first, and to anticipate, here’s the cause (although likely only a partial cause) which I’m about to propose for Mill’s Mental Crisis: his teenage emotional commitment to the utilitarian political enterprise is threatened by the very, very low intellectual quality of Bentham’s thought and writing.

2

How could Bentham have produced two so very different reactions on occasions just two years apart? The materials used by Dumont and the manuscripts on which Mill worked were not nearly all the same, but there was nonetheless a good deal of overlap. Bentham’s views hadn’t changed much; and while Mill was a couple of years older, at a time of life when people mature rapidly, he was evidently still very much the same person as his slightly younger self. And anyway, where do I get off making dismissive judgments about the quality of the work by an acknowledgedly important figure in the history of philosophy and the political and legal history of Great Britain?

If you take time out to read Dumont’s *Traité* and Mill’s rendition of Bentham side by side, here’s what you’ll find. Dumont took a great many liberties with his original; he attempts to convey Bentham’s ideas, but (evidently partly because Bentham himself wouldn’t supply complete manuscripts, or answer Dumont’s many questions about what he thought and meant) the resulting work speaks in the voice of a worldly Frenchman, it emphasizes the systematic structure of Bentham’s views (especially the organizing idea that all that really matters, when you’re designing laws and the institutions that go with them, is the balance of pleasure over pain), and, perhaps most importantly, it is relatively short. Now Mill, as we’ll see in a moment, seems to have taken few liberties with the manuscript in front of him: he made choices about which version to use, but the very length of the *Rationale* suggests that, whenever possible, he used all of them. He took his job to include

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8Emphasis on the “relatively”: the French totals 1214 pages of text, exclusive of front and back matter, and the English translation runs to some 555 pages. But this is still a great deal shorter than the *Rationale*, and it has much greater breadth of coverage.

9Indeed, at one point, Mill apologetically announces that he has included two chapters
rewriting Bentham’s sentences, and occasionally he added supporting materials, but on the rare occasions when he felt he needed to correct Bentham, the correction appears as an editor’s footnote; so he was unwilling to tamper with the content himself.\textsuperscript{10} Perhaps this was because he felt himself to be a great man’s underlaborer; perhaps because Bentham was discussing aspects of courtroom procedure that were simply undocumented—in order to know about them, you would had to have spent a great deal of time in court, or talking with lawyers—and so Mill would likely not have felt confident making more than very minor changes to the text in front of him.\textsuperscript{11} We no longer have the manuscripts from which Mill worked (and Bentham had the practice of destroying manuscripts once the material had actually been published). But when we look at the \textit{Rationale}, what we see must be very close to what Mill saw, and this is confirmed by the large amount of quite similar manuscript material which we do still possess.

What we see in the \textit{Rationale} is startlingly different from Dumont’s rendering of Bentham; I’ll mention just a handful of the more striking contrasts. First, there is almost no properly utilitarian argument. Bentham has many ideas about how things ought to be done, but he does not appeal to anything on the order of a hedonic calculation to justify his proposals (and on most of the occasions, not all that frequent overall, that the term “utility” comes up, it clearly means “usefulness,” and not the feeling of pleasure).\textsuperscript{12} Second,
Bentham’s proposals often sound reasonable to us: for example, he argues that when taking testimony, you should ask the witness questions in person (as opposed, say, to sending him a letter to answer), you should be allowed to ask followup questions, and when he answers, someone should write it all down. But where Dumont makes this sort of point in a paragraph, the *Rationale* devotes 434 pages to it.\(^{13}\) (Yes, you heard that right: 434.) Finally for right now, Bentham is much given to pointless taxonomizing.\(^{14}\) The

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Those are the sort of point-scoring you might find in Voltaire, but they’re not appeals to the Principle of Utility. In many ways, Bentham belongs a great deal more to the Enlightenment than we remember.

There are rare exceptions: for instance, an appeal to cost-benefit calculation (though not one that explicitly invokes utility as Bentham officially wants us to understand it), at vol. ii, p. 521; or again, in proposing that a register be kept of cases in which “makeshift evidence” is used, he argues that reviewing the register will “exhibit the aggregate quantum of benefit on the one hand, and of mischief on the other,” and allow future legislators to revise the judicial code on the basis of the track record (vol. iii, pp. 545f); or again, at vol. iv, pp. 36f, 278, 479–481. (The term is mentioned—but it’s not clear in which sense—at vol. iv, p. 393n., again at p. 471, and again at vol. v, pp. 416, 457, 735 and 744.)

However, in vol. v, the frequency with which utility is invoked picks up: “the principle of utility” is used in its proper sense on p. 60; Bentham’s utility-driven account of justified punishment is rehearsed at pp. 141–143; the Principle of Utility is in play when we are told what “humanity” amounts to on p. 233; on p. 298 the point is made that comparative utilities matter, whereas traditional legal categories (such as the classifications ‘civil’ and ‘criminal’) don’t; on p. 303 we are given a definition of immorality in terms of the tendency to lessen the quantity of happiness in society; and there are similar references at pp. 326f, 330–32, 344, 587 and 628n. Mill tells us that over the course of the year-long homework assignment, his own writing style improved, to the point where it “became, at times, lively and almost light” (I:119/A 4:16). The change is noticeable only in the final volume (not throughout, however), and the relatively frequent invocations of utility are confined to those more gracefully written stretches of text. I suspect that we owe them to Mill rather than Bentham: at the stage when as editor he became willing impose his voice on the writing, he also found himself able to adjust the content.

If, as John Plamenatz once remarked (Halévy, 1972, p. xvi), the “ends of policy” which Bentham identified “were not happiness but other things which he believed (without troubling to prove it) make for happiness,” and if the “principles,” which he intended to be “used as guides in making policy…(though he thought otherwise) have nothing to do with promoting the greatest happiness of the greatest number, conceived as a sum of pleasures,” the problem, from the point of view of a sophisticated Benthamite, is not that most of Bentham’s arguments are not made out in terms of sums of pleasures and pains. Benthamites were and are committed to identifying intermediate principles and ends. (I’m grateful to William Twining for pressing me on this point.) The problem is rather that those intermediate principles and ends are supposed to be anchored to the principle of utility, and the young John Stuart Mill working through Bentham’s manuscripts would have found no evidence that they were.

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\(^{13}\)Book III, at vol. ii, pp. 1–434.

\(^{14}\)A shortish sample, picked more or less at random, can be found at vol. iii, pp. 612–
overall impression produced by the writing—anyway, this is how it struck me, and I would expect it to strike you this way also—is of philosophically uninteresting, intellectually flat, endlessly repetitive crankiness.¹⁵

The impression the materials made was probably worse than the finished product which Mill has left us indicates. If you sit down today with the many boxes of Bentham’s carefully preserved handwriting, you will find, for instance, one after another almost-identical table of contents, meant for the same book, and one after another almost-identical preface, also for that same book... for folder after folder after folder. These are not drafts, as we normally understand the notion: stages in which previous material is being reworked and improved.¹⁶ Rather, Bentham seems to have commenced writing, morning after morning (he worked until his three o’clock breakfast), by starting in, yet once again, on whichever book it was, beginning, as usual, at the beginning. (He apparently did the same thing in the evening as well: while being shaved, presumably with a straight razor, he would dictate to a secretary.)¹⁷ And, each morning (or evening), the words came out pretty much the same way. Looking at the manuscripts, I had something like the reaction—and I expect that Mill’s was similar—of the character in Kubrick’s

⁶¹⁸. I should emphasize that the problem was not the presence of taxonomies (recall Mill’s “strong relish for accurate classification,” from his description of the earlier epiphany), but rather, as Bain, 1966, p. 143, dryly put it, “distinctions without adequate differences.”

¹⁵Mill’s contemporaries balked at the finished product as well. For instance, one reviewer, who as a matter of fact thought well of Bentham’s project overall—for instance, he seconds the point about testimony we just touched on, noting that “if there a point that may be considered indisputable as a general maxim, it is the superiority of vivē voce examination over prepared and written questions”—complained about “a repulsiveness of style as mysterious as the bricks of Babylon, [which] set[s] lay-readers so completely at defiance,” and he went on to reproduce “specimens of the style” that “form as unsuitable ornaments [in a work meant for the edification of posterity] as the grinning faces and burlesque forms with which monkish builders have studded our magnificent cathedrals”; he pointedly observed that “ignorance of the views of other men is not indispensible for the correctness of one’s own; and that it is possible for opinions that are not insolently expressed, to be yet honestly, boldly, and successfully maintained”; and he remarked on Bentham’s “eccentricities and impracticableness,” which “thrust him out of the rank where [his] genius ought to place him,” of “frequent absences of a plain work-a-day sense,” and “flaws, which strike across this great work a vein so deep and coarse that there is scarce a page together which we have read with unmixed pleasure” (Empson, 1828, pp. 459, 482, 516–19).

¹⁶Compare Bentham’s own later description of the process of writing the Rationale: “all the time of scribbling it the second time I never looked at what I had scribbled the first time: nor while going over the field a third time...never did I...take the trouble of bestowing a glance on what I had done at either of the two preceding times...I suffered the pen to run on in the track upon which it had entered” (2006, pp. 336f).

¹⁷Wheatley, 1855?, pp. 9, 34–36.
Shining who discovers that her husband’s novel-in-progress consists entirely in repetitions of the sentence, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

What really matters, of course, is not how it strikes you or me, but how the young Mill responded to it. And here we have his subsequent testimony to go on as well.

Late in life, Mill penned a biographical essay titled “Bentham” (X:77–115). The tone manages to be laudatory, but inspection confirms the substance of the assessment I’ve just given. Describing his mentor’s prose, Mill tells us that “he fell into a Latin or German structure of sentence, foreign to the genius of the English language. He could not bear, for the sake of clearness and the reader’s ease, to say...a little more than the truth in one sentence, and correct it in the next. The whole of the qualifying remarks which he intended to make he insisted on embedding as parentheses in the very middle of the sentence itself” (X:114). Bentham, Mill more than allows, is not much good at careful argument: “We must not look for subtlety, or the power of recondite analysis, among [Bentham’s] intellectual characteristics. In the former quality, few great thinkers have ever been so deficient” (X:80). Reiterating that “we often must [reject] his practical conclusions,” Mill goes out of his way to praise “Bentham’s method...as the method of detail, of treating wholes by separating them into their parts...Hence his interminable classifications” (X:82f). Mill seems to identify Bentham’s procedure with Plato’s Method of Collection and Division; he says that “Bentham was probably not aware that Plato had anticipated him in the process to which he too declared that he owed everything” (X:88). For the moment, the relevant observations are two: This is a part of Plato’s work that nonspecialists tend to ignore, for the simple reason that we don’t think much of the Method. And although Mill seems to praise it, this is not how he argues himself.

Mill is in retrospect also disappointed on matters of substance, although it is hard to know how much of that response to attribute to his younger self. Bentham overlooked the importance of character formation in ethics (X:98), and his philosophy is capable “of organizing and regulating the merely business part of the social arrangements” (X:99). Even these arrangements are unacceptable, because he never noticed that entirely empowered majorities would be likely to oppress minorities (X:106–108). His moral philosophizing was bound to be defective, because he both ignored the work of previous philosophers, and was insufficiently imaginative to compensate without their

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18Kubrick, 1980.
help for “the incompleteness of his own mind as a representative of human nature” (X:91f). And while Mill insists that any one person would be an incomplete such representative, Bentham was an extreme case, someone who had never grown up: “a boy to the last,” his understanding of other human beings was “the empiricism of one who has had little experience” (X:92). “It is,” Mill remarks in a final note, “indispensable to a correct estimate of any of Bentham’s dealings with the world, to bear in mind that in everything except abstract speculation he was to the last, what we have called him, essentially a boy.” (X:115)

We can still hear the echo of those “intellectual results beyond all computation” which the young Mill saw “stretching out into the distance,” now almost entirely stripped of the sense of the sublime: his older self tells us that “the field of Bentham’s labours was like the space between two parallel lines; narrow to excess in one direction, in another it reached to infinity” (X:100).

Looking back, the more mature Mill did find something he could wholeheartedly praise, and that real praise is reserved almost entirely for Bentham’s willingness to stand on his own convictions when faced with institutionalized abuses.19 “He alone was found with sufficient moral sensibility and self-reliance to say to himself that these things . . . were frauds, and that between them and himself there should be a gulf fixed. To this rare union of self-reliance and moral sensibility we are indebted for all that Bentham has done” (X:81). To borrow a phrase from the Rationale, Bentham’s role was to be someone who “speaks out and calls things by their names” (vol. i, p. 388n); he was the child who proclaimed that the emperor had no clothes. His example taught others to do likewise: “It is by the influence of the modes of thought with which his writings inoculated a considerable number of thinking men, that the yoke of authority has been broken, and innumerable opinions, formerly received on tradition as incontestable, are put on their defense, and required to give an account of themselves” (X:78).

Mill’s father, James Mill, was a friend and political ally of Bentham’s, and the young Mill had been prepared to be a utilitarian political activist. On encountering Bentham’s ideas in Dumont’s rendering of them, John Stuart Mill had embraced that mission. But faced with the actual written manuscripts of the Marx of utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill had, I am suggesting, a horrifying realization, and I’ll put it in today’s idiom: that he had been raised by—and into—the Flat Earth Society. This was Mill’s second

19Mill’s example of such an abuse is legal clients having to “pay for three attendances in the office of a Master of Chancery, when only one was given” (X:81).
teenage epiphany.

3

In two hundred years, no one is likely to remember the founder of the Flat Earth Society, much less devote a life of scholarship to editing his writings. Benthamites, then and now, think much better of Bentham than I am suggesting the young Mill did. How are we to reconcile the conflicting assessments?

Bentham was in fact capable of graceful, powerful writing, and a good deal of Bentham’s influence was due to it. The material on evidence was crabbed, obsessive, and tedious; so part of the problem was that Mill’s sample of the raw materials was unfortunate. The problem was no doubt compounded by a further cause of the uptake Bentham received. Much of Bentham’s output made its way to the public by way of other intellectuals, such as Dumont and James Mill, who rewrote what they were given, and in doing so, imposed on the final product a much more attractive authorial persona; it would be a mistake to think of Dumont as having translated Bentham from an already existing English original: rather, Dumont composed a work ‘by Bentham’. However, Mill was aware of the provenance of Dumont’s Traité, and in his struggle to make passable prose out of the source materials for the Rationale was only too likely to have decided that he was seeing the real Bentham behind the facade supplied by another author.

Much of the subsequent enthusiasm for Bentham has to do with the obvious merits of many of his practical proposals. An anonymous contributor to the Times Literary Supplement provides an enthusiastic overview which conveys what sort of improvements fall under this heading:

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20There are exceptions: e.g., the chapter on improbability and impossibility (Bentham, 1827, vol. iii, pp. 258–384) is decently written and develops a recognizably philosophical view, which comes with supporting arguments. (For example: by the law of the excluded middle, a proposition is true—and so a fact is the case—or it is not; probability comes in degrees; therefore, probability must be psychological, rather than a feature of the objective world.) But this stretch of text is most striking for the contrast it makes with the remainder of the Rationale.

21Acknowledged in his own somewhat awkward explanations at the beginning of the “Discours préliminaire” to Bentham, 1830, at vol. i, pp. i ff.

When the reviewer invoked in note 15 objected to “[t]he slovenly and careless confidence with which [Mill’s] office of editor has been performed,” part of his dislike had to do with the young Mill’s own lack of legal training and experience, but a good part of it was a response to Mill’s unwillingness to cut down the manuscripts as ruthlessly as had Dumont: “Not a single unsightliness seems to have been removed” (Empson, 1828, pp. 464n, 465n).
He stood for the reform of the representative system in Parliament; he demanded municipal reform; he prayed for the mitigation of the terrible criminal law, for the abolition of transportation, and for the improvement of prisons.... He clamoured for the removal of defects in the jury system, pleaded for the abolition of grand juries... demanded the abolition of imprisonment for debt, the sweeping away of the usury laws, the reform of the law of evidence, the repeal of religious tests... the reform of the Poor Law,... the training of pauper children,... the establishment of a national system of education. He demanded an extension of the idea of savings banks and friendly societies, cheap postage without the object of national profit coupled with post office money orders. He insisted on a complete and uniform Register of Births, Marriages and Deaths, a Code for Merchant Shipping, full Census returns, the circulation of Parliamentary papers, the protection of inventors. He demanded local Courts, uniform and scientific methods of drafting Acts of Parliament, a general register of real property, of deeds and all transactions, and last, but certainly not least, the passing of public health legislation.

in addition...[h]e demanded the creation of public prosecutors and of advocates for the poor.

To us to-day [this is 1925] practically the whole of it in principle, if not in effect, is admitted. It makes quite dull reading. ... But... when Bentham set forth his polity all these things were impossible, absurd, ridiculous. Great intellects waved them away.\textsuperscript{22}

These proposals stand on their own; one doesn’t need to read hundreds of pages of Bentham, or connect them to the remainder of Bentham’s intellectual system, in order to appreciate their force.

Finally, Bentham’s followers are impressed by him because they think he was right. But whether utilitarianism was right was not Mill’s problem; rather, it was that although he continued to think that Bentham was right, he was dismayed by the quality of the presentation.

\textsuperscript{22}Anonymous, 1925, p. 902; Ogden, whose own somewhat abbreviated quotation of it directed me to the passage, attributes it to an “eminent authority” (Bentham, 1931, pp. ix-x), and, writing when and where he did, may well have known enough to do so.
When teenagers become disenchanted with their parents’ and elders’ ideals, they generally walk away. After emerging from his depression, however, Mill devoted the remainder of his life to improving the quality of utilitarian moral theory, of utilitarian political philosophy, and of all the rest of it. In his hands, the intellectual heritage of utilitarianism became subtle, mature, refined, richly argued, thoughtful—in short, everything it had not been in Bentham’s development of it. We remember utilitarianism, and still take it seriously, only because John Stuart Mill took it upon himself to make it worthy of the emotional commitment that he had come to have as a sixteen year old.

We tend to forget that the utilitarianism of Bentham and James Mill was not called ‘radical’ for nothing; many of the then-shocking implications—representative government and universal enfranchisement, most notably—have long since been assimilated, and now seem tame. But a succession of popular authors have been clear enough about what sort of steps the position entails.\textsuperscript{23} And while Bentham seems to have trusted that once his ideas were given a hearing, policymakers would enact the laws and institute the procedures that he advocated, if you actually tried to implement the policies entailed by a principled Benthamite utilitarianism, you would quickly enough find yourself faced with resistance, and just the sort of resistance that could only be overcome by expedients that the French and Russian Revolutions have made familiar. How is it that we do not think of Benthamite utilitarianism together with guillotines and gulags?

In part, the unsullied history is a fortunate accident; in their early days the Benthamites had neither the opportunity nor the personal ruthlessness required to seize the reins of power. Although the reforms that Bentham and James Mill had their hearts set on were not nearly all of the consequences that could be derived from the Principle of Utility, they happened to line up nicely with the interests of the middle class, and so it turned out that they could be gradually accommodated without simply overturning the political system.\textsuperscript{24} And the key players were coopted in various ways: James

\textsuperscript{23}Huxley, 1998, is perhaps the most famous; Gunn, 1961, is a more recent and very knowledgeable dystopia. Williams, 1973, covers some of the territory in a professional philosopher’s register.

\textsuperscript{24}Nonetheless, it’s important to remember that what seems to us moderate in retrospect was dangerous politics by the lights of the time; a good example of where the limits were drawn is found in Bain, 1966, p. 111: in 1810, Sir Francis Burdett published a piece “denying the power of the House of Commons to send to prison, as they had done, John Gale Jones, and John Dean, printer, for discussing in a debating society, the exclusion
Mill became a colonial administrator; while Bentham never managed to put up his notorious model prison, the government compensated him for having terminated the project. In part, however, it is a matter of how John Stuart Mill resolved his personal crisis of confidence: once he had reworked the theoretical foundations of utilitarianism, it was no longer that sort of movement. I’ll conclude by explaining how that happened.

To connect this point to the preceding discussion, I want to draw my illustration of the way Mill attempted to improve the intellectual underpinnings of the utilitarian platform from his discussion of scientific method. To do that, I’ll provide only the briefest sketch of his lengthy and rich treatment of the topic.

Some sciences are systematized, in such a way that lengthy inferences can be assembled from shorter ones; these are the “Deductive or Ratiocinative Sciences” (VII:209/II:iv:1), with Euclidean geometry serving as Mill’s paradigm case. To effect this sort of systematization, we “construct the science from the fewest and simplest possible inductions [the axioms], and... make these, by any combinations however complicated, suffice for proving... truths, relating to complex cases...”

Now, of the Deductive Sciences, some exhibit composition of causes, and others do not. The model for composition of causes is, “in dynamics, the Composition of Forces” (that is, summing vectors to get resultants); formally, causes compose when “the way which expresses the effect of each cause acting by itself... also correctly express[es] the part due to that cause, of the effect which follows from the [causes] together” (VII:370f/II:ii). Sciences which exhibit composition of causes treat causes which can cancel each other out: “A stream running into a reservoir at one end tends to fill...
it higher and higher, while a drain at the other extremity tends to empty it. . . in cases such as these . . . the two causes which are in joint action [may] exactly annul one another . . . ” (VII:372/III:vi:1). This means that your calculations may be mistaken if you have overlooked a contrary cause; whereas if you add 5 and 7 to get 12, you do not have to worry that perhaps a countervailing cause is draining off some of the cardinality unnoticed, and that in this case, $5 + 7 = 9$. This latter sort of science “affords no room for what so constantly occurs in mechanics and its applications, the case of conflicting forces . . . In mechanics we continually find two or more moving forces producing, not motion, but rest . . . There is no similar state of things in geometry . . . What is proved true from one geometrical theorem . . . cannot be altered and made no longer true by reason of some other geometrical principle” (VIII:887f/VI:viii:2). Mill calls the mode of treatment appropriate to a science like mechanics the Physical Method, and that appropriate to sciences like arithmetic or geometry the Geometrical Method.

For domains in which a great many different kinds of cause interact, Mill recommends the Deductive Method.\(^ {26} \) A core of initial principles—he seems to think of Newton’s Laws of Motion as a model—is to be established inductively.\(^ {27} \) Alternatively, they may be handed down as results established by a methodologically simpler science, as when associationist psychology supplies the initial principles for Mill’s projected science of character, which he called “ethology.” Further results are derived from these initial principles, in the manner of any Deductive Science, and here we can think of the ways in which, from Newton’s laws, we work up treatments of planetary orbits or automobile collisions. But because the causes represented in the treatment might be overridden, we treat them as “tendencies” (VIII:898/VI:ix:2), and the conclusions “are therefore, in the strictest sense of the word, hypothetical. They are grounded on some suppositious set of circumstances, and declare how some given cause would operate in those circumstances, supposing that no others were combined with them” (VIII:900/VI:ix:3). The reality check is “Verification,” i.e., comparison of the results of the science to “Empirical Laws”—what we call phenomenological laws, rough and ready generalizations “which observation or experiment has shown to exist, but on

\(^ {26} \) Bear in mind that not all ‘Deductive Sciences’ are suitable for the ‘Deductive Method’. Because Mill’s various uses of “deductive” differ from our own, Mill’s commentators tend to lose track of his terminology: for instance, Haraldsson, 2011, describes ethics done geometrically as “in the deductive spirit,” which is just plain confusing.

\(^ {27} \) Using his famous methods of agreement, difference, residues and concomitant variations (VII:388–406/III:iv); these “four methods” are still taught today in informal logic classes.
which [one] hesitate[s] to rely in cases varying much from those which have been actually observed.” (VII:516f/III:xvi.1).

In very complex domains, in particular and especially, that of social science, merely calculating a composition of causes in the manner of mechanics does not in practice suffice. Instead, an entire science is peeled out of the domain and systematized, on the understanding that the treatment exhibits only one aspect of the highly interconnected phenomena; the conclusions drawn within such a treatment will have to be checked against the phenomena and the results of complementary sciences to see whether in one case or another they are overridden by other tendencies. For example, economics helps itself to a simplifying assumption, that people are motivated by solely ‘economic’ considerations (they want to make as much money as possible for as little work as possible). But the conclusions drawn in particular cases may be overridden by phenomena assigned to ethology; in many countries (Mill seems to have France especially in mind), “in conducting the business of selling their goods over a counter...[men] care more about their ease or their vanity than about their pecuniary gain.”

In the *System of Logic*, Mill takes time out to criticize “the interest-philosophy of the Bentham school”. Bentham’s “mistake was not so much one of substance as of form”: he applied the Geometrical Method in domains whose sciences require the Deductive Method. That is, when he derived a conclusion from idealized or oversimplified initial principles, he forgot to allow that the conclusion might, in simpler or more complicated ways, have to be modified or overruled. In the example Mill gives, Bentham treats human beings as governed by self-interest, and draws conclusions about how the behavior of rulers can be yoked to the interests of the ruled. These conclusions are right as far as they go, but they have to be corrected to take account of further causes that Bentham overlooked: that human beings

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28VIII:900–906/VIix:3–4; elsewhere, endorsing a view he attributes to Thomas Carlyle, Mill tells us that “in the infinite complexities of human affairs, any general theorem which a wise man will form concerning them, must be regarded as a mere approximation to truth; an approximation obtained by striking an average of many cases, and consequently not exactly fitting any one case. No wise man, therefore, will stand upon his theorem only—neglecting to look into the specialties of the case in hand, and see what features that may present which may take it out of any theorem, or bring it within the compass of more theorems than one.” (XX:161) And Mill ascribed the success of his *Principles of Political Economy* in part to the way it “treated Political Economy not as a thing by itself, but as a fragment of a greater whole; a branch of Social Philosophy, so interlinked with all the other branches, that its conclusions, even in its own peculiar province, are only true conditionally, subject to interference and counteraction from causes not directly within its scope” (I:243/A 7:10).
in general, and rulers in particular, are also governed by habit and local custom.\textsuperscript{29}

Let’s turn from Mill’s philosophy of science to its political applications. It is plausibly what Mill thinks of as the Geometrical Method that gives rise to revolutionary excesses. When you draw a policy conclusion from the premises supplied by a political ideology, it often wears an extreme form: the monarchy and the church must be deprived of their powers and assets; the implementation of socialism requires shifting agricultural production from small farmers to collectives; China must increase its steel production. When these are not counterbalanced or overridden by other considerations, we have assignats, dekulakization, the Great Leap Forward and so on: the repeated spectacle provided by the late eighteenth and twentieth centuries, of revolutionary movements perversely inflicting widespread suffering and mass murder on the populations in their power in the name of humanitarian ideals. However, the formal characterization of the Geometrical Method was precisely that, once you have drawn a conclusion, you do not need to worry that it might need counterbalancing, or even be overridden.

Even a political party with a dramatic slogan—in this case, “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”—that applies its principles using the Deductive rather than the Geometrical Method is no longer this sort of revolutionary vanguard. Bentham and James Mill bought into a quick argument for mechanisms of representative democracy that would tie the interests of the rulers to those of a majority of the population. That argument, Mill allowed, is fine as far as it goes, but there is a counterbalancing consideration, namely, the likely effects of a tyranny of the majority; and so he went on to design institutions intended to restrain the majority in various ways.

If you have drawn policy conclusions from your ideological principles, and other political actors object to them, then if you are committed to the

\textsuperscript{29}VIII:890–893/VI:viii:3; compare VIII:946/VI:xii:4, on “the error... of those who would deduce the line of conduct proper to particular cases, from supposed universal practical maxims.” Again, in \textit{Utilitarianism}, Mill replies to a complaint on the part of Herbert Spencer that “Bentham, certainly...is least of all writers, chargeable with unwillingness to deduce the effect of actions on happiness from the laws of human nature and the universal conditions of human life. The common charge against him is of relying too exclusively upon such deductions, and declining altogether to be bound by the generalizations from specific experience which Mr Spencer thinks that utilitarians generally confine themselves to. My own opinion...is, that in ethics, as in all other branches of scientific study, the consilience of the results of both these processes, each corroborating and verifying the other [that is, successful application of the Deductive Method], is requisite to give to any general proposition the kind and degree of evidence which constitutes scientific proof.” (X:258n)
Geometrical Method, you will not be able to allow that their objections spring from legitimate counterbalancing considerations. If they do not come around to your point of view after a few rounds of attempted explanation, you are likely to find yourself doubting their good faith: they must be driven by (and here is a phrase that Bentham used in this context) “sinister interests.”

Such opponents must be silenced and eliminated; it is no accident that the revolutionaries who implicitly adopt the Geometrical Method so frequently avail themselves of the secret police.

But the Deductive Method leads its practitioners to expect their opponents’ conclusions to complement their own, and to think that the correctly adopted policy is likely to be one that reflects and accommodates the apparently conflicting arguments. This puts us in a position to explain the puzzling framing argument of the second chapter of *On Liberty*. You will recall Mill reasoning that any opinion you might have is either true, half-true, or false. He claims that if your opinion is true, it needs to be contested to keep it alive; that if your opinion is half-true, it needs to be contested to have it completed; and that if your opinion is false, it needs to be contested so it can be changed. Since any opinion you have needs to be contested, and since you’re probably not going to do the contesting yourself, you have a very strong interest in others having the liberty to disagree with you. The puzzling bit is why Mill felt it necessary to clutter a straightforward dilemma with an extensive discussion of the middling case: of those beliefs that are neither true, nor false, but merely half-true. After all, why isn’t the part-falsity already covered by the final case: false opinions which need to be contested in order to be corrected?

The argument of *On Liberty* is evidently shaped by Mill’s theory of scientific method. In political argumentation, the subject matters are typically those for which the Deductive Method is appropriate. When it is, conclusions established by any one argument quite often turn out to be a part

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30Indeed, Mill observed, in a passage that appeared in early editions of the *System of Logic*:

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that society has usually, both by practitioers in politics and by philosophical speculators on forms of government, from Plato to Bentham, been deemed to be whatever the men who compose it choose to make it... hardly any notion was entertained that there were limits to the power of human will over the phenomena of society... the only obstacle was supposed to lie in the private interests or prejudices, which hindered men from being willing to see the [social arrangements] tried. (VIII:876/VI:vi:1)

31XVIII:228–259, esp. at pp. 252ff; Millgram, 2004, secs. 2–3, reconstructs the supporting argument Mill gives for the first of these three claims.
of the truth, and one that is misleading on its own. To complete such a half-truth, it must be supplemented by results often produced by independently developed sciences, and, plausibly, by arguments whose advocates are antecedently disposed to see things in a very different manner.

In the *Autobiography*, Mill tells us that, as a young teen

> the subject [of the French Revolution] took an immense hold of my feelings. It allied itself with all my juvenile aspirations to the character of a democratic champion. What had happened so lately, seemed as if it might easily happen again; and the most transcendent glory I was capable of conceiving, was that of figuring, successful or unsuccessful, as a Girondist in an English Convention. (I:65/A 3:1)

Mill grew up in the aftermath of that Revolution—the Napoleonic Wars lasted until 1815, when he was nine or so—and it would have been a grave oversight if the revolutionary potential of movements directed at radical reform had not eventually received his close attention. A good deal of his writing suggests that it must have: not only did he at one point seriously contemplate composing a history of the French Revolution himself, and not only did Mill review Carlyle’s history of the French Revolution very favorably, but an entire volume of his *Collected Works* is devoted to “Essays on French History and Historians.” Here we have before us the results of that intellectual engagement: if I am right, Mill’s theory of scientific method was an attempt to diagnose and correct the Terror (not that this was by any means its only agenda). Mill’s own subsequent political theorizing was shaped by the diagnosis, and if we now think of the views he made famous as “liberal” rather than “radical,” and if a great many of them have been taken up into the political common sense of our time, that is in good part because his insistence on sensitivity to the different sides of a question strikes his readers today as intelligent and mature.

I earlier argued that Mill was disheartened when he found Bentham to be, among other things, childish, and that he reformulated the utilitarian theory and political program so as to retrieve his own youthful commitment, by rendering it, among other things, grown up. Let me conclude with one final observation: we are finally in a position to see how Mill managed to rescue rather than reject Bentham.

The Deductive Method allows the result of one treatment to be complemented, adjusted by and even overridden by considerations belonging to a different treatment (or even a different science). Bentham’s error, as Mill thought, was that of treating the Geometrical Method as appropriate in
social-science subject matter. That allowed Mill to correct Bentham’s pol-
icy dictates, while granting that the arguments that Bentham constructed
for them were right as far as they went. In his essay on Bentham, in one of
those attempts to make a criticism sound as nice as possible, he remarked
that “there is hardly anything positive in Bentham’s philosophy which is
not true: . . . when his practical conclusions are erroneous, which in our opin-
ion they are very often, it is not because the considerations which he urges
are not rational and valid in themselves, but because some more important
principle, which he did not perceive, supersedes those considerations, and
turns the scale” (X:93). At the age of sixteen, Mill had taken on a lifelong
commitment to a cause, one which he was not ready to abandon; his work
in philosophy of science, it turns out, met a very personal need. It allowed
him to understand himself as improving the utilitarianism he had inherited,
rather than merely replacing it.

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