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► **To cite this version:**

Christophe Salvat. STILL-BORN YET NOT WITHOUT INFLUENCE. Journal of the History of Economic Thought, In press. halshs-03083697

**HAL Id: halshs-03083697**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03083697v1>**

Submitted on 19 Dec 2020

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STILL-BORN YET NOT WITHOUT INFLUENCE

WHAT MILL'S POLITICAL ECONOMY OWES TO HIS PROJECT OF ETHOLOGY

BY CHRISTOPHE SALVAT\*

**Abstract**

*This article questions the articulation between John Stuart Mill's initial project of creating a new science dedicated to the means of improving individual character, a science named ethology, and the treatise of political economy that he published instead. My claim is that his defence of free competition as well as some of the arguments he opposes to it, and which have often puzzled his readers, actually reveal the moral agenda of his political economy and of some of his political principles, specifically his ambivalent position towards paternalism.*

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**This “preprint” is the peer-reviewed and accepted typescript of an article that is forthcoming in revised form, after minor editorial changes, in the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* (ISSN: 1053-8372), issue TBA. Copyright to the journal's articles is held by the History of Economics Society (HES), whose exclusive licensee and publisher for the journal is Cambridge University Press.**

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The preprint may be cited as follows:

Salvat, Christophe. “*Still-Born Yet Not Without Influence: What Mill's Political Economy Owes to his Project of Ethology*”. *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* (forthcoming). Preprint at *SocArXiv*, [osf.io/preprints/socarxiv](https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv)

## I. INTRODUCTION

In chapter five of book six of the *System of Logic*, John Stuart Mill proposed to found a new science, referred to as ethology. The aim of this new science would be to understand the role played by social circumstances in individual choices and to improve people's character by intervening in their social environment. This science, if it had been achieved, would have had – alongside political economy – a significant place in Mill's moral system. In its absence, political economy seems almost at odds with the general moral background of his philosophy. However, the main consequence of its absence is to conceal the perfectionist or paternalistic feature of Mill's general framework. This paper therefore discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the missing theory of ethology relatively to political economy. It shows that, despite not being the object of a full treatise, ethology is nonetheless present in Mill's philosophical system and that it surreptitiously resurfaces, notably, in his political economy and his politics. It also highlights the importance given to excellence or nobleness of character, a notion too often discarded as a mere trace of the Victorian frame of mind (Houghton 1957). Failing to address the issue of character formation in Mill's thought could, I contend, lead to serious misunderstandings of his philosophy, particularly in relation to paternalism.

The first section presents Mill's initial project of setting a new science inherited from associationism and directed towards the improvement of individual characters. Section two questions the nature of the improvement considered and suggests that the desired qualities alluded to in the *System of Logic* match those of the 'noble characters' he extensively develops in *Utilitarianism*. Section three introduces the main liberal features of his *Principles on political economy* published instead of the expected treatise on ethology. Sections four and five further examine the link between political economy and ethology. Whilst section four focuses on how

improving characters justifies some decisive exceptions to the general principle of free competition (colonies, education and land property), section five argues that Mill sees in the principle of competition, and therefore in the promotion of political economy, one of the most efficient ways to improve individual characters. The final section questions the paternalistic feature of Mill's philosophy.

## II. THE SCIENCE OF ETHOLOGY

In chapter five of book six of the *System of Logic*, Mill proposed to found a new science, called ethology, which aimed to understand the role played by social circumstances in individual choices. Based on psychology's general laws, ethology was supposed to reconcile deductive and universal laws of human nature with seemingly contrary empirical evidence. Its aim was to explain why individuals behave differently in comparable circumstances whilst all being subject to the same universal laws. In his classic *History of English Utilitarianism* (1902), Ernest Albee maintained that Mill abandoned his project of developing a science of ethology soon after the publication of the *System of Logic* to dedicate himself to political economy (Albee 1902). But, according to David Leary, Mill's failure to complete his scheme can be partly explained by ethology's own weaknesses. As a deductive science-to-be grounded on empirical psychology, ethology was, he believes, doomed from the start (Leary 1982, p.155). This theory has since been contested (Capaldi 1973, Leary 1982, Ball 2000). I claim here that, whatever Mill's reasons for abandoning his project of writing a full treatise on ethology, he never abandoned the idea of using social science, and political economy in particular, to improve individual characters.

Although ethology is only explicitly dealt with in *System of Logic*, character formation is a topic Mill often refers to in his other works. This is especially true in *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865), *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865), and his notes on James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1869). Carlisle (1991) and Ball (2000) have argued that Mill's autobiography could be read as a case study of ethology, an illustration of how "his character was being formed (and to some degree deformed) by his father and subsequently re-formed by himself" (Bal 2000, p.33). The issue of the formation of character is also a prominent one in *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) and *Subjection of Women* (1869). I shall, however, essentially deal here with his writings on political economy.

As a first approximation, ethology can be described as a branch of human psychology. Its origins are to be found in the associationist theory defended by David Hume, David Hartley, Alexander Bain, as well as James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829)<sup>1</sup>. In his *Autobiography*, Mill describes his father's 'fundamental doctrine' as "the formation of all human character by circumstances, through the universal Principle of Association, and the consequent unlimited possibility of improving the moral and intellectual condition of mankind by education. Of all his doctrines none was more important than this, or needs more to be insisted on" (Mill [1874] 1981, p.111). Those views were, however, not generally shared, including by associationist theorists. Robert Owen, for instance, contested the role (self-)education could potentially play in character formation (Tait 1971). Auguste Comte, Mill's

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<sup>1</sup> Despite his young age, it is believed that John Stuart assisted his father during the redaction of the *Analysis* (Carlisle 2010, pp.18-19).

main opponent, was however not a disciple of associationism, and he considered it to be scientifically flawed<sup>2</sup>.

Although they often disagree on fundamental issues, associationist philosophers all agree that human beings follow general and universal psychology laws and that the distinctness of individual behaviours can be explained by the great variety of circumstances they are subject to. As a member of the Associationist School (to which Mill's father also belonged), Mill believed that individual actions are caused by a number of psychological associations, and that provided we have sufficient knowledge of the character of the person and of her environment, then her actions could be scientifically predicted, since "volitions do, in point of fact, follow determinate moral antecedents with the same uniformity, and (when we have sufficient knowledge of the

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<sup>2</sup> For Comte, for something to be considered as scientific observation, it must satisfy two conditions: observations must be veridical and they ought to presuppose a prior theory. Yet these two conditions cannot be fulfilled with introspection (Wilson 1991, p.118). According to the French philosopher, the principle of interior observation belongs to the metaphysico-theological stage of philosophy. For Comte, the identity between the observing and the observed organ makes the "principle of this so-called psychological method [...] entirely worthless" (Comte, 1988, 21). Grounding individual differences on physiological factors, Comte is known for having justified social inequalities such as the inferior social position of women, which he attributed to the smaller size of their brain. This particular question was a major bone of contention between both philosophers who eventually fell out in 1847 (Olivier 2002).

circumstances) with the same certainty, as physical effects follow their physical causes” (Mill [1865] 1979, p.446).

In its purest form, associationism excludes the idea of free will. For Mill, however, individuals can – to some extent – alter their character (Mill [1865] 1979, p.466). In that respect, Mill dissociates himself from Owen and his followers, who believed that individual character could only be moulded through external action (Harrison 2009, Owen 1813). Determinism is not ‘Fatalism’, says Mill, and it certainly does not diminish an individual’s personal responsibility in their actions. This distinction between irresistible and resistible causes of action is, as suggested by John Skorupski, fundamental to avoid determinism turning into fatalism (Skorupski 1989, p.252). It would be misleading, however, to conclude that individuals owe their capacity to resist motives of action to their moral autonomy. They only owe it to their character. People who have a strong character are better equipped to select amongst different motives of action the one they will actually yield to. But this is not autonomy, not – at least – in the Kantian meaning of the word<sup>3</sup>. To be fully autonomous, the agent’s will ought to be independently and rationally formed. For Mill, however, all motives of action are externally determined and nothing suggests that a rational – and consequently universal – one should be given priority. On the contrary, he clearly states in *On Liberty*, that all experiences of living are equally desirable and, moreover, that this includes the desires of the most spontaneous and impulsive people; the most praiseworthy, in effect, as they are the mark of a strong and energetic character.

The aim of ethology is “to deduce the requisite middle principles from the general laws of Psychology. The subject to be studied is, the origin and sources of all those qualities in human

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<sup>3</sup> On the different meanings autonomy can have in Mill’s writings, see (Fuchs 2001).

beings which are interesting to us, either as facts to be produced, to be avoided, or merely to be understood: and the object is, to determine, from the general laws of mind, combined with the general position of our species in the universe, what actual or possible combinations of circumstances are capable of promoting or of preventing the production of those qualities.” (Mill [1843] 1974, pp.873-74). If ethology can give us a scientific account of how our character, and as a consequence our behaviour, is determined by our environment, then it becomes possible to design policies that could positively affect people’s decision-making processes, without directly interfering with their personal choices.

There are two different sides to ethology depending on whether it applies to national or to individual character. Mill believed each developed nation had its particular character<sup>4</sup> and that it would be “an absurdity” (Mill [1865] 1979, p.99) to ignore these differences when discussing legal and political matters. This is, as John Robson showed it, the very core of Mill’s attack against Jeremy Bentham’s universalism. Similar points can be made against the supposed universality of the principles of political economy. Personal characters are the combined product of individual and social circumstances, and it is through a combined action on these circumstances that personal character can evolve. How could it be otherwise, knowing that we all influence our (close) environment, just as we are swayed by it? The real issue, though, is to what extent it is possible to anticipate the consequences on people’s character of a change in their environment; or, in other words, whether Mill’s project of a science of ethology is achievable. Mill believes that, if it is impossible to anticipate with great exactitude the consequences of a

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<sup>4</sup> Mill believed, for instance, that the Germans were *speculative* while the British were *practical*.

For more details see (Robson 1998).



social policy in that respect, it is nonetheless possible – or at least it should soon be – to ascertain its general impact. This should suffice to decide whether or not an action is desirable: “It is enough that we know that certain means have a tendency to produce a given effect, and that others have a tendency to frustrate it. When the circumstances of an individual or of a nation are in any considerable degree under our control, we may, by our knowledge of tendencies, be enabled to shape those circumstances in a manner much more favourable to the ends we desire, than the shape which they would of themselves assume. This is the limit of our power; but within this limit the power is a most important one.” (Mill [1843] 1974, pp.869-870).

### III. THE ULTIMATE AIM OF ETHOLOGY

The cultivation of nobleness of character, for Mill, “should be to individual human beings an end” (Mill [1843] 1974, p.952), and therefore constitute the ultimate aim of ethology. The idea of nobleness of character is a recurrent notion in Mill’s writings, one that he adopted when still very much under the influence of the Romantics and one that he never abandoned<sup>5</sup>. Mill believed, as did a number of public moralists, that some types of characters, which he called ‘noble characters’, were of higher moral standards than others, and that the achievement of a well-ordered society depended on people’s ability to excel in character.

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<sup>5</sup> Mill commented that Bentham knew absolutely nothing about human character (Mill 1985, pp.92-93). Romantics, on the other hand, realized its importance but never approached it from a scientific point of view.

What does being of ‘noble character’ involve? Mill does not give a full account. Noble translates as love of pride, of liberty and personal independence, of power or excitement, “but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all humans beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong.” (Mill 1985, p.212). The notion of nobleness of character is purposefully kept ill-defined by Mill, who does not want to convey the idea that it only refers to a unique pattern. Noble characters are those able to assert their singularity, whilst at the same time cultivating higher pleasures and higher values.

There are two main institutional ways to foster nobleness of character for Mill. The first one is to further democracy. This may be surprising as Mill clearly singled out democracy as a major cause of standardization of characters. It is important, however, to distinguish the social and the political meaning of the word democracy. Democracy, as a social movement towards equality, and for Mill, like for Alexis de Tocqueville before him, inevitably results in the downwards harmonization of people’s lifestyles. Democracy, as a political system of representative government appears to be the only appropriate response to what Tocqueville referred as the ‘fated’ gradual progress of equality. But democracy can also represent a serious threat to nobleness of characters. Strong and energetic characters are an asset to the proper functioning of representative government but, as Mill is well aware, they are not usually appreciated by people<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> “The commonplaces of moralists, and the general sympathies of mankind, are in favour of the passive type. Energetic characters may be admired, but the acquiescent and submissive are those which most men personally prefer. The passiveness of our neighbours increases our sense of

They are, therefore, less likely to be elected. The British election system exacerbates this ‘natural’ tendency. “At present”, regrets Mill, “by universal admission, it is becoming more and more difficult for anyone, who has only talents and character, to gain admission into the House of Commons. The only persons who can get elected are those who possess local influence, or make their way by lavish expenditure, or who, on the invitation of three or four tradesmen or attorneys, are sent down by one of the two great parties from their London clubs, as men whose votes the party can depend on under all circumstances” (Mill [1843] 1974, pp.455-56). The real danger, as Mill sees it, is not that noble characters are underrepresented – this is to be expected – but that they are *totally* excluded from representation. Once a few are elected, Mill confidently assumes that they will necessarily be heard. Although only counting according to their number in the actual voting, the instructed minority “would count for much more, in virtue of their knowledge, and of the influence it would give them over the rest” (Mill [1843] 1974, p.460).

The second<sup>7</sup> institutional lever to alter people’s character in England (as well as anywhere else) is to promote, to generalise, and to improve education. Although all men have the potential to

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security, and plays into the hands of our wilfulness. Passive characters, if we do not happen to need their activity, seem an obstruction the less in our own path” (Mill [1843] 1974, p.407).

<sup>7</sup> Education is only “second” in the order of this discussion. In fact, education has priority over democracy for Mill: “When society has not performed its duty, by rendering this amount of instruction accessible to all, there is some hardship in the case, but is a hardship that ought to be borne. If society has neglected to discharge two solemn obligations, the more important and more fundamental of the two must be fulfilled first: universal teaching must precede universal enfranchisement.” (Mill 1977, p.470).

experience such pleasures, some people's pleasures are limited on account of their lack of education. According to associationism, sensations produce ideas, which in turn, when associated to other's ideas, produce complex mental states that enable us to derive pleasure from situations or events we would otherwise have been indifferent to. Education gives us the means to develop the necessary faculties that will be later instrumental to our happiness. But education is wasted if it stops individuals from asserting their character, as Mill believes. Strength and diversity of character is what education is about, and more importantly even, it is what civilization is about. "Ethology", writes Mill, "is the science which corresponds to the art of education in the widest sense of the term, including the formation of national or collective character as well as individual" (Mill [1843] 1974, p.869).

It is therefore one of the government's main duties and one of the very few, if not the only, case where it has full legitimacy to interfere with its citizen's private lives: "Education [...] is one of those things which it is admissible in principle that a government should provide for the people. The case is one to which the reasons of the non-interference principle do not necessarily or universally extend." (Mill [1848] 1965, p.948). In aspects of practice, promoting education is achieved by setting up new schools across the country, however, the most important aspect is rather the underlying legal obligation made for parents to send their children to school at little or no cost (Mill [1848] 1965, p.949). Schools are also not required to be state-funded, so that parents have the freedom, as they ought, to send their children to private and religious schools. Furthermore, the government should have no authority to bind teachers to a single curriculum (Mill [1848] 1965, p.950). The only obligation to be made is to provide proper education to all children. This, Mill believes, is far from being the case in Victorian England, where "[t]he present wretched education, and wretched social arrangements" are responsible of the English's

lack of sophistication, their egoism and their unrepentant sexism, and these should be the first institutions to be reformed (Mill [1861] 1985, p.215).

For Mill, nobleness of character refers to “the conformity of his own character to his standard of excellence, without hope of good and fear of evil from other source than his own inward consciousness.” (Mill [1838] 1985, p.95). It relies on a deep conviction that ‘individuality should assert itself’ (Mill [1859] 1977, p.261), that different modes of life are worth living and that ‘free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others’ (Mill [1859] 1977, p.261). This belief is supported by different types of arguments. The first one is utilitarian in nature: by letting people find their pleasure wherever they choose to find it (on the condition that no one else is hurt) one ensures their greatest happiness.

Mill secondly sees the cultivation of strong characters as a defence against the standardization of characters entailed by the upcoming democracy. Strong and energetic characters are impervious to public opinion and custom. “The general average of mankind”, regrets Mill, “are not only moderate in intellect, but also moderate in inclinations: they have no tastes or wishes strong enough to incline them to do anything unusual, and they consequently do not understand those who have, and class all such with the wild and intemperate whom they are accustomed to look down upon.” (Mill [1859] 1977, p.271). But for this standard of excellence to be achieved, adequate circumstances need to be created. This is where sciences such as ethology and political economy should assist the legislator.

#### IV. MILL’S CONCEPTION OF ECONOMICS

Mill's *Principles of political economy* stands as one of the most influential economic textbooks of the second half the nineteenth century. Initially published in 1848, it has been continually republished, was revised by Mill up until its seventh edition in 1871, and was extensively used at least until World War One. Mill's contribution to economics has often been undermined and read only to be compared to Adam Smith's and David Ricardo's. It is true that historians of economic thought, who used to exclusively focus on a retrospective history of economic concepts, have not been very sympathetic to Mill's works (Schumpeter 1954, Blaug 1985, Hollander 1985). The idea according to which Mill's economic ideas lacked originality was, however, not shared by everyone. John Hicks considered him as "the most undervalued economist of the nineteenth century" (Hollander 1985, p.ix), and George Stigler even claimed that he was "one of the most original economists in the history of the science" (Hollander 1985, p.xii).

Unlike Ricardo, Mill does not see the decline of the rate of profits as an adverse process to arrest or to delay but rather as a necessary condition to reach the stationary state, which he sees as "a very considerable improvement on [their] present condition" (Mill [1848] 1965, p.754)<sup>8</sup>. Since acquisition of wealth is made virtually impossible in such a state, people can concentrate on a better distribution: "It is only in the backward countries of the world that increased production is

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<sup>8</sup> To be more specific, two different situations should be distinguished. If the stationary state is brought on by a rise in Ricardian rent, wages will be left at subsistence, which hardly qualifies as an 'improvement'. But if the stationary state is generated through moral restraint (hence controlling population growth), workers will benefit from better life conditions. I am thankful to an anonymous referee for pointing out this important distinction to me. For more details, see (Persky 2016, p. 85).

still an important object: in those most advanced, what is economically needed is a better distribution, of which one indispensable means is a stricter restraint on population” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.755). Like Thomas Malthus, he disapproved of the unsustainable growth of population caused by people’s imprudent behaviour, but does not contemplate colonial trade as a possible solution to what can only be regarded as a *moral* issue. Political economy, on the contrary, offers conclusive evidence that population growth and profit rates are closely linked. While “the countries in which the greatest prudence is manifested in the regulating of population, are often those in which capital increases less rapidly”, one can also observe that “[w]here there is an indefinite prospect of employment for increased numbers, there is apt to appear less necessity for prudential restraint” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.753). The economic slowdown consecutive to the fall of the profit rate should therefore, for Mill, be conducive to an improvement of people’s moral constraint. According to his own words, Mill “cannot [...] regard the stationary state of capital and wealth with the unaffected aversion so generally manifested towards it by political economists of the old school” (Mill [1848] 1965, pp.753-54).

The difficulty in assessing Mill’s contribution to political economy from a strict economic point of view becomes obvious once we realize that, for Mill, the science of political economy, cannot be considered separately from the other social sciences, and most specifically from ethology. Political Economy, should not be treated “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 directed within its scope: while to the character of a practical guide it has no pretension, apart from other classes of considerations.” (Mill [1874] 1981, p.236). Whilst economic commentators are prone to acknowledge the distinction introduced by Mill

between science and art, they are not ready to admit that, in order to have any possible application, political economy must be connected to other social sciences.

Science “deals in facts, [art] in precepts. Science is a collection of truths; art, a body of rules, or directions for conduct” (Mill 1967, p.312). As a science, political economy is logically strictly restricted to the uncovering of universal economic laws. To identify such laws, it is necessary to imagine an economic agent stripped from all that could potentially makes him belong to a certain time or a certain culture. “Just in the same manner [that geometry presupposes an arbitrary definition of a line]”, writes Mill in his *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy* (1844), “does Political Economy presuppose an arbitrary definition of a man, as a being who invariably does that by which he may obtain the greatest amount of necessaries, conveniences, and luxuries, with the smallest quantity of labour and physical self-denial with which they can be obtained in the existing state of knowledge” (Mill 1967, p.326). Of course, Mill never considered increasing wealth and economic growth as society’s ultimate end. And whatever this aim may be, it is not for political economists to uncover it. This is the task of art, like moral philosophy, not of science. Mill’s economic man has nevertheless been attacked by a number of thinkers such as Emile Durkheim (Steiner & Gillig 2015). Durkheim was not averse to the idea of using abstractions for scientific purpose and he certainly belonged to those who believed in the scientific potential of social studies, but he believed that Mill’s process of abstraction went too far. If Mill’s political economy had been supposed to stand on its own, Durkheim’s criticism would probably have been acceptable. However, this was never supposed to be the case, and once articulated with ethology, Durkheim’s point falls through.

The scientific legitimacy of political economy relies, as presented above, on a de-socialized view of man. The practical validity of the general laws it has uncovered depends, however, on the



social and historical circumstances actually encountered. Circumstances can strongly affect people's character in one way or another and this has potentially decisive consequences on their economic choices. In the absence of a science capable of anticipating the impact caused on individual character by institution changes, political economy is condemned to remain a purely theoretical science, devoid of any possible applications. To be fully relevant, the lessons from political economy need to be completed by those of ethological principles, the omission of which "is no defect in them as abstract or hypothetical sciences, but it vitiates them in their practical application as branches of a comprehensive social science." (Mill [1843] 1974, p.487). General economic laws ought to be reinterpreted according to social and cultural specificities to have some 'applications to social philosophy' as stated in the full title of the *Principles*.

As we know, Mill abandoned the idea of writing a treatise on ethology, and dedicated the few years immediately following the *System of Logic* to the redaction of his book on political economy instead. This may explain why he did not strictly follow the epistemological rules he ascertained in the *Definition of Political economy* (1836) and in the *System* (1843). In the following sections, I shall present two economic issues: land properties and colonies, where Mill voluntarily stepped aside from using the abstraction of the *homo oeconomicus* to include considerations drawn from ethology in order to promote moral improvement.

## V. LAND PROPERTY AND COLONIES

Let us first consider the issue raised by large agricultural exploitation. Mill considers small landed properties to be far superior to large exploitations, yet he recognizes that, economically speaking, labour "is unquestionably more productive on the system of large industrial

enterprises” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.768). In chapter nine of his *Principles*, ‘Of Production on a Large, and Production on a Small Scale’, Mill compares the productivity of small and large agricultural enterprises and endeavours – not without difficulties – to present the economic benefits of small agricultural exploitations. He eventually admits that “the comparative merits of the *grande* and the *petite* culture, especially when the small farmer is also the proprietor, cannot be looked upon as decided. It is a question on which good judges at present differ. The current of English opinion is in favour of large farms: on the Continent, the weight of authority seems to be on the other side” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.150). Property is the determinant factor to take into consideration: “To understand the subject, it must be studied where the cultivator is the proprietor, or at least a *métayer* with a permanent tenure; where the labour he exerts to increase the produce and value of the land avails wholly, or at least partly, to his own benefit and that of his descendants.” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.148).

Although not as efficient as hired labour, economic independence gives a sense of responsibility and prudence to the farmers, whose survival now only depends on their ability to work, save and plan ahead for their future. In addition to being constitutive of strong and active personalities, economic independence is also a prerequisite to moral improvement, including sexual restraint. This applies to rich countries, in which increased production ceases to be an important object (Mill [1848] 1965, p.755), as well as poor countries, who should give priority to character formation over immediate economic growth: “In a backward state of industrial improvement, as in Ireland, I should urge its introduction, in preference to an exclusive system of hired labour; as a more powerful instrument for raising a population from semi-savage listlessness and recklessness, to persevering industry and prudent calculation.” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.768). In a series of articles on Ireland, published in the *Morning Chronicle*, Mill also claims that the Irish

peasants' admittedly revolting behaviour is the result of their exploitation and that with proprietorship "tendencies in the current character of the peasant are reversible" (Carlisle 2010, p.149).

In the case of Ireland, Mill actually conjectured that the Irish character had been 'malformed' by the economic exploitation and religious subservience imposed by Britain (Bell 2010, p.49). To put it right, Mill proposed to buy up the wastelands of Ireland and distribute them to the Irish peasantry, either through outright grants-in-deed, or through permanent tenures under a quit-rent (Zastoupil 1983, p.710). In India, where the government "being itself the landlord" (Mill [1848] 1965, p.327), redistributing land to Indian peasants is not an option. He therefore proposes to reform the terms of tenure and grant perpetual leases to the farmers. But, whatever the means employed, changing a national character always remains a long and slow process. A more direct and efficient way is to aim at individual characters. This perfectly illustrates the principle enunciated above, and reaffirmed in the *Principles*, according to which "the moral aspect of the question [...] is still more important than the economical" (Mill [1848] 1965, p.768). His argument is moral rather than economic, and it relies on the types of psychological mechanisms ethology should have uncovered. His aim is to foster strong and energetic characters. As noted by Joseph Persky, "the point was not to redistribute, but to reorganize in a fashion that increased efficiency and overcame rural lethargy" (Persky 2016, p.106).

Mill, like his father before him, believed that England, as one of the most morally advanced countries in the world, had a duty to civilize underprivileged countries. Unlike his father, however, and in discordance with the Ricardian tradition, Mill argues that England would gain from carrying on its ancient colonial trade system with India. Colonies are, for Mill, "the last of the counter-forces which check the downward tendency of profits, in a country whose capital

increases faster than that of its neighbours, and whose profits are therefore nearer to the minimum.” (Mill [1848] 1965, pp.745-46). His main argument, developed in the *Principles of Political Economy*, is that only an emigration of capital (as well as population) could check the progressive decline of the rate of profit and keep up a level “a supply of cheap food and cheap materials of clothing, proportional to the increase of our population; thus enabling an increasing capital to find employment in the country, without reduction of profit, in producing manufactured articles with which to pay for this supply of raw produce.” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.746). If one does accept the wage-fund theory, as Mill does<sup>9</sup>, the reasoning is perfectly valid. However, it should not be read as a personal stance in favour of imperialism.

The reason for which Mill still favours colonization is not economic but moral. Political economy provides some arguments in favour of imperialism but they are not and cannot be determinant. It is fundamental, to fully understand Mill’s approach to political economy, to keep in mind the way he sees the relation between science and art (Riley 1998, Robson 1968).

Amongst the main sciences, Mill gives a special importance to moral sciences such as political economy, ethology, history, and psychology, which he discusses in book six of the *System of Logic*. By art, he essentially refers to morality, politics and aesthetics, which form the basis of the ‘art of life’. For Mill, art and science both contribute to improve man’s condition but each within its own constitution. The object of science is to uncover the general laws of the organic and inorganic world while the aim of art is to set human ends. Science is then strictly instrumental to art: “The art proposes to itself an end to be attained, defines the end, and hands it over to the science. The science receives it, considers it as a phenomenon or effect to be studied,

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<sup>9</sup> This point is, however, debated. See (White 1994, Vint 1995).

and having investigated its causes and conditions, sends it back to art with a theorem of the combination of circumstances by which it could be produced.” (Mill [1843] 1974, pp.944-45). Despite this important methodological principle, Mill also, on occasion, introduces moral and normative considerations in his *Principles of Political Economy*. This happens, in particular, when oppositions occur between potential economic benefits and character improvement. Take the case of productivity and land reform. As a science, the role of political economy is to analyse the mechanisms behind economic growth, however, such analyses do not suppose that economic growth is man’s ultimate end. In fact, morality tells us that it is not and that when a conflict occurs between increase of wealth and improvement of character, priority should be given to the latter. The difficulty arises when political economy is to give practical instruction on how to achieve ends set by art. This cannot be done without the support of ethology.

Colonialism constitutes a perfect illustration of Mill’s belief that “the moral aspect of the question [...] is still more important than the economical” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.768)<sup>10</sup>. Contrary to what has sometimes been argued, Mill did not use political economy to justify colonialism. Like his father, he supported the English colonial system but essentially for moral – or what Sullivan called ‘cultural’ – reasons. Colonies, when suitably governed, could benefit from the experience and wisdom of the old countries. They also, as Bell judiciously noted, constituted “laboratories of character development” or “case studies of his proposed science of ethology” (Bell 2010, p.46). This remains true whether colonies change indigenous characters for the better

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<sup>10</sup> It can, however, be pointed out that, as Stefan Collini suggests, Mill often took advantage of his authority as a leading political economist to influence public opinion on the benefits of reforms that could not be vindicated by economic arguments (Collini 1991, p.163).

or the worse. And, as shown by Bell, Mill grew more and more disillusioned about England's ability to foster strong and noble characters abroad.

In his *Autobiography*, Mill explains that, though he sometimes took the historical and cultural context of the economic agent, the *Principles of Political Economy* “yielded to none of its predecessors in aiming at the scientific appreciation of the action of these causes, under the conditions which they presuppose; but it set the example of not treating those conditions as final” (Mill [1874] 1981, p.257). Land properties and colonies are but two examples of these provisional conditions. It is possible that Mill broke his own epistemological rule because he knew his treatise on ethology would never be completed. He may also simply have considered the issue too politically sensitive not to be dealt with<sup>11</sup>. As such they do not jeopardize the scientific status of political economy as he defined it. However, I argue that by systematically promoting individual competition, political economy goes beyond its scientific scope, and that it actually aims at improving people character.

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<sup>11</sup> Mill interrupted the redaction of the *Principles on Political economy* for six months to write papers about the Irish famine: “The Political Economy was far more rapidly executed than the Logic, or indeed than anything of importance which I had previously written. It was commenced in the autumn of 1845, and was ready for the press before the end of 1847. In this period of little more than two years there was an interval of six months during which the work was laid aside, while I was writing articles in the *Morning Chronicle*... urging the formation of peasant properties on the waste lands of Ireland. This was during the period of the Famine, the winter of 1846-47.” (Mill [1874] 1981, p.242)

## VI. WHEN COMPETITION SHAPES CHARACTER

In what follows, and to close this discussion, I want to show that not only did ethology sometimes bias Mill's economic reasoning, but that it may also have influenced his defence of competition.

As Smith and Ricardo's successor, Mill supports economic competition, then referred as the *laissez-faire* principle, as the most effective system imagined so far. We have seen that Mill had reasons to also support colonialism. This is not, however, the only exceptions he makes to the liberal creed. In Book five Chapter eleven of the *Principles*, 'On the grounds and limits of the *Laissez-faire* or non-interference principle', Mill presents an impressive list of exceptions to the rule of competition.

It is often believed, maybe due to the influential thesis of Friedrich Hayek, that Mill's liberalism wore off under the spell of his wife Harriet Taylor, who eventually led him away from economic liberalism (Légé 2008). This is partially incorrect. First, historians have shown that Mill's early positions were largely shaped by the Saint-Simonian philosophy (Gillig & Légé 2017). His faith in the utility of public intervention, however, steadily declines after the publication of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and the 1848 Revolution. It is also wrong to conclude from his late socialist sympathies (which actually were limited to local experiments) the idea that he then came to question the legitimacy of competition. On the contrary, competition always had been a bone of contention between him and them (Mill [1848] 1965, p.792).

Whilst writing the *Principles of Political Economy*, between 1845 and 1848, Mill is hesitant about the importance to give to the *laissez-faire* principle. He confides his doubts in a letter to

John Austin (Schwartz 1972, p.114) before finally deciding to support the rule of free competition with a few exceptions on account that “if competition has its evils, it prevents greater evils.” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.793). Mill is also concerned about the consequences of the development of democracy (according to Tocqueville’s meaning) in English society. Individual freedom and competition are, alongside an appropriate political constitution, the major means to stop the rise of uniformity and apathy characteristic of such societies: “The public collectively is abundantly ready to impose, not only its generally narrow views of its interests, but its abstract opinions, and even its tastes, as laws binding upon individuals. [...] there was never more necessity for surrounding individual independence of thought, speech, and conduct, with the most powerful defences, in order to maintain that originality of mind and individuality of character, which are the only source of any real progress” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.945).

In the *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill lists four reasons supporting the system of free competition. The first one is related to the imperative right that individuals have to be in control of their own personal life. According to Mill, “there is a circle around every individual human being which no government, be it that of one, of a few, or of the many, ought to be permitted to overstep: there is a part of the life of every person who has come to years of discretion, within which the individuality of that person ought to reign uncontrolled either by any other individual or by the public collectively” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.943). But, as Mill acknowledges, this objection seldom applies to governmental interferences which are generally not directed against individual free agency. The second objection raised by Mill against the increase of governmental agency follows from the impact such an increase has on the actual power of the government, both in terms of authority and influence. The danger is especially when members of the government have social or individual vested interests to pursue. This is also particularly



alarming in democratic societies in which public opinion absolutely rules and minorities can easily be oppressed. The third objection against governmental agency is linked to the principle of the division of labor, or more exactly its implicit denial. The more governments take over what was previously held by individuals or local powers, the less efficient they are in fulfilling their functions. This is especially true of centralized countries such as France. The fourth and last objection but also, according to Mill, the ‘strongest’ one, is the loss of individual agency that goes along with the growing individual apathy produced by sprawling governmental interferences: “A people among whom there is no habit of spontaneous action for a collective interest – who look habitually to their government to command or prompt them in all matters of joint concern – who expect to have everything done for them, except what can be made an affair of mere habit and routine – have their faculties only half developed; their education is defective in one of its most important branches.” (Mill [1848] 1965, pp.948-49). This main reason for governments not to interfere in private lives is that they have disastrous effects on the formation of characters. The less competitive is a society, the less strong and energetic individual characters will be. Interestingly enough, competition is not supported by strictly economic arguments.

Despite those reasons, Mill concedes that a number of exceptions can be made to the principle of competition, which are also developed in chapter eleven, book five, of the *Principles of Political Economy*. The consumer is, theoretically, the best judge of his needs and of his interest.

However, this is not always the case: “there are other things, of the worth of which the demand of the market is by no means a test; things of which the utility does not consist in ministering to inclinations, nor in serving the daily uses of life, and the want of which is least felt where the need is greatest. This is peculiarly true of those things which are chiefly useful as tending to raise

the character of human beings. The uncultivated cannot be competent judges of cultivation” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.953). In other words, those who may be the most in need of education are not necessarily the ones who are the most desirous of it. Education, for Mill, can legitimately be enforced and paid for by the government, as it is essential to the improvement of human character. There are a number of further cases for which Mill believes the principle of free competition should not apply, including child and female labor, perpetual commitments, and unions. Although each could be linked to character improvement, they are nonetheless justified otherwise. The last case, a defense of public charity, is ethology related.

The case of public charity, or the Poor Laws, was particularly sensitive in the first half of the nineteenth century in England (Clement 1999). Ricardo, in particular, had voiced his opposition to such laws, which he considered partly responsible for the poverty of the lowest classes. In addition to deterring people from work, public charity interfered with the labor market and enabled employers to pay their workers a rate below the natural wage. Despite adopting very similar principles to Ricardo, John Stuart Mill is one of the very few classical economists to have given his support to the Poor Laws. His reasons are not, however, strictly economic but ethologic<sup>12</sup>. The legitimacy of public assistance ought to be assessed by the consequences it has on individual character. Mill admits that too generous an assistance can foster idleness<sup>13</sup> but he

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory Claeys claims that Mill’s views on poor relief can also be explained from a political standpoint. The idea is that beyond the perfection of individual character lies another, and much more important goal, the perfection of the social entity (Claeys 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Mill considered man to be naturally inclined to indolence and reproached the socialists for being too naive about it. He sees competition as a necessary condition to exertion: “It is the

also believes that not being assisted can also have detrimental effects on character: “Energy and self-dependence are (...) liable to be impaired by the absence of help, as well as by its excess. It is even more fatal to exertion to have no hope of succeeding by it, than to be assured of succeeding without it. When the condition of any one is so disastrous that his energies are paralyzed by discouragement, assistance is a tonic, not a sedative: it braces instead of deadening the active faculties” (Mill [1848] 1965, pp.967-68). The difficulty is to find a system that supports people in real need and prevent them from giving up whilst not discouraging those who do not need support but seek it. This implies differentiating assistance according to the situation and character of the people calling for help. Private individuals only occasionally meet people in need and they tend to act according to their emotions rather than their reason. They either give too much or too little. When properly managed, public charity, on the contrary, can be efficient; and Mill believes history has proven English Poor Laws to be effective (Mill [1848] 1965, p.968).

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common error of Socialists to overlook the natural indolence of mankind; their tendency to be passive, to be the slaves of habit, to persist indefinitely in a course once chosen. Let them once attain any state of existence which they consider tolerable, and the danger to be apprehended is that they will thenceforth stagnate; will not exert themselves to improve, and by letting their faculties rust, will lose even the energy required to preserve them from deterioration.

Competition may not be the best conceivable stimulus, but it is at present a necessary one, and no one can foresee the time when it will not be indispensable to progress.” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.793)

## VII. MILL ON PATERNALISM

We have seen that education was, for Mill, one of the most efficient ways to mould characters. But, providing that it equally applies to all, it is also one of the slowest. “The initiation of all wise or noble things”, claims Mill, “comes and must come from individuals” (Mill [1859] 1977, p.269). Being altruistic, noble characters are logically incited to assist the less privileged to rise to higher moral and hedonistic standards. But more than being a mere incentive to altruistic people, inequality of characters, caused as previously seen by adverse social circumstances, are also a matter of social justice.

In the absence of external guidance, people born in unfavourable circumstances cannot hope to reach high levels of happiness and morality. It is therefore essential for Mill that those who were lucky enough to benefit from better circumstances therefore help those less fortunate to overcome their condition. And as it happens, they are the only ones to be in a position to assist them. Noble characters have benefited from privileged instruction and education. They now have a moral duty towards those who have not: “Human beings owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and avoid the latter. They should be for ever stimulating each other to increased exercise of their higher faculties, and increased direction of their feelings and aims towards wise instead of foolish, elevating instead of degrading, objects and contemplations.” (Mill [1859] 1977, p.277).

For Mill, there is nothing wrong in accepting ‘guidance’ from more privileged people: “Many have let themselves be guided (which in their best times they always have done) by the counsels and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed One or Few.[...] The honour and glory of the average man is that he is capable of following that initiative; that he can respond internally to

wise and noble things, and be led to them with his eyes open.” (Mill [1859] 1977, p.269).

Individuals are, for Mill, all progressive beings and as such they have a decisive part to play in their own moral development. Although it is always desirable for an individual to reform his own character, it is in practice hardly possible for him to do so in isolation. Reformation of character can only be indirect: “I can indeed influence my own volitions, but only as other people can influence my volitions, by the employment of appropriate means. Direct power over my volitions I am conscious of none.” (Mill [1865] 1979, p.298-99). In other words, reformation of one’s character cannot be – strictly speaking – a self-regarding action.

Mill reckons, however, that some individuals are better equipped than others to initiate these actions. “It is no novelty”, he writes in *Subjection of Women*, “that mankind do not distinctly foresee their own changes, and that their sentiments are adapted to past, not to coming ages. To see the futurity of the species has always been the privilege of the intellectual *élite*, or of those who have learnt from them; to have the feelings of that futurity has been the distinction, and usually the martyrdom, of a still rarer *élite*.” (Mill [1869] 1984, 294). They belong to what Samuel Taylor Coleridge originally called *clerisy*, a group of men of superior intellectual and moral standards. It is likely, therefore, that this particular feature of Mill’s philosophy is a testament to the Romantics’ deep influence exercised during his youth. But, as argued by Capaldi, the nature of Coleridge’s notion of *clerisy* changed with Mill, most probably as a result of the influence of Comte (Capaldi 2004, p.170). For Maurice Cowling, the *clerisy* performs the functions once performed by the clergy, substitution for the ideal object of Christianity which is altruistic elevation of feelings (Cowling 1963, p.78). It is unclear, however, what Mill really expects from this group and how they could be identified. Could the members of the *clerisy* be those granted with multiple votes in *Representative Government*? To what extent are these

individuals entitled to interfere with other people's lives? With what legitimacy? Mill explicitly rejects any form of paternalism. Legal paternalism is explicitly discarded by his famous harm principle. Individuals, however, can, under some conditions, interfere with other people's lives. "It would be a great misunderstanding of this doctrine", explains Mill in *On Liberty*, "to suppose that it is one of selfish indifference, which pretends that human beings have no business with each other's conduct in life, and that they should not concern themselves about the well-doing or well-being of one another, unless their own interest is involved. Instead of any diminution, there is need of a great increase of disinterested exertion to promote the good of others. But disinterested benevolence can find other instruments to persuade people to their good, than whips and scourges, either of the literal or metaphorical sort." (Mill [1859] 1977, p.277).

The first of these conditions is to never use coercion or threat, but rather to use persuasion, as described in the last, but rarely quoted, sentence of the harm principle: "That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise." (Mill [1859] 1977, p.224). This passage, considered *in extenso*, demonstrates the misconception that subsequently arose from an over-interpretation of the expression 'against his will'.

For private actions on character formation to take place, secondly, they ought not to express or reinforce any existing subjection relationship between individuals. This notably applies to

relations between rich and poor, between different social classes, between men and women, or between different races. This point is defended in chapter seven, book four, of the *Principles of Political Economy*. Mill is appalled by the idea that a category of individuals, essentially composed of rich men, sees itself as being *in loco parentis* to the poor and women, “guiding and restraining them like children” (Mill [1848] 1965, p.759). It relies on a strongly idealized concept of the relationship between protector and protected, which conceals its real authoritative nature. “The so-called protectors are now the only persons against whom, in any ordinary circumstances, protection is needed”, contends Mill (Mill [1848] 1965, p.761).

This leads me, to finish, to question a possible similarity between Mill’s project of ethology and Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler’s libertarian paternalism. Although the authors reject any intellectual legacy from the English philosopher, it is impossible not to notice a certain similarity with the way they respectively propose to use psychology and behavioural economics to improve people’s lives. There is a striking similarity between Mill’s ethology and Sunstein and Thaler’s use of empirical studies in behavioural economics. Considering Mill’s emblematic figure in the debates over paternalism, I believe the question of its potential connection with libertarian paternalism both offers a valuable criticism of this new trend in paternalism as well as a better idea of Mill’s originality.

Over the last twenty years a number of books and articles have been published in defence of what Sunstein and Thaler coined libertarian paternalism (Sunstein and Thaler 2003), that is to say a form of paternalism which is fully compatible with the principles of individual freedom. Based on a vast literature of experimental psychology studies, libertarian paternalism, or behavioural paternalism as it is also referred (Salvat 2014, Lecouteux 2016), argues that since individual choices are unavoidably subject to other people’s choices, the latter actors are

therefore obliged to take the welfare of the former into account. This can be achieved, for instance, through carefully designed default rules, framing or endowment effects (Loewenstein and Haisley 2008). Apart from its literary and scientific success, behavioural paternalism has been experimented in traditionally liberal countries such as the USA and the United Kingdom, where nudges units are or have been implemented seen.

For Sunstein and Thaler, all paternalistic actions are legitimate as long as they promote the ‘right’ choice and that individuals can freely turn them down. In practice, they believe paternalistic actions are needed in all kinds of decisions in people’s lives, from pension schemes to grocery shopping, considering that “almost all people, almost all the time, make choices that are [not] in their best interest” (Sunstein and Thaler 2003, 1163). More than being merely justifiable, they claim that behavioural paternalism is in fact unavoidable. Since individuals are still “free to choose”, the authors argue that their version of paternalism is fully compatible with libertarianism. Like Mill, Sunstein and Thaler consider that there is an objective good but they plainly disagree about its nature. For Mill, the objective good translates into being of noble character. It covers both a sensibility to higher pleasures and some degree of selflessness. For Sunstein and Thaler, on the contrary, the goodness of an action exclusively relates to the objective welfare of the agent.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

I have presented in this paper Mill’ projected science of ethology, the aim of which was to uncover the psychological laws of individual behavior. Mill believed that such laws could then be used to improve people’s character. Although he never finished the treaty of ethology as he had planned, I argue that this project resurfaces in his work on political economy, as well as in



some of his writings on politics and justice. The fact that Mill was indeed ready to interfere with people's lives for their own good is fundamental and invites a reassessment of his views on paternalism. It also gives us invaluable tools to reflect on the limits of a contemporary form of liberal yet psychology-based form paternalism, namely libertarian paternalism.

Mill's paternalistic views constitute, what I believe to be, the best argument against modern versions of paternalism, namely their lack of truly moral ends. Behavioral paternalism justifies paternalistic actions on account of the welfare improvement it will bring to individuals but this is not a sufficient reason for Mill to interfere with private lives. The authors neglect what constitutes for Mill the moral core of his paternalism, that is man's betterment. Mill considers that the only real objective of paternalism is to improve man's moral character, rather than the immediate outcome of his actions. Contrary to Sunstein and Thaler, Mill is concerned by man's ability to choose for himself and he would certainly regard nudges as a further debasement of man's character and individuality. For Mill, education is – along with the use of colonialism, in some instances – the most effective way to improve people's character. Additionally, private and benevolent actions are possible in some scenarios. The only condition expressed by Mill is that people's autonomy and diversity of character is promoted. The existence of an objectively superior good goes with the idea that there are many ways to achieve it and that it cannot be simply expressed by an economic aggregate. If paternalism is justified at all, it should be moral in its core.

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