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“The Teacher of Teachers”: James Mill and the Education of John Stuart Mill

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Abstract: John Stuart Mill’s account of his education in *Autobiography* (1873) is typically sifted through three interrelated sets of polarities: nurture/nature; reason/emotion; authority/autonomy. First, the father tried to mold the son’s development towards a specific ideal, curbing his spontaneous growth. Second, James relentlessly sharpened John Stuart’s analytical prowess to the almost total neglect of his emotional needs. Third, the authoritarianism involved in the design and execution of James Mill’s curriculum rendered John Stuart Mill incapable of autonomy. This article argues that the dualities of nurture/nature and reason/emotion are not unambiguous, though ever-present in the reception of the younger Mill’s education. Widening our perspective in their examination opens the possibility of a different assessment of that famous education being no education for autonomy.

This article focuses on one aspect of John Stuart Mill’s biography: the rigorous home-schooling undertaken by his father, James Mill. Famously, its completion coincided with a “crisis” in the younger Mill’s “mental history.”¹ The son’s *Autobiography* (1873) goes on to tell a story of emancipation from the father’s narrow creed. J. S. Mill allegedly refashioned himself by engaging with thinkers and ideas different, antithetical, and even hostile to Benthamism.

Scholars engage with J. S. Mill’s notorious education through three interrelated sets of polarities: authority/autonomy; nurture/nature; reason/emotion. As I try to show in section 1, the reception of the *Autobiography* mostly denies

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¹J. S. Mill, *Autobiography* (1873), in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–1991), vol. 1, chap. 5. Henceforward CW.

J. S. Mill's central thesis: the authoritarianism involved in the design and execution of James Mill's curriculum rendered J. S. Mill incapable of autonomy. As the argument goes, the habits of submission fostered by the father led the son to the mere substitution of one kind of authority for others. This effect was caused by James Mill, on the one hand, trying to mold J. S. Mill towards a specific ideal, curbing his spontaneous, natural growth, and, on the other hand, by relentlessly sharpening J. S. Mill's analytical prowess to the almost total neglect of his emotional needs.

The dualities of nurture/nature and reason/emotion as hermeneutic categories for J. S. Mill's education have proved so influential as to seem unequivocal. But they are not. James Mill's concern with children developing a capacity for happiness with "resources in themselves," independent of "accidents which govern the sort of life to which they have been habituated,"² has never been taken into consideration. Sections 2 and 3 argue that interrogating the father's teaching methods and objectives as regards the son's education allows a fuller picture to emerge. J. S. Mill's early education was not just "a course of Benthamism."³ A more nuanced account makes room for a different assessment of that famous education being no education for autonomy. Uncovering the inadequacies of the binary framing in the analysis of J. S. Mill's education makes it possible to reconsider the dynamics of that educational experience and reassess both the role of James Mill in it and its presumed authoritarianism.

The first step to substantiate this claim is to revisit a central feature of the story: the "making" of J. S. Mill's mind.⁴ Alan Ryan, William Thomas, John Robson, Jack Stillinger, and recently Elijah Millgram have questioned the *Autobiography's* place in the story of the younger Mill's intellectual development.⁵ Still, they took for granted that James Mill was on the side of "nurture." He was, after all, the "second founder of Association Psychology,"⁶ the environmentalist theory par excellence. Looking into James Mill's educational methods reveals that the boundaries between nature and nurture were not as rigid as typically supposed. To illustrate

²J. Mill to D. Ricardo, Oct. 15, 1811, in *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, ed. Piero Sraffa, 11 vols. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2004 [1951–1973]), 6:59. Henceforward WCDR.

³J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 137.

⁴J. Mill to J. Bentham, July 28, 1812, in *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. 8, ed. Stephen Conway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 255.

⁵Alan Ryan, *J. S. Mill* (London: Routledge, 2016), 11–23; William Thomas, "John Stuart Mill and the Uses of Autobiography," *History* 56, no. 188 (1971): 341–59; John M. Robson, "John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham with Some Observations on James Mill," in *Essays in English Literature from the Renaissance to the Victorian Age*, ed. M. MacLure and F. W. Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 245–68; Elijah Millgram, *John Stuart Mill and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) chap. 3.

⁶J. S. Mill, "Preface" to James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1869 [1829]), in CW 30:99.

this, I focus on an active principle of James Mill’s practice: stimulating curiosity. Philosophers, moralists, and educationalists agreed that curiosity, the passion for knowledge, was as natural as language and reason. Acknowledging the subversive tendencies of curiosity, their attitude on its educational value varied according to the value they assigned to maintaining authority or fostering autonomy.

The next step to take is to resist the second familiar dichotomy: reason and emotion. For Richard Reeves, the father “must bear much of the responsibility for his son’s lack of emotional cultivation,”⁷ given the emphasis on the extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, value of poetry. Similarly, for Timothy Larsen, the “father’s educational plan included purging away everything that was sentimental and replacing it with the analytical.”⁸ Although J. S. Mill’s “secular life” was much more religious than is usually acknowledged, Larsen argues, he was deficient in a devotional sense: there was no emotional attachment to ideals, goals, or ends.⁹ Notwithstanding the unwillingness to follow the *Autobiography* to its conclusions, these discussions rely heavily on its author’s point of view. J. S. Mill’s grievances as regards his education’s lack of emotional cultivation obscure the emotional cultivation he did receive, especially in a devotional sense. James Mill’s emphasis on the emotions of inspiration, admiration, and emulation in the cultivation of virtue becomes relevant in J. S. Mill’s greatest realization: that we can become the authors of our own character.¹⁰

1. John Stuart Mill’s Education on Trial

Contemporaneous readers of the *Autobiography* found much more to lament than to admire in its author’s “unusual and remarkable” education.¹¹ The *Autobiography* told “one of the saddest stories which literature contains.”¹² Disagreements about whether the son was “crammed,”¹³ “repressed,”¹⁴ or

⁷Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), 21.

⁸Timothy Larsen, *John Stuart Mill: A Secular Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 26.

⁹*Ibid.*, 27–29.

¹⁰J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 175, 177.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 5.

¹²Anon., “Mr. Mill’s *Autobiography*,” *British Quarterly Review* 59 (1874): 197.

¹³Henry Holbeach, “Mr. Mill’s *Autobiography* and Mr. Fitzjames Stephen on ‘Liberty,’” *Saint Paul’s Magazine* 13 (1873): 696–97. Cf. [Francis Turner Palgrave], “John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography*,” *Quarterly Review* 136, no. 271 (1874): 154.

¹⁴[Herbert Cowell], “John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography*,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 115, no. 699 (1874): 76, 90. Cf. Frederick Rogers, “The Reality of Duty; as Illustrated by the *Autobiography* of John Stuart Mill,” *Contemporary Review* 28 (Aug. 1876): 523.

“suppressed”¹⁵ notwithstanding, they agreed that no father is “entitled to teach the child all he *does* believe himself, or to fix beforehand as far as possible the whole form of the child’s character.”¹⁶ James Mill came forth as a “theorist” and authoritarian. His educational practice was perceived either as a sort of indoctrination or psychological manipulation.

In 1873, Harriet Grote wondered how J. S. Mill’s “fine nature ever righted itself, or how the latent power was developed.”¹⁷ Some accepted that the *Autobiography* supplied the materials to “trace the gradual emancipation of his mind,” working his “way through a mass of prejudices implanted in the physically weak pupil by the strong, energetic, and rigid father.”¹⁸ But most found no such latent power or eventual emancipation: “James Mill is substantially reproduced in John Stuart,”¹⁹ the son having been “carefully indoctrinated with the opinions of the father.”²⁰ The “narrowness of outlook which cannot fail to impress the mind of every student of the philosophy of James Mill” had, another reviewer claimed, “clung to the thinking of the son.”²¹ The verdict was clear: the father “was trying an experiment for the gratification of his own love of theory and love of power.”²²

Portrayals of a “paternal despotism”²³ and an “overpowering domination”²⁴ by James Mill over his son as well as a “dictatorial implementation”²⁵ of an educational program still command the scene. The discovery of the earlier drafts and rejected leaves of the *Autobiography* revealed that J. S. Mill (with Harriet Taylor Mill’s help) had toned down much of his criticism of his childhood. On the one hand, the discovery

¹⁵[Abraham Heyward], “John Stuart Mill,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 8, no. 48 (1873): 664. Cf. [Thomas Hare], “John Stuart Mill,” *Westminster Review* 45, no. 1 (1874): 157.

¹⁶Holbeach, “Mill’s *Autobiography*,” 695, emphasis original. See also Palgrave, “Mill’s *Autobiography*,” 172; Heyward, “Mill,” 666; Cowell, “Mill’s *Autobiography*,” 77–78, 90–91; Harriet Grote, *The Personal Life of George Grote* (London: Murray, 1873), 25.

¹⁷H. Grote to A. Bain, Oct. 24, 1873, in *The Lewin Letters, a Selection from the Correspondence and Diaries of an English Family, 1756–1885*, ed. Thomas Herbert Lewin, 2 vols. (London: Constable, 1909), 2:318.

¹⁸Anon., “*Autobiography*. By John Stuart Mill,” *Athenaeum*, no. 2400 (Oct. 1873): 521. See also Hare, “Mill,” 122–24.

¹⁹Palgrave, “Mill’s *Autobiography*,” 155.

²⁰Heyward, “Mill,” 667.

²¹Anon., “Mr. Mill’s *Autobiography*,” 209.

²²[Henry Reeve], “*Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*,” *Edinburgh Review* 139, no. 283 (1874): 96.

²³Karl Britton, *John Stuart Mill* (London: Penguin Books, 1953), 13.

²⁴Janice Carlisle, *John Stuart Mill and the Writing of Character* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1991), 97.

²⁵Bruce L. Kinzer, *J. S. Mill Revisited: Biographical and Political Explorations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 24–25.

brought attention to the historicity of the document itself, leading some scholars to question its evidentiary reliability.²⁶ However, except for Stillinger,²⁷ when Michael Packe,²⁸ Robson,²⁹ Reeves,³⁰ and others³¹ questioned parts of the son's account of his education, rarely, if ever, did they consider the father's point of view. The father-son portrait as sketched and received in the late nineteenth century persists a century and a half later.

On the other hand, the additional material simply put in stronger (especially psychoanalytic) light what one could already infer from the "official" version.³² For example, Nicholas Capaldi considers the master-slave, superior-inferior dynamic, implied in the younger Mill's account of his upbringing, detrimental to both parties: the father came "to find his identity tied up in the subordination of others," while, to the son, the relationship perpetuated "a sense of inferiority reinforced by deference."³³ Similarly, Elijah Millgram argues that J. S. Mill's "life's agenda was determined not *by* but *for* him."³⁴ Millgram traces the effect to its cause: "James Mill had imposed a training regimen on the young John Stuart Mill that had habituated him to working at the dictates of another."³⁵ For Millgram,³⁶ Janice Carlisle,³⁷

²⁶Robert Cumming, "Mill's History of His Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25, no. 2 (1964): 235–56; William Thomas, "John Stuart Mill and the Uses of Autobiography," *History* 56, no. 188 (1971): 341–59; Jack Stillinger, "Who Wrote J. S. Mill's 'Autobiography'?" *Victorian Studies* 27, no. 1 (1983): 7–23; William Stafford, *John Stuart Mill* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 44–54.

²⁷Stillinger, "Mill's Education."

²⁸Michael St. J. Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), 26.

²⁹E.g., John M. Robson, *The Improvement of Mankind* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 5.

³⁰Reeves, *Mill*, 21–23.

³¹E.g., Antis Loizides, "Taking Their Cue from Plato: James and John Stuart Mill," *History of European Ideas* 39, no. 1 (2013): 121–40; Larsen, *Mill*, chap. 1.

³²Albert William Levi, "The 'Mental Crisis' of John Stuart Mill," *Psychoanalytic Review* 32, no. 1 (1945): 86–101 and "The Writing of Mill's Autobiography," *Ethics* 61, no. 4 (1951): 284–96; John Durham, "The Influence of John Stuart Mill's Mental Crisis on His Thoughts," *American Imago* 20, no. 4 (1963): 369–84; Bruce Mazlish, *James and John Stuart Mill: Father and Son in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Hutchinson, 1975); Peter Glassman, *J. S. Mill: The Evolution of a Genius* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1985).

³³Nicholas Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11.

³⁴Millgram, *Mill*, 14, emphasis original.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 72.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 15, 30, 63, 72.

³⁷Carlisle, *Mill*, 91ff.

Keith Rinehart,³⁸ and Eugene August,³⁹ Harriet Taylor Mill and, upon her passing, her daughter Helen Taylor took up the role of authority in J. S. Mill's life. Maria Morales has fittingly dubbed this "the Puppet Thesis."⁴⁰

The thesis that J. S. Mill's education made him incapable of autonomy is supported by a constellation of three ideas: that James Mill dictatorially forced his views upon his son and tried to completely shape his character, and that he did so both by crushing whatever natural proclivity, passion, or instinct his son could have and by purging whatever strong emotion, attachment, or inspiration his son could feel. The next two sections examine James Mill's educational thought and practice, as he wrote and talked about it himself, and challenge both the thesis itself and its traditional formulation.

2. Nurture, Nature

Timothy Larsen claims that "James Mill saw the education of his son as a vindication of nurture over nature,"⁴¹ echoing Ian Cumming's and William Burston's much earlier accounts of James Mill's educational practice.⁴² Although a recurrent theme in the reception of J. S. Mill's education, interpretations of what the nurture/nature antithesis entails vary. "Had not nature triumphed over nurture," Francis Cavenagh noted, J. S. Mill "would either have lost his reason or at any rate have been unable to accomplish the noble work of his later life." For Cavenagh, the result of James Mill's experiment was that education is not all-powerful. Nature had its own way after all.⁴³ Like Cavenagh, Millgram treated J. S. Mill's life as a test case:⁴⁴ his was indeed a rare life with a clear educational program and no waste of energy. Yet Millgram argues that James Mill's schooling worked a little too well. It enforced a strong coherence around a single, tightly integrated project: utilitarianism. But a meaningful life, Millgram claims, must not demand any kind of forced consistency. Hence, J. S. Mill's education rendered his life meaningless, his noble work included.⁴⁵

³⁸Keith Rinehart, "John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*: Its Art and Appeal," *University of Kansas City Review* 19, no. 4 (1953): 267.

³⁹Eugene R. August, *John Stuart Mill, a Mind at Large* (New York: Scribner's, 1975), 21. See also Mazlish, *James and John Stuart Mill*, 229–30.

⁴⁰Maria H. Morales, *Perfect Equality: John Stuart Mill on Well-Constituted Communities* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1996), 27–28.

⁴¹Larsen, *Mill*, 21.

⁴²Ian Cumming, "A Manufactured Man," *University of Auckland Bulletin* 55, no. 2 (1960): 1–35; William H. Burston, *James Mill on Philosophy and Education* (London: Athlone, 1973), 77–96.

⁴³Francis A. Cavenagh, ed., *James and John Stuart Mill on Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), x.

⁴⁴Millgram, *Mill*, 33.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 13–14, 29–32, 149, 154.

Despite its confused orientations, the nurture/nature antithesis is brought up for a reason. J. S. Mill himself described his education as an experiment and recounted how he was thought a "made" or "manufactured man."⁴⁶ Caroline Fox's recollections of the Mill siblings reinforced the impressions of their stern upbringing,⁴⁷ recording, for example, a conversation about how James Mill and Jeremy Bentham "tried educational experiments on John!"⁴⁸ Fox also took a note about J. S. Mill admitting that "it is better to let Nature have her own way" in the education of children.⁴⁹

There is another way to look at J. S. Mill's education as experimental. Early education took up practically no space in educational books or textbooks of the time. In 1806, James Mill pointed out that "whatever may be the power of education, our knowledge of it is yet so imperfect, that many untoward circumstances may defeat the efforts of the most skillful and assiduous instructor."⁵⁰ He lamented time and again⁵¹ the lack of testimonies documenting the early education of actual, accomplished individuals, both contemplative and active. "What would we give to have a perfect account afforded us of the manual in which the mind of a Socrates, or of an Epaminondas, was formed?"⁵² Such accounts provided a valuable service in an education for "future eminence," since he thought "that we might make as many great men almost as we please."⁵³ The urge to contrast the father's appeal to manufacturing greatness to the son's letting "Nature have her own way" is strong. We should resist it.

First, in the eighteenth century there was a consensus that education ought to be adapted to the pupil's natural capacities. Although the ability and diligence of preceptors mattered, the outcome of any system of education depended on being adapted to the "natural propensities,"⁵⁴ "disposition,"⁵⁵ or "temper"⁵⁶ of the student. A right education, John Locke had famously

⁴⁶J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 33, 163.

⁴⁷*Memoirs of Old Friends, Being Extracts from the Journals and Letters of Caroline Fox, from 1835 to 1871*, ed. Horace N. Pym, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, 1882), 1:145–46.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 164.

⁵⁰[James Mill], "Milton's Prose Works," *Literary Journal*, s.s., 2, no. 2 (1806): 140.

⁵¹For some examples, see [James Mill], "Life of William Jones," *Literary Journal* 4, no. 3 (1804): 169; "Millar on Ranks, with His Life," *Literary Journal*, s.s., 1, no. 6 (1806): 625–26; "Dr. Franklin's works," *Literary Journal*, s.s., 2, no. 4 (1806): 397–99; "Memoirs of William Penn, II," *Philanthropist* 4, no. 13 (1814): 35.

⁵²[James Mill], "Life of Washington, vol. 2," *Literary Journal* 4, no. 3 (1804): 226.

⁵³[James Mill], "Life of Reid," *Literary Journal* 1, no. 18 (1803): 567.

⁵⁴Vicesimus Knox, *Liberal Education*, 10th ed., 2 vols. (London: Dilly, 1789 [1781]), 1:30.

⁵⁵James Barclay, *A Treatise on Education* (Edinburgh: Cochran, 1743), 10–11; George Chapman, *A Treatise on Education* (London: Cadell, 1774), 142, 224.

⁵⁶Isaac Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind* (London: Brackstone, 1741), 100.

argued, had to consider “the child’s natural genius and constitution.”⁵⁷ Notwithstanding his critique of Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau asked educators to be mindful of what children are capable of comprehending, to acknowledge that aspects of a child’s education, such as the internal development of their faculties and organs (how children see, think, and feel), lay beyond their control.⁵⁸ For Claude Adrien Helvétius, the greatest part of education was due to chance, “to what is not taught by a master.”⁵⁹ Although he acknowledged Locke’s take on differences in natural capacity, Helvétius easily turned it on its head: postulating an unknown cause to explain a phenomenon was unscientific. In nine out of ten cases, Helvétius quoted Locke, education made the “great difference in mankind.”⁶⁰ In the early nineteenth century, Elizabeth Hamilton was clear about the relationship between nature and nurture: “we ought to accompany Nature in her progress; and as she gradually unfolds the powers of the mind, . . . we should devote ourselves to the improvement of each faculty, in the order it is by her presented.”⁶¹ In the education of infants especially, Hamilton was the first to press on the gravity of the study of the human mind. Early associations had direct bearing on both social and individual happiness.⁶²

Second, for educators on either side of the nature/nurture debate, Frank Musgrove has suggested, “an individual’s capacity for moral and intellectual progress was unlimited if sufficient care was taken to provide an appropriate environment.”⁶³ The question of appropriateness was resolved with reference to the choice between private (or domestic) over public education. Both Locke and Rousseau favored domestic education on account of its adaptability to individual capacities.⁶⁴ But there was no consensus in this case as in the former. Most late-eighteenth-century educators had come to embrace Helvétius’s position: the comparative advantages of public over domestic education were too many and too important to

⁵⁷John Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1690), in *The Works of John Locke in Nine Volumes*, 12th ed. (London: Rivington, 1824 [1794]), 8:47.

⁵⁸Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou de l’éducation*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: Néalme, 1762), 1:iv, 5–6, 179–81.

⁵⁹Claude Adrien Helvétius, *A Treatise on Man*, new and improved ed., ed. W. Hooper, 2 vols. (Albion Press, 1810 [1777]), 1:21n, 35.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 94–95, 95n; Locke, *Thoughts*, 6.

⁶¹Elizabeth Hamilton, *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education*, 2 vols. (Bath: Cruttwell, 1803), 2:25. Cf. Chapman, *Treatise*, 140.

⁶²Hamilton, *Education*, 1:xiv, 37, 73, 88; 2:176.

⁶³F. Musgrove, “Two Educational Controversies in Eighteenth-Century England: Nature and Nurture; Private and Public Education,” *Paedagogica Historica* 2, no. 1 (1962): 81–94. See also Gerraint Parry, “Education Can Do All,” in *The Enlightenment and Modernity*, ed. Norman Geras and Robert Wokler (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 25–49.

⁶⁴Locke, *Thoughts*, 53ff.; Rousseau, *Émile*, 1:13–15.

overlook. Some educators, who agreed with Locke and Rousseau on the importance of different natural capacities, argued that it was possible to combine the best of both worlds. Parents could place their children in smaller private academies or employ tutors to complement the teaching of large public schools. They could even undertake the task themselves to set strong foundations before sending off their children to such schools. Any of these arrangements offered an education mindful of individual capacities without the risk of parental bias or softness, waste of time, or the degrading influence of sycophantic servants. At the same time, the competitiveness in the public school's microcosm society fostered vigor, contest, and industry.⁶⁵

James Mill's correspondence points to the “private vs. public” as the more relevant of the two debates in the education of J. S. Mill.⁶⁶ “The father—the father—is the teacher of teachers,” he thought.⁶⁷ Parents are the most invested in “the training of [their] children to the best chance of happiness.”⁶⁸ The authorities agreed: “A father, who has time, talents, and temper, to educate his family, is certainly the best possible preceptor.”⁶⁹ To witnesses, however, he was “excessively severe,” despite his method being “by far the best” and “infinitely precise.”⁷⁰ In 1817, Anne Romilly in a letter to Maria Edgeworth faulted James Mill for his children's sheltered lives.⁷¹ But his friends tried to convince him that his eldest stood “in need of that collision, which is obtained only in society, and by which a knowledge of the world

⁶⁵Helvétius, *Treatise*, 2:411–14; Barclay, *Treatise*, 13; T. Sheridan, *A Plan of Education for the Young Nobility and Gentry of Great Britain* (London: Dilly, 1769), 52–54; Chapman, *Treatise*, 43–45, 55–56; Joseph Priestley, *Miscellaneous Observations relating to Education* (London: Johnson, 1778), 51–52; Knox, *Liberal Education*, 1:29; Richard Lovell and Maria Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (London: Johnson, 1801 [1798]), 2:367–68; Thomas Barnes, “A Brief Comparison of Some of the Principal Arguments in favour of Public and Private Education,” *Memoirs of Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester Volume II* (Warrington: Cadel, 1785), 13–14; William Barrow, *An Essay on Education*, 2 vols. (London: Rivington, 1802), 1:122–23.

⁶⁶J. Mill to F. Place, Oct. 14, 1814, in Graham Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place*, rev. ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1918), 67–68; J. Mill to D. Ricardo, Oct. 26, 1818, in WCDR 7:318; J. Mill to Sir John Stuart, May 29, 1821, National Library of Scotland (NLS) MS Acc. 4796/66 (folder 3), f. 1v.–2r.

⁶⁷J. Mill to A. Walker, March 20, 1820, NLS, Walker of Bowland Papers MS 13725, f. 23r.

⁶⁸J. Mill to D. Ricardo, Oct. 15, 1811, in WCDR 6:59.

⁶⁹Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 2:386; see 2:93. See further Locke, *Thoughts*, 59; Rousseau, *Émile*, 1:21. Compare with Helvétius, *Treatise*, 1:21–24.

⁷⁰F. Place to E. Place, Aug. 17, 1817, in Wallas, *Life of Francis Place*, 74. Cf. J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 53, 55.

⁷¹A. Romilly to M. Edgeworth, Oct. 6, 1817, in *Romilly-Edgeworth Letters, 1813–1818*, ed. Samuel Henry Romilly (London: Murray, 1936), 177–78. Cf. Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 2:93.

and its manners is best acquired."⁷² Soon enough, J. S. Mill was on his way to France to master that knowledge out of his father's sight.⁷³ And after a short time upon his return, the younger Mill formed clubs, societies, and reading groups with remarkable energy.⁷⁴ Incidentally, James Mill came to think that once youths are "launched in the world," their education comes under their "own control."⁷⁵

In a letter to Alexander Walker in 1820, James Mill presented his practice in a way which addressed almost all the perceived disadvantages of domestic education, pressing on the shortcomings of public education and highlighting that nature and nurture were bound together. The defective state of educational institutions forced him to take "the principal charge" of his children's education. He could not afford a tutor, he confessed. Still, no tutor would have been as methodical and diligent as he in seeing the education of his children through, however "skillful," "virtuous," or "philosophical" they might have been. His method was simple: begin with what is "adapted to the capacity" of his students, and then go on "from step to step, through the whole field of literature and philosophy." He questioned his children regularly and in an orderly manner, compelling them to read attentively and to exercise their memory, teaching them to discriminate what is important and habituating them to the proper expression of their ideas, both verbal and, "when the proper time come," written.⁷⁶ Once again, the authorities agreed.⁷⁷ The results were undeniable: "from no part of his time having been allowed to go to waste," his son's "acquirements are very unusual at his years."⁷⁸

According to James Mill, the "principle of imitation," curiosity, and attraction to novelty marked J. S. Mill's very first steps in learning. James Mill availed himself of his son's imitation of his own preoccupation with books. Prompted by J. S. Mill's curiosity about, and attraction to, unfamiliar and novel characters as well as his engrossment with maps, James Mill guided his learning. Not only could the young prodigy "read English perfectly" before he was three, but also "by the time he was five years old, [he] knew a good deal of Greek, and was acquainted with geography even to minuteness."⁷⁹

J. S. Mill's account was largely consistent with his father's, though he only drew attention to his father's fixation with not wasting time.⁸⁰ J. S. Mill,

⁷²D. Ricardo to J. Mill, Nov. 8, 1818, in *WCDR* 7:326. See also F. Place to E. Place, Aug. 17, 1817, in Wallas, *Life of Francis Place*, 74–75; G. Townsend to J. Mill, March 1823, in Bain, *James Mill*, 205.

⁷³J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 57ff.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, chap. 4.

⁷⁵James Mill, "Education," 32.

⁷⁶J. Mill to A. Walker, June 24, 1820, NLS MS 13727 ff. 5r.

⁷⁷Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 1:97; Hamilton, *Education*, 2:110–11.

⁷⁸J. Mill to A. Walker, Feb. 26, 1820, NLS MS 13725 f. 13r.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, f. 13v.

⁸⁰E.g., J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 9.

however, seemed unaware of the extent to which his father's educational practice both followed convention and was designed to stimulate his natural capacities. "If you attempt to act upon the mind," James Mill thought, "in ways not adapted to its nature, the least evil you incur is to lose your labour."⁸¹ Hamilton had made an almost identical claim,⁸² which is not surprising as they drew from similar sources.⁸³ For Hamilton, the natural attractiveness of light and color, the excitement of curiosity, and the consequent grip upon attention ought to be made subservient to the education of infants. Hamilton's advice to parents was simple: "Let their reasoning powers be in infancy confined to objects of sense. Let their curiosity be roused, and their attention engaged to observation of the scene around them."⁸⁴ Similarly, for Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, prints were thought to be "entertaining to children at a very early age." They were thought to "teach accurately of sight," to "engage the attention, and employ the imagination."⁸⁵ It was important for children to experience the things around them: to exercise their senses, to express their curiosity, and learn to focus their attention. Young children ought not be "cooped up in a nursery" with nothing to exercise their curiosity and attention other than a few toys. As these would lose their appeal soon, the child's curiosity would be "checked, and its power of attention weakened."⁸⁶ In 1803, James Mill's *Literary Journal* had endorsed Hamilton's and Edgeworth's educational works as the only two textbooks with "valuable remarks on the education of the young mind."⁸⁷

Once again, James Mill followed convention. The educational relevance of curiosity was a given in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain.⁸⁸ "To

⁸¹James Mill, "Education," in *Supplement to the 4th, 5th and 6th Editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Constable, 1824), 11.

⁸²Hamilton, *Education*, 1:xiv.

⁸³Jane Rendall, "Elementary Principles of Education: Elizabeth Hamilton, Maria Edgeworth and the Uses of Common-Sense Philosophy," *History of European Ideas* 39, no. 5 (2013): 613–30; Samin Gockekus, "Elizabeth Hamilton's Scottish Associationism: Early Nineteenth-Century Philosophy of Mind," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 5, no. 3 (2019): 267–85. See also Robert A. Fenn, *James Mill's Political Thought* (New York: Garland, 1987), chap. 1.

⁸⁴Hamilton, *Education*, 1:84–85

⁸⁵Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 1:17. See also Hamilton, *Education*, 1:300–301.

⁸⁶Hamilton, *Education*, 2:73

⁸⁷Anon., "Philosophy of Mind," *Literary Journal* 1, no. 3 (1803): 82. For Robert Fenn, there was a "virtual unanimity" between editor and contributors on this one subject in *Literary Journal*. Robert A. Fenn, "James Mill's Political Thought" (PhD diss., University of London, 1972), 2:106.

⁸⁸Dugald Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, vol. 1 (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1792), 24. See further François Fénelon, "De l'éducation des filles" (1657), in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 6, ed. Jean-François de La Harpe, Yves Mathurin, and Marie Tréaudet de Querbeuf (Paris: Briand, 1810), 19; Locke,

direct the curiosity into proper channels," Hamilton urged, "ought to be the unceasing object of parental care, from the dawn of intellect till its maturity."⁸⁹ For Thomas Hobbes, curiosity was the desire to know the causes of things and the passion for truth. It was a distinctively human characteristic, like reason and language.⁹⁰ Locke discussed several ways to encourage and keep curiosity active in children, for example by taking their questions seriously and taking special care in answering them.⁹¹ He claimed that curiosity is encouraged with praise by people whom children esteem, which directs pride towards something advantageous: "Upon this ground you shall find, that there cannot be a greater spur to the attaining what you would have the elder learn and know himself, than to set him upon teaching it his younger brothers and sisters."⁹² James Mill took this advice to heart: J. S. Mill began tutoring his younger siblings at eight.⁹³

The implications of James Mill's encouragement of these natural propensities, especially curiosity, for the thesis that J. S. Mill's education was no education for autonomy, have gone unnoticed. The pedagogical implications of curiosity, as we saw, were not up for debate: "turned to its proper objects," Hamilton thought, curiosity laid the foundation for the love of knowledge, "the first step to all improvement."⁹⁴ But what were the "proper" objects of curiosity?

Although the advent of empiricism did indeed valorize curiosity, as Barbara Benedict put it, curiosity had "retained its earlier taint of inappropriate, even heretical, inquiry."⁹⁵ The threat of lawlessness which traditionally

Thoughts, 118–19; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 1:286–90; Isaac Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind* (London: Brackstone, 1741), 53; Rousseau, *Emile*, 2:9; James Wadham Whitchurch, *An Essay upon Education* (London: Becket, 1772), 195, 199; Henry Home, *Loose Hints upon Education*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Bell, 1782), 90; Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: Bell, 1783), 133–34; David Williams, *Lectures on Education* (London: Bell, 1789), 1:50; William Godwin, *The Enquirer; Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (London: Robinson, 1797), 33, 131; Louisa Hoare, *Hints for the Improvement of Early Education and Nursery Discipline*, 3rd ed. (London: Hatchard, 1820), 156.

⁸⁹Hamilton, *Education*, 2:49.

⁹⁰Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. William Molesworth, 11 vols. (London: Bohn, 1839–45), 3:44–45, 92–93, 94. See further Kathryn Tabb, "The Fate of Nebuchadnezzar: Curiosity and Human Nature in Hobbes," *Hobbes Studies* 27, no. 1 (2014): 13–34.

⁹¹Locke, *Thoughts*, 115.

⁹²*Ibid.*

⁹³J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 13.

⁹⁴Hamilton, *Education*, 2:81.

⁹⁵Barbara M. Benedict, "Curiosity in British Literature: Investigators, Curiosities, Motifs and Methods," in *Toward New Philosophical Explorations of the Epistemic Desire*

hovered around curiosity, Benedict claims, was fortified by an association with subversiveness.⁹⁶ Locke admitted that curiosity might veer into the inappropriate. The danger of being led astray by curiosity was acknowledged, but the stimulation which strange new things brought about was worth it.⁹⁷ For Samuel Johnson, curiosity, as the desire of knowledge, “seems on many occasions to operate without subordination to any other principle.”⁹⁸ For Catharine Macaulay, the value of this unruliness was undeniable. Her curiosity curbed the “empire of habit,” by allowing her “to outstep the limits of female education, and pry into the deepest recesses of science.”⁹⁹ Hobbes too thought that this wandering curiosity was one of the most “effectual seeds of death” of authority,¹⁰⁰ but he developed a curriculum specifically to curtail it.¹⁰¹ Stifling curiosity as well as preventing the examination of received dogma, Helvétius thought, perpetuated dependence.¹⁰²

3. Reason, Emotion

The previous section suggested that James Mill followed established practice developing a curriculum adapted to the natural capacities of his son. He stimulated his student’s inquisitiveness, encouraged him to read on his own, and fostered his curiosity. Any educational program which fueled curiosity was commonly thought to be set on a trajectory to escape its own (narrow) parameters: “Every man who is educated to any purpose in this country,” James Mill thought, “is educated by his own reading, not only without, but in spite of his masters.”¹⁰³

This section turns to his endeavor “to give, according to his own conception, the highest order of intellectual education” to his son.¹⁰⁴ J. S. Mill emphasized his education’s one-sidedness: it lacked poetic/emotional cultivation. He

to Know: Just Curious about Curiosity, ed. Marianna Papastephanou (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2019), 69.

⁹⁶Barbara M. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 27.

⁹⁷Lock, *Thoughts*, 116–18.

⁹⁸Samuel Johnson, “Curiosity,” *The Rambler*, no. 103 (March 12, 1751), in *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 12 vols. (London: Baldwin, 1801), 5:202–3.

⁹⁹Catharine Macaulay Graham, *Letters on Education, with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (London: Dilly, 1790), 82, 5.

¹⁰⁰Hobbes, *Leviathan*, in *Works*, 3:706.

¹⁰¹George Kataliakos, “Curiosity, Political Self-Restraint and Thomas Hobbes,” in Papastephanou, *Epistemic Desire to Know*, 60–64. See also George Kataliakos, “Curiosity and Education in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes” (PhD diss., University of Cyprus, 2021).

¹⁰²Helvétius, *Treatise*, 1:223.

¹⁰³J. Mill to A. Walker, June 24, 1820, in NLS MS 13727 f. 5r.

¹⁰⁴J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 7.

thought poetic culture a “natural aliment” to logic and analysis.¹⁰⁵ On the one hand, the “superabundance” of the latter in his education was supposed to highlight the unnaturalness of the whole. On the other, his newly discovered capacity to be inspired by poetry was meant to showcase his gradual emancipation from a narrow creed.

Three ways of conceptualizing the reported emotional deficiency in the younger Mill’s education stand out. First, scholars such as Robson and Thomas, as well as others, argue that the struggle between reason and emotion served both a literary and philosophical purpose.¹⁰⁶ For Stillinger, J. S. Mill “plays off fear against love, sternness against kindness, narrowness against many-sidedness, and starvation of the feelings against poetry, art, and free expression of the feelings.”¹⁰⁷ For Frederick Rosen, J. S. Mill frequently identified and used polarities to state and develop his own position.¹⁰⁸ Second, the struggle between reason and emotion was embodied in his work and life in the scientist/artist and philosopher/poet contrasts.¹⁰⁹ For Bertrand Russell, the embodiment of these constructs was gendered: “morals and intellect were perpetually at war in his thought, morals being incarnate in Mrs. Taylor and intellect in his father.”¹¹⁰ J. S. Mill was “so thoroughly, so utterly fathered,” Peter Glassman has argued,¹¹¹ that he could never achieve “the integrated life of reason and emotion”¹¹² he thought he had. Larsen has suggested a third way in conceptualizing the reason/emotion dichotomy. James Mill “did nothing to cultivate in John an

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 113.

¹⁰⁶John M. Robson, “Mill’s ‘Autobiography’: The Public and the Private Voice,” *College Composition and Communication* 16, no. 2 (1965): 97–101; Thomas, “Mill,” 347–49; Rinehart, “Mill’s *Autobiography*,” 268–69, 272–73; Eugene R. August, “Mill’s ‘Autobiography’ as Philosophic ‘Commedia,’” *Victorian Poetry* 11, no. 2 (1973): 149–51; Martin Warner, “Philosophical Autobiography: St Augustine and John Stuart Mill,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series*, no. 16 (Sept. 1983): 202–3; Stafford, *John Stuart Mill*, 44–54.

¹⁰⁷Stillinger, “Mill’s Education,” 34.

¹⁰⁸Frederick Rosen, “Mill on Coleridge,” *Télos—Revista Iberoamericana de Estudios Utilitaristas* 12 (2003): 27ff.

¹⁰⁹John M. Robson, “Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill: Artist and Scientist,” *Queen’s Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (1966): 167–86; Andrew Gustafson, “Mill’s Poet-Philosopher, and the Instrumental-Social Importance of Poetry for Moral Sentiments,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (2009): 821–47.

¹¹⁰Bertrand Russell, “John Stuart Mill” (1951), in *Mill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jerome B. Schneewind (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 2.

¹¹¹Peter Glassman, “‘Who Made Me?’: The *Autobiography* of John Stuart Mill,” *Prose Studies* 5, no. 2 (1982): 197. See also Michael Palencia-Roth, “Mothers, Fathers and the Life of Reason: The Case of John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography*,” *Comparative Civilizations Review* 4, no. 4 (1980): 47; Glassman, *Mill*, 5.

¹¹²Kathleen E. Welch, “Logical Writing in the Education of John Stuart Mill: The *Autobiography* and the Privileging of Reason,” *Browning Institute Studies*, no. 16 (1988): 155. See also Millgram, *Mill*, 29–32.

unhindered devotional sense that could readily find other outlets."¹¹³ For Larsen, cultivating one's devotional sense, nurturing the capacity to know, to feel, and to be inspired by another's devotion to an ideal, is constitutive of one's identity and sense of self.¹¹⁴ Larsen's biographical account has unquestionably shed new light on the importance of religion in the younger Mill's life. However, we need to revisit his discussion of J. S. Mill's education.

Larsen suggests that J. S. Mill's devotional sense eventually developed through his attachment to Harriet, which was a devotion of love, rather than to James Mill, which was a devotion of fear.¹¹⁵ That Larsen fell back to the other two ways of conceptualizing the reason/emotion dichotomy highlights the extent to which the discussion of J. S. Mill's education is entrenched in those analytical polarities. Whatever the exegetical purpose the reason/emotion analytical duality serves in discussions of J. S. Mill's education, that it was no education for autonomy remains common ground. This section argues that J. S. Mill's education was not devoid of emotion by examining whether it encouraged knowing, feeling, and being inspired by another's devotion to an ideal. The implications of such an examination are readily evident. On the one hand, if the father did actively try to cultivate his son's emotions, then there is no reason to reproduce the gendered embodiment of the polarity. On the other, if the emotions James Mill sought to develop were conducive to autonomy, then the binary framing of J. S. Mill's education once again fails exegetically. I focus on the latter.

Larsen applies a new hermeneutic tool to the old problem of "logic *contra* sentiment."¹¹⁶ A devotional sense "is a way of fostering one's own identity and sense of self through one's loyalty and emotional connection to another entity."¹¹⁷ What faith means to faithful people, for example, has no meaning to someone emotionally "tone deaf," such as J. S. Mill's education made him.¹¹⁸ The ability to acknowledge and tune in to the emotional state of another person, marked by their delightful extravagance in praising the object of their devotion, both opens up doors of friendship and fosters sympathy even among those whose devotion is attached to different objects, such as one's country or religion.¹¹⁹ Failing to nurture this common trait, Larsen argues, J. S. Mill's education stifled a way of being human.¹²⁰

Larsen seems to underestimate the devotional overtones of James Mill's influence. Harriet Grote, for example, clothed James Mill's impact on the

¹¹³Larsen, *Mill*, 28.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 26–28.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 28–29, 85–88.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 27, 88.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 27–28.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 28.

Philosophical Radicals in both patriotic and religious garb: he eloquently made “the conceptions of duty towards mankind at large” so attractive that the younger disciples were “fired with patriotic ardour” as well as “with bitter antipathies,” in their preparation “to wage battle” on behalf of “‘the true faith,’ according to [James] Mill’s ‘programme’ and preaching.”¹²¹ In 1867, J. S. Mill claimed that early studies fix the student’s eyes “upon the ultimate end from which those studies take their chief value—that of making you more effective combatants in the great fight which never ceases to rage between Good and Evil.”¹²² In *Autobiography*, he recounted how his father had expressed surprise that no one revived the “Manichaeic theory of a Good and an Evil Principle, struggling against each other for the government of the universe.”¹²³ The “great fight” between Good and Evil seems, at least, apt in exciting J. S. Mill’s sense of purpose or devotion.

Larsen seems also to underrate James Mill’s indirect teaching, which, as J. S. Mill admitted, “left seed behind, which germinated in due season.”¹²⁴ Larsen argues that those who have a devotional sense are neither perplexed nor disaffected by others’ expression of their feelings and attachments in extravagant devotional claims. J. S. Mill’s education would thus have rendered him unable to see that the “heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.”¹²⁵ Surprisingly, in 1834, J. S. Mill acknowledged this much in his commentary on Plato’s *Gorgias*:

The love of virtue, and every other noble feeling, is not communicated by reasoning, but caught by inspiration or sympathy from those who already have it; and its nurse and foster-mother is Admiration. We acquire it from those whom we love and reverence, especially from those whom we earliest love and reverence; from our ideal of those, whether in past or in present times, whose lives and characters have been the mirror of all noble qualities; and lastly, from those who, as poets or artists, can clothe those feelings in the most beautiful forms, and breathe them into us through our imagination and our sensations.¹²⁶

Similarly, three decades earlier, James Mill urged his readers to remember that “it is a work of much difficulty to remove prejudices; and that men are not always blameable because they cannot relinquish them.”¹²⁷ No force of reasoning could make some people abandon their ungrounded beliefs. Both Mills agreed that the exchange of reasons or the bringing of evidence (or its

¹²¹Harriet Grote, *The Personal Life of George Grote* (London: Murray, 1873), 23.

¹²²J. S. Mill, “Inaugural Address delivered to the University of St. Andrews” (1867), in CW 21:256

¹²³J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 43.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 25.

¹²⁵Larsen, *Mill*, 28,

¹²⁶J. S. Mill, “Gorgias” (1834), in CW 11:150.

¹²⁷[James Mill], “Van Mildert on Infidelity,” *Literary Journal*, s.s., 2, no. 4 (1806): 363.

lack thereof) to light was not always sufficient for changing minds, and hearts, in educational, social, and political issues.¹²⁸

Larsen, further, seems to undervalue the part James Mill’s classical curriculum played in his son’s emotional development. J. S. Mill admitted that he had received a “poetic culture of the most valuable kind, by means of reverential admiration for the lives and characters of heroic persons; especially the heroes of philosophy.”¹²⁹ Plato’s Socrates, among others, had an “animating effect” on him.¹³⁰

Such acknowledgment of a psychagogic as well as animating effect in experiencing the achievements of models of excellence was neither novel nor peculiar to the two Mills. J. S. Mill asked his audience at St. Andrews in 1867: “Who does not feel a better man after a course of Dante, or of Wordsworth, or, I will add, of Lucretius or the *Georgics*, or after brooding over Gray’s *Elegy*, or Shelley’s ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’?”¹³¹ Like Joseph Addison,¹³² Lord Monboddo,¹³³ and Lord Kames before him,¹³⁴ J. S. Mill added Plato, Demosthenes, and Tacitus to this list, being “poets and artists” themselves.¹³⁵ The works of ancient moralists were thought to improve their readers by creating a disposition to imitate their characters’ moral excellence. Such a curriculum, Lord Kames thought, opened “a spacious and commodious avenue to the heart of a young person.”¹³⁶

The lives of models of excellence were meant to guide the young to virtue, by inspiring emulation through admiration, the “nurse and foster-mother”¹³⁷ of virtue. Louis Jaucourt had defined emulation as a “noble, generous passion, which admiring merit, good deeds, and the actions of others, attempts to imitate, or even to surpass them, by working courageously according to honorable and virtuous principles.” Emulation is animated by honor and love of duty and country. As a (sympathetic) passion, it is

¹²⁸See further Antis Loizides, *James Mill’s Utilitarian Logic and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2019), chap. 5.

¹²⁹J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 115.

¹³⁰*Ibid.* See further Antis Loizides, “The Mills,” in *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Socrates*, ed. Christopher Moore (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 793–814.

¹³¹J. S. Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 254.

¹³²[Joseph Addison], “Dignity of Human Nature,” *The Tatler*, no. 108 (Dec. 15–17, 1709): 1.

¹³³James Burnet, *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: Bell, 1789), 19.

¹³⁴Henry Home, *Elements of Criticism*, 3 vols. (London: Millar, 1762), 1:75.

¹³⁵J. S. Mill, “Inaugural Address,” 254. See further Antis Loizides, “Mill’s Aesthetics,” in *A Companion to Mill*, ed. Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 250–65.

¹³⁶Henry Home, *Elements of Criticism*, 1:75.

¹³⁷J. S. Mill, “Gorgias,” 150.

“always active and open, takes that merit of others as its motive, so as to strive for perfection with more ardor.”¹³⁸

Jaucourt’s definition of emulation, like many other invocations of the term as a prompt to imitate excellence,¹³⁹ contrasted emulation to envy and insisted on the “proper” objects of admiration, as per Aristotle’s discussion of zeal in *Rhetoric* (2.11). While both senses of emulation are other focused, the former, centering around rivalry or contest, includes the idea of surpassing others, whereas the latter, emphasizing ardor, refers to a painful realization that we are lacking in (some) excellence we admire in others. We thus aspire to reach their attainments rather than maliciously take theirs away (or merely being concerned with surpassing others, irrespectively of attaining virtue ourselves).

The above-described psychagogic and animating effect had been part of James Mill’s educational plan. Beginning with Socrates, he considered him to be the martyr of a philosophy “of real utility in human life,” going after “the rules and motives of good conduct,” fighting the enemies of truth.¹⁴⁰ Just as his son learned the Greek alphabet, James Mill regretfully noted the neglect in English education of the “*Socraticae chartae*, those precious remains so strenuously recommended by Horace and Cicero, as the fountain of genius, to both the orator and the poet.”¹⁴¹ He considered Plato’s dialogues unsurpassed in their ability “to sharpen the faculties; to render acute in discerning, and ingenious in exposing fallacies; to engender a love of mental exercise; and to elevate with the ambition of mental excellence.”¹⁴² Around the time his eldest began reading Plato’s dialogues, James Mill painted a striking portrait of Socrates as a firebrand, “called upon to seal his doctrines with his blood,” promoting “the cause of truth, virtue, and human happiness,” giving “a new tone to the sentiments of mankind,” and firing “to the search and to the elevated declaration of truth some of the most distinguished men who have accelerated the progress of knowledge, and raised the views of mankind.”¹⁴³

¹³⁸Louis chevalier de Jaucourt, “Emulation,” in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. David Moak (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2007), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.888>, accessed Dec. 18, 2022. Originally published as “Emulation,” *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1755), 601–2.

¹³⁹Howard D. Weinbrot, “‘An Ambition to Excell’: The Aesthetics of Emulation in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1985): 121–39.

¹⁴⁰[James Mill], “Taylor’s Translation of Plato [I],” *Literary Journal* 3, no. 8 (1804): 451. See further Antis Loizides, *John Stuart Mill’s Platonic Heritage: Happiness through Character* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), chap. 3.

¹⁴¹[James Mill], “Taylor’s Plato,” *Edinburgh Review* 14, no. 27 (1809): 189.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*, 198–99.

¹⁴³[James Mill], “Clarkson’s Memoirs of William Penn I,” *Philanthropist* 3, no. 2 (1813): 231.

Philosophical works were not the only source for inspiration, admiration, and elevation. In 1809, James Mill extolled a book that was impossible to read and "to rise without a warmer love of one's country than before; without a stronger disposition to make for it every sacrifice; to risk all in resisting its oppressors, and to account life not worth preserving, where freedom, independence, liberty, are not enjoyed, where tyranny reigns, or oppression operates."¹⁴⁴ These emotions were brought about by a historian. James Mill thought the peculiar business of history was "to teach, or rather, to inspire, for it should be her object to inflame with the love of" the public virtues. Histories display human passions in interesting situations, awakening our sympathies, just as dramatic and epic poems, novels, and romances could do.¹⁴⁵ With typical rhetorical embellishment, he pointed out that there is a connection "founded in eternal and immutable laws" between "good taste in literature and the spirit of political freedom in polished nations" much like that between "virtue and political freedom."¹⁴⁶

The "love of virtue," James Mill thought, "is not an exclamatory, turbulent, impetuous, noisy passion. It never throws a man violently into a state of agitation and tumult. It is a calm and holy affection; it expresses itself with earnestness and warmth, but not with heat and violence."¹⁴⁷ Through word as well as deed, models of excellence can make a profound impression and inspire the strongest resolve, even without passionate expressions. For James Mill, a skillful author or an orator can paint a lively scene with words, exciting admiration for the noble character traits of those who expose and rise against the "lovers of the dark scene." When "the undesirable, the dismal consequences, to which their unhappy purposes lead," are thus made "more distinctly seen," then they are "the more sure of being locked to the memory, and of operating with their due force upon the active principles of man."¹⁴⁸ Perhaps that was why, in 1804, he had praised a sermon on the recent outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars for its "emphatically beautiful" call to arms for the protection of liberty: "We know nothing," James Mill wrote, "either in ancient or modern eloquence to surpass this; and if any man read it without the strongest emotions, we do not envy him in his feelings."¹⁴⁹

Biography complemented philosophy and history in inspiring the emulation of admirable conduct. As we saw, in having a "perfect account . . . of the manner in which the mind of a Socrates, or of an Epaminondas, was

¹⁴⁴[James Mill], "Fox's History of the Reign of James II," *Annual Review and History*, no. 7 (1809): 102–3.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶[James Mill], "The Works of Sallust," *Literary Journal*, s.s., 1, no. 4 (1806): 347.

¹⁴⁷[James Mill], "Sir H. Moncrieff Wellwood's Sermons," *Literary Journal*, s.s., 1, no. 3 (1806): 265.

¹⁴⁸[James Mill], "Instruction: A Poem," *Philanthropist* 1, no. 4 (1811): 401.

¹⁴⁹[James Mill], "Hall's Fast Sermon," *Literary Journal* 3, no. 1 (1804): 24.

formed," James Mill thought, "we receive the most effectual instructions to make ourselves, or others, on the formation of whose minds we may have any influence, such men, as he whose exploits we admire."¹⁵⁰ The passion of emulation is most appropriately awakened by "psychological qualities, moral and intellectual."¹⁵¹ He thought Cornelius Nepos's (ca. 110–25 BCE) series of biographies of famous generals one of the most instructive books for children. For James Mill, this book did "much to fix their taste for useful learning, and to inspire them with the ambition of imitating every thing which is excellent."¹⁵² It was one of the books which the Mill children used to learn Latin.¹⁵³

Friendship and camaraderie in the pursuit of noble ends was also an integral part of emulation. Stepping into the *agora* was a requirement for cultivating virtue. Public discussion, for James Mill, allowed the friends of public good "to review the reasons of their attachment; to re-animate their zeal by renewed reflection on the merits of the object which they pursue; and to rouse themselves to still greater exertions by mutual recollections and exhortations."¹⁵⁴ Happiness, for James Mill, "is placed within the reach, commonly of the individual, and always of the community, in proportion as honest industry flourishes, in proportion as sound religion inculcates pure morality, and the diffusion of rational knowledge secures public and private liberty." "To promote these desirable objects," he added, "let every reformer take one individual in hand and begin. . . with *himself*."¹⁵⁵ Public discussion was important even in the face of disagreement by fostering inquisitiveness and by kindling zeal. So long as they are devoted to the pursuit of truth, James Mill thought, those who disagree with us, "though our antagonists," "are our friends" and "our coadjutors."¹⁵⁶ Children especially need to learn that "to *agree* to differ; i.e. to have different opinions, without quarrelling with one another, or hating one another, on that account."¹⁵⁷

The preceding analysis moves past the standard view of James Mill's educational practice and has important implications for the assumed authoritarianism involved in it, especially when it is inspected through a hard-determinist view, that is, a view that human character is formed solely by

¹⁵⁰[James Mill], "Life of Washington," 235–36.

¹⁵¹James Mill, *Commonplace Books*, vol. 1, ed. Robert Anthony Fenn, London Library, f. 119v (comment on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*).

¹⁵²James Mill, "Stark's Biographia Scotica," *Literary Journal* 5, no. 12 (1805): 1321.

¹⁵³J. Mill to F. Place, Dec. 7, 1814, British Library Add MS 35152, f. 199.

¹⁵⁴[James Mill], "Lancasterian Institutions," *Philanthropist* 3, no. 12 (1813): 345.

¹⁵⁵[James Mill], "Weyland on Population and Production," *British Review and London Critical Journal* 8, no. 16 (1816): 312, emphasis original.

¹⁵⁶[James Mill], "Persecution of Infidelity," *Philanthropist* 2, no. 7 (1812): 210–11.

¹⁵⁷[James Mill], "Marsh and Others against Lancaster," *Philanthropist* 2, no. 5 (1812): 106, emphasis original.

external circumstances.¹⁵⁸ As we saw, there was a connection between admiration and inspiration and the "active principles of man."¹⁵⁹ James Mill thought emulation integral in making ourselves such persons as those "whose exploits we admire."¹⁶⁰ For J. S. Mill, this capacity for self-formation was the very essence of moral freedom.

The feeling of moral freedom, J. S. Mill wrote, is found in "being able to modify our own character *if we wish*."¹⁶¹ Through poetic cultivation, J. S. Mill thought, "we learn to respect ourselves only so far as we feel capable of nobler objects."¹⁶² He thus identified a painful realization as the first step in desiring to change our character. This step was initiated either by the "experience of the consequences of the character we previously had; or by some strong feeling of admiration or aspiration, accidentally aroused."¹⁶³ This new desire interjects into the series of circumstances which influence or shape who we are and reinforces the desire to improve ourselves.¹⁶⁴ Admiration thus introduces a new train of circumstances in the formation of character: the desire to be a different kind of person. Just like curiosity breaking the "empire of habit," so admiration breaks the empire of our former self and sets us on a trajectory to take control of its formation.

The capacity to author our own character through admiration, as a manifestation of autonomy, allows us to see the connection between J. S. Mill's view on emotional cultivation, Larsen's definition of a devotional sense, and James Mill's educational aims. Classical education's emphasis on admiration, inspiration, and emulation, as we saw, was commonly thought to open "a spacious and commodious avenue to the heart of a young person."¹⁶⁵ James Mill thought that the most honorable of purposes, the improvement of mankind, was not out of the reach of anyone, even those with humble means. That admirable lesson could only be taught via moral exemplars.¹⁶⁶ Not unlike his father, for J. S. Mill, poetic cultivation grounded the feeling of self-respect on the capacity for "noble aims and endeavours."¹⁶⁷ He too pointed to the importance of perseverance on the face of adversity.

¹⁵⁸J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, 111, 177; Terence Ball, "Psychology, Associationism, and Ethology," in Macleod and Miller, *Companion to Mill*, 148–50. See also Terence Ball, "Competing Theories of Character Formation: James vs. John Stuart Mill," in *John Stuart Mill—Thought and Influence: The Saint of Radicalism*, ed. Georgios Varouxakis and Paul Kelly (New York: Routledge, 2010), 35–56; Terence Ball, "The Formation of Character: Mill's 'Ethology' Reconsidered," *Polity* 33, no. 1 (2000): 25–48.

¹⁵⁹[James Mill], "Instruction: A Poem," *Philanthropist* 1, no. 4 (1811): 401.

¹⁶⁰[James Mill], "Life of Washington," 235–36.

¹⁶¹J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, in CW 8:841, emphasis original.

¹⁶²J. S. Mill, "Inaugural Address," 254.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, 840–41.

¹⁶⁴J. S. Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, in CW 9:466.

¹⁶⁵Home, *Elements of Criticism*, 1:75.

¹⁶⁶[James Mill], "William Penn I," 228–33.

¹⁶⁷J. S. Mill, "Inaugural Address," 254.

Perseverance was achieved by imagining oneself in a community with “the great characters in history, or even in fiction, and by the contemplation of an idealized posterity. . . [and] of ideal perfection embodied in a Divine Being.”¹⁶⁸

Conclusion

The educational journey of the Mill family began with James Mill being “convinced of the advantages which a father enjoyed in swaying the mind of his child.”¹⁶⁹ Just seven weeks after the birth of J. S. Mill, the proud father noted his strong determination to test the power of education and invited a friend to a challenge: “which of us twenty years hence can exhibit the most accomplished & virtuous young man. If I can beat you in this contest, I shall not envy you that you can have yours the richest.”¹⁷⁰ Six years later, at the first sign of serious illness, he anxiously expressed his fear that he would never realize his son’s full potential, making him “a worthy successor” to both himself and Bentham.¹⁷¹ Soon enough, however, James Mill was able to brag about the accomplishments of his children.¹⁷²

For Stillinger, Bruce Kinzer, and Dale Miller, these letters offer early signs of later motifs of the father-son relationship.¹⁷³ However, throughout this article, I have tried to show that we need to take James Mill’s view into consideration for a more nuanced understanding of J. S. Mill’s education. For example, when the filter of James Mill “the rationalist, the maker of syllogisms, the geometrician”¹⁷⁴ is applied, “athletic aggressiveness and self-aggrandizing”¹⁷⁵ are all that can be seen in the father’s talk of a contest in accomplishments and virtue, free from envy about riches.¹⁷⁶ But once that filter is removed, the vocabulary of emulation uncovers ideas of nobility, honor, and virtue, as well as friendship, solidarity, and fairness.

It is “the myth of John Mill’s education,” as Stillinger has eloquently put it, “that has made the greatest impression historically and culturally.”¹⁷⁷ In this article, I have tried to rehabilitate that infamous education by problematizing the three traditional dichotomies which keep the myth alive: nurture/nature, reason/emotion, authority/autonomy. I have argued that James Mill had

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

¹⁶⁹J. Mill to A. Walker, Feb. 26, 1820, NLS MS 13725 f. 13v.

¹⁷⁰J. Mill to W. Forbes, July 7, 1806, NLS MS Acc. 4796/49 (folder 2), f. 1v–2r.

¹⁷¹J. Mill to J. Bentham, July 28, 1812, in *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 8:255.

¹⁷²J. Mill to F. Place, Dec. 7, 1814, in Wallas, *Life of Francis Place*, 70.

¹⁷³Stillinger, “Mill’s Education,” 23–24; Kinzer, *Mill Revisited*, 13–14; Dale E. Miller, *J. S. Mill* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 4–5.

¹⁷⁴Mary Mack, *Jeremy Bentham: An Odyssey of Ideas* (London: Heinemann, 1962), 19.

¹⁷⁵Stillinger, “Mill’s Education,” 23.

¹⁷⁶J. Mill to W. Forbes, July 7, 1809, NLS MS Acc. 4796/49 (folder 2), f. 1v–2r.

¹⁷⁷Stillinger, “Mill’s Education,” 34.

strived for nurture to follow nature in the acquisition of knowledge, not least through the unruly passion of curiosity. I have also tried to show the importance of emotion in the pursuit of excellence. Inspiration and admiration were key in the devotion to noble ends. Further, I have challenged the perceived authoritarianism J. S. Mill's education entailed. First, freedom from indoctrination manifested itself in the capacity of curiosity to escape the limitations of one's education and to break through the empire of habit. Second, the freedom to refashion one's self took form in the capacity to be inspired by those whom one comes to admire. Contesting the binary formulation of that famous education dispels the myth that surrounds it, or, at least, lessens the myth's appeal. Still, as long as *Autobiography* remains the main source in the origin story of the "Apostle of Progress," the father is destined to remain the antihero, if not the villain, of the story.