Mothers, Fathers and the Life of Reason: The Case of John Stuart Mill's Autobiography

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The life of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was probably viewed by his contemporaries as singularly full, successful and serene. He himself modestly called it "uneventful." They saw a man who had written the most influential work on logic, the most influential one on political economy, and important essays on liberty and the subjection of women. They saw a man who, as a Wunderkind under the systematic tutelage of his father, had been an eloquent advocate of the Utilitarian philosophy and who, as a mature man, had become a responsible civil servant, not only in India House but also in the British Parliament. Mill's life indeed seemed—as did the life of Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich for a while—to "flow pleasantly and well" and with far fewer problems than are usual. But his life was not as "uneventful" as he would have us believe; there was turmoil beneath the placid surface. As a twenty-year-old, Mill suffered, as he states in his Autobiography, a massive mental crisis which paralyzed him intellectually for a time and from which he emerged with somewhat different interests and with a redirected sense of purpose. All became, according to his telling of it, stable again. Yet if one looks closely at the Autobiography and at the documents concerning other aspects of Mill's life, one sees that this stability was, if not more apparent than real, then at any rate certainly precarious. He reacted, for example, to the deaths of his father, his mother, and his wife in radically different ways, each of them extreme and all of them as a whole indicative of deeply rooted emotional problems and conflicts. This essay is an ex-
ploration of the pattern of Mill’s attitudes towards his family and of the various changes in his life, with an eye to discovering the connection these attitudes and changes might have with his intellectual work and with an eye as well to relating this kind of biographical study to civilizational inquiry.

One may begin at the beginning. “I was born,” writes Mill in his Autobiography, “in London, on the twentieth of May 1806, and was the eldest son of James Mill, the author of the History of British India.” One remarks at once that Mill’s mother has dropped from view in his account of his birth. Why? It cannot be maintained that the omission is merely a slip of the pen, for, reading on, one discovers that not once does Mill’s mother appear directly in the entire Autobiography. There is the barest reference to her having existed, at least, in Mill’s acknowledgment that his father “married and had a large family” (p. 4).

The suppression of Mill’s mother has not gone completely unnoticed by critics. Victorian reviewers of the Autobiography mentioned the mother’s disappearance with disapproval. Bruce Mazlish, one of the few critics to have singled out this sentence, even begins his work on the two Mills by citing it, commenting that it is “a new version of the immaculate conception, in which the mother is entirely missing.” Though Mazlish does concern himself somewhat with Mill’s relationship to his mother, most of his book is devoted to the father-son relationship, thus implicitly sanctioning Mill’s account of his birth. Mill’s account, though not unnoticed, has gone largely unexplained and has not really been related to the rest of his life and work. Yet that simple and deliberate omission acquires—when placed in context—enormous importance for understanding Mill’s intellectual and personal development.

For the purposes of this presentation, Mill’s omission can be discussed in four overlapping contexts: “the classical,” “the pedagogical,” “the autobiographical”
and "the biographical." I shall discuss the classical and the pedagogical only briefly, focusing most of my attention on the latter two terms. First, the classical (and it is of some significance—though one should not claim any direct influence—that Mill's education was based on major classical texts): a scene from the end of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy vividly illustrates some of the basic concerns behind my interpretation of Mill's life and thought. At this point in the *Oresteia* a trial is being conducted, the trial of a matricide. Orestes, accused of the murder of his mother, is being defended by Apollo. Because he knows that Orestes really did kill his mother, Apollo shifts the grounds of Orestes' defense to show that the killing of the mother cannot be considered a serious offense. "The mother is no parent of that which is called her child," Apollo tells the chorus, "but only the nurse of the new-planted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts" (11. 658-60). Perhaps sensing the chorus' disbelief, Apollo quickly comes to his point. "I will show you proof," he says, pointing to Pallas Athene. "There can be a father without any mother. There she stands, the living witness, daughter of Olympian Zeus, she who was never fostered in the dark of womb" (11.662-65). The power of this argument proves decisive, for Athene, yielding to Apollo's words and declaring that "there is no mother anywhere who gave me birth" (1. 736), casts the deciding vote which acquits Orestes.

And yet everyone in the play and in the audience really "knew" that Apollo's account of Athene's parthenogenetic birth was a lie. Everyone knew the truth: that Metis, pregnant with Athene, had been swallowed by Zeus just before the birth was to take place. Zeus kept Metis in his belly and gave birth to Athene out of his own head. Here the ingested mother is conveniently forgotten and Orestes acquitted. While sensing that something is not quite right with Apollo's argument and that he should not be allowed to get away with some-
thing so contrary to the known facts, his audience is nevertheless persuaded by him. His power is not the power of rhetoric alone but, strangely, the power of logic as well. The steps in his thinking—the steps which make his argument so difficult for the chorus and Athene to refute—may best be illustrated by referring to a version of the diagrammatic representations for the distribution of terms by Euler, the 18th century Swiss mathematician and logician.

Using Euler's circles, we may say that if we take class A (or Zeus) and class B (or Metis) with element C (or Athene) within it

then the most succinct way of describing the position of C (Athene) if B (Metis) is made a class within A (Zeus) is to say that C is in A; C is within class A:

It is no longer necessary to cite B, the middle element, in order to describe the position of C; therefore, the middle is dropped and B (or Metis, Athene's mother) "vanishes." The relevance to Orestes' trial is clear: if the mother (B) can be proven not to exist as a parent then Orestes is not her son and cannot be convicted of matricide.

Perhaps another reason why Apollo's argument appears convincing is that, by analogy, it makes an appeal—possibly to his listeners' unconscious—to
syllogistic processes in which the middle also seems to be dropped. Two forms of the syllogism will make this clear. The first is that of the hypothetical syllogism: If A, then B; and if B, then C; therefore, if A, then C. Or, as the Barbara form of Aristotle’s conditional syllogism reads: if A is predicated of all B, and B is predicated of all C, then it is necessary for A to be predicated of all C. The middle term (B) is dropped in the concluding third movement of this process.\(^5\)

One should note, however, that although the middle is dropped, this does not mean that it actually ceases to exist, and logicians would argue for the importance of its continuing existence. B may even be said to be the carrier of the meaning since without it there would be no meaningful connection between A and C. However, Athene’s conclusion stems from the belief, planted in her by Apollo, that the middle has vanished in fact. In acquitting Orestes she acts for a moment as though the metaphor were—or had become—real. In describing his birth Mill also acted as though the metaphor of the disappearing mother were real. Paradoxically and ironically—though maybe appropriately—Mill was himself a logician whose greatest contribution to the history of logic was, he thought, to have criticized Aristotelian syllogistic processes in the formulation of his own.

In so describing his birth Mill has in effect demonstrated—and this is part of the “pedagogical” context—the success and thoroughness of his father’s educational experiment. Early in Mill’s life, his father seems to have taken him away from his mother and to have tried to educate and raise him virtually alone, “parthenogenetically,” in order to demonstrate certain pedagogical principles. James Mill and his circle (e.g., Jeremy Bentham) were stoics in their pedagogical views,\(^6\) believing not only in the separation of emotion and reason but also in the inherent superiority of the latter and consequently in the need for it to be domi-
nant. This belief resulted in a pedagogical discipline which separated the mind from the heart and kept the pupil away from emotional disturbances. The mother and the inherently emotional forms of her influence were kept at a distance as much as possible; conversely, the father and the "rational" forms of his influence were emphasized.

II

What are motherly and fatherly values and what is their relationship to individuation, to the processes of maturation? Motherly values—which are in a civilizational context the values of primitive peoples (early religions exalted Mother-Goddesses and feminine votaries)—emphasize, in the words of Erich Fromm in *The Art of Loving*, warmth, food, satisfaction, security; in metaphorical terms she is home, nature, soil and ocean. Her love is unconditional, given freely and without restriction. Opposed to motherly values are fatherly values. These values—which are the values considered most important in more civilized societies (later religions such as Judaism or Christianity are patriarchal, exalting God the Father; even the Virgin Mary, in Catholicism, occupies a secondary position)—emphasize, again in the words of Erich Fromm, "the world of thought, of man-made things, of law and order, of discipline, of travel and adventure." Fatherly love is conditional; it can be withdrawn, for its main requirement is obedience. Fatherly values appeal also to hierarchizing, to a notion of order which has its societal analogue in laws of inheritance and primogeniture, and its grammatical analogue in the syntax of ordination and subordination. Fatherly values thus stand behind much we consider necessary for an ordered society and for good, logical argumentation. On examining Apollo's defense of Orestes we see that, metaphorically, the argument depends—as all argu-
ments ultimately do—on dropping middles or subsuming or "ingesting" them (as Zeus ingested Metis), for that is how conclusions are attained. The dropped middle, in this metaphor, is the mother, and as the mother disappears so also tend to disappear those motherly values cited above.

In the psychology of individuation, the human being must—if he is to attain true maturity—eventually harmonize within himself motherly and fatherly values, internalizing and developing both a motherly and fatherly consciousness. If he succeeds, he becomes a fully individuated and loving human being, compassionate and kind both in principle and in action. If he fails, he may become neurotic in some way, and his neurosis is likely to manifest itself most clearly in his actions and attitudes toward those people closest to him.

III

With these values in mind, I should like to turn now to the "autobiographical" context. As I have indicated earlier, Mill's mother is conspicuous by her absence in the *Autobiography*. This does not mean that Mill simply did not think of her. Perhaps paradoxically, the disappearance of Mill's mother from the final text might be considered an act of editorial mercy on the part of John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor and any others involved in editorial decisions. With one unimportant exception, every single deleted description of the mother is negative. The father's "ill assorted marriage" (Stillinger, p. 66) is due to the mother not having "kindred intellect, tastes or pursuits" (p. 4, note; Stillinger, p. 36). At another point Mill states that he did not have "the slightest regard" for his mother's "remonstrances" on his "ill breeding and impertinence" (p. 21, note; Stillinger, p. 56, note).

Perhaps the most negative of the deleted passages
That rarity in England, a really warm hearted mother, would in the first place have made my father a totally different being, and in the second would have made the children grow up loving and being loved. But my mother with the very best intentions, only knew how to pass her life in drudging for them. Whatever she could do for them she did, and they liked her, because she was kind to them, but to make herself loved, looked up to, or even obeyed, required qualities which she unfortunately did not possess.

The deletions of his mother from the final text show not only that Mill tried to give a parthenogenetic account of his own birth but also that he tried to give a similar account of his own growth. Immediately after the preceding passage, Mill concludes that "I thus grew up in the absence of love and in the presence of fear." The context of this sentence allows us to restate it this way: "I thus grew up in the absence of my mother and in the presence of my father." This negative passage is interesting also for two other reasons. First, Mill indicates that a warm hearted mother was a rarity in England, insinuating that his mother was typical and that nineteenth-century family patterns were therefore somewhat like his. Second, though this passage is so negative, or possibly because of its negativity, it may explain some of Mill's general attitudes towards life, his interests and behavior as an adult and mature man. Erich Fromm maintains that if the mother is cold and unresponsive (and in Mill's eyes his own certainly was), the child will transfer the need for protection to the father and may develop into a "one-sidedly father-oriented person, completely given to the principles of law, order and authority, and lacking in the ability to expect or receive unconditional love. This development is further intensified if the father is authoritarian and at the same time strongly attached to the son."\(^{11}\)

Mill's father was—to all appearances—strongly attached to his son. If nothing else, the extraordinary amount of time they spent together demonstrates that.

And, as all the major biographical accounts of John
Stuart Mill’s life stress, Mill apparently repaid his father in kind: he was a father’s son. The father was certainly a formidable model: described by his contemporaries as a brilliant conversationalist, breathtakingly lucid and forceful, described by modern critics as a man of abstractions and principles, a man of vast theoretical knowledge.

Many of the early pages of the Autobiography read like a rationalist’s hagiography of the father. Of all his father’s strengths, the one most often singled out for praise by Mill was his analytic habit of mind. His father owned an extensive library of books on logic (p. 74) and was expert in syllogistic logic (p. 13), in which the son was repeatedly drilled. It is to this kind of education that Mill feels “most indebted” for his capacity as a thinker (p. 13). The elder Mill inculcated in his son his own way of thinking, his own opinions and values. At one point Mill states that his father’s word on a subject had “fixed [his own] opinion and feeling from that time forward” (p. 22).

Such a formidable mind and personality should arouse strong feelings in a son, and since the elder Mill was probably more domineering towards his son than he was towards his friends, it is not surprising that Mill’s admiration for his father is tinged with ambivalence. This ambivalence is both explicit and implicit in the published text and in its deleted passages, and in contemporary accounts of Mill. For instance, the tentative criticism implied in the statement that the father’s “teachings tended to the undervaluing of feeling” (p. 67) points towards more negative feelings evident in both the final text and the early draft. Mill’s father was “chiefly deficient” in “tenderness,” had a constitutional irritability (p. 32), a critical eye (p. 10), “asperities of temper” and no spontaneity. At the same time, however, Mill feels compelled to come to his father’s defense. His father was not, Mill says, “himself cold hearted or insensible” (and notice that, as I have mentioned earlier, Mill’s mother is accused of being...
cold hearted); rather, his father merely "thought that feeling could take care of itself" (p. 67). And Mill professes himself grateful for the "amount of labour, care, and perseverance" (p. 5) which his father exerted in educating him.

As far as the pattern of his life as a whole is concerned, Mill divides it into three general stages: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Until 1826, the year of his crisis, Mill was clearly dominated by his father. As a child, Mill was "extremely subdued and quiet" in his father's presence (p. 21), questioning neither his father's authority nor the authority of adults in general. Lady Bentham, with whose family Mill spent over a year in France in 1820 and 1821, wrote James Mill that the boy was thankful for criticism and anxious to please his elders. Such thankfulness may have been simply the instinct for survival in a child whose domineering father had decreed that he learn Greek at three years of age, Latin at eight, logic and political economy at twelve. And, even later, the domination was at times more thorough than one might expect. For instance, in the second number of The Westminster Review, Mill himself continued an article written by his father in the first number. A deleted passage in the Autobiography remarks that "many if not most of the readers did not suspect that the continuation was by a different hand from the first article" (Stillinger, p. 93), so closely were they allied in substance, tone and style.

"One of the turning points in [Mill's] mental history" occurred after his return from France in 1821 and upon his reading of Dumont's accounts of Bentham's speculations in the Traité de législation; from that moment to his mental crisis in 1826 he was an apostle of Utilitarianism. Utilitarianism was of course his father's creed, and Mill even called it a "religion" (p. 42). Utilitarianism is, to give one definition of it, a philosophy of ends, a philosophy of the greatest good or happiness for the greatest number. A philosophy of ends
must de-emphasize means, must subordinate means to those ends, must, in other words, de-emphasize or subordinate middles. Significantly, Mill was during this time, according to his own description, "a mere reasoning machine" (p. 66).

"The time came," Mill writes, "when I awakened from this [phase] as from a dream": autumn 1826, the time of his mental crisis. In fact, Mill had several crises, but, for the purposes of the Autobiography, he seems to have compressed them into one. Its central formulation is extremely interesting in light of my focus and should be quoted in full:

In this frame of mind [of "dull... nerves" and "indifference"] it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself, "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for. (p. 81)

Not only has Mill chosen understated, unemotional language to describe an intensely emotional state, but he also speaks of that state as though it were part of a scientific experiment. The crisis is even put into the form of an hypothesis. That is, if the objects of change are realized, then there should be joy. The pursuit of the objects of change should make Mill happy. However, since Mill would actually not be happy upon the realization of his goals, since there no longer seems to be any necessary and logical relationship between purpose, realization of purpose, and happiness, "the whole foundation" of his life collapses. It is only after the negative conclusion to Mill's hypothesis has been attained, not before, that his heart sinks within him and he enters the slough of despond; such an orderly nervous
breakdown could only happen to a logician. In addition, Mill has explained his collapse in terms of ends and means: the "ends" (that is, the conclusions, the results) have "ceased to charm" and Mill therefore has lost "interest in the means" (that is, the middles). This is certainly a Utilitarian intepretation of the means, seen not as intrinsically important but as important only with reference to the ends. Neither in the depths of his de-spair nor in his analysis of it has Mill broken away from his past.

In order to break way from his past, to free himself from his upbringing, Mill would have to assert the importance of the means independently of—or at least not subordinate to—the ends. This was eventually what he came to assert. First, however, he set out to reread his favorite books, trying to draw from them some "strength and animation" (p. 81). But this was a mistake; this was clinging to the past. He felt distress also because there was no one in whom he could confide, no one he loved sufficiently, no one to whom he could turn for assistance. And the person who could help least was, Mill says, his father (p. 82), for he had "no knowl-edge of any such mental state" (p. 82) as Mill's. On then analyzing his education, which had been "wholly" the work of his father, Mill concluded that his acquired analytical power had worn away "the feelings," that analytic habits strengthened cause-and-effect relationships, the connections between means and ends, and weakened those relationships based on feeling, desire and pleasure (p. 83). Mill felt—he said—like a well-equipped ship, with a rudder but with no sail (p. 84). And yet through all of his description of his dejection and its causes Mill never explicitly and unequivocally placed the blame directly on his father. Perhaps that would have been too much for a son who up to that point had worshipped his father unquestioningly.

The first major step towards a solution of his crisis came, Mill says, "'accidentally'; it certainly came un-
consciously. That step depended, appropriately enough, on finding some sort of relief from his father's oppression. If the cathartic incident had not occurred, Mill would surely have had to invent it:

I was reading Marmontel's Memoirs, and came to the passage which relates his father's death, the distressed position of the family, and the sudden inspiration by which he, then a mere boy, felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them—would supply the place of all that they had lost. (p. 85)

The vivid scene moved Mill "to tears" and the "burden grew lighter" from then on. A psychoanalytically sensitive Mill would have recognized his catharsis as the abreaction of his repressed hostility towards his father. One must "kill," overcome, or deny the parent in order to assert one's ego. That Mill conforms to this pattern may be seen from the following sentences: "The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me [another way of describing the fear that his father's education had been completely successful], was gone. I was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or a stone" (p. 85). Mill was not, in other words, his father, for he did not possess that patriarchal, lapidary rigidity, and this discovery gave him the courage to develop independently, to find his own means of maturation.

Mill now wished to enjoy "the ordinary incidents of life": sunshine and sky, books, conversation, public affairs (p. 85). And though he had several relapses, he was never again as unhappy as he had been, for he learned to find enjoyment in things in themselves and not as means to something else (pp. 85-6). He learned to enjoy life "without dwelling on it or thinking about it, without... putting it to flight by fatal questioning" (p. 86), and this became his theory and philosophy of life (p. 86).

"For the first time," Mill writes, he began to give "its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual," ceasing to attach so much importance "to the ordering of outward circumstances, and the training of the
human being for speculation and action” (p. 86). In other words, he now considered motherly values to be more important than fatherly values, or at least equal to them. Mill’s own phrases or words which come to be associated with motherly values are: “the passive susceptibilities,” “the cultivation of the feelings,” “poetry and art,” “the imagination,” “Wordsworth,” “Harriet Taylor,” and “love.”

It should not be assumed that upon the discovery of motherly values Mill neglected all that he had learned or that he committed himself mind and heart to the opposite of what his father had taught him. Some dismayed contemporaries indeed saw it that way. Mill, however, never allowed his ordered life completely “to fall to pieces, but was incessantly occupied in weaving it anew” (p. 94). And though he sought the “cultivation of the feelings,” and though this cultivation “became one of the cardinal points” in his “ethical and philosophical creed” (p. 86), he tried always to maintain “a due balance among the faculties,” a balance, in my terminology, between motherly and fatherly values.

The first major step in the “internal culture” of his life was the reading of poetry. Of particular help here was Wordsworth’s poetry. But Mill not only read poetry; he argued about it in public debates and wrote about it. The early 1830s saw the appearance of such essays as “Two Kinds of Poetry,” and “What is Poetry?”, and a series of articles headed “The Spirit of the Age” which Carlyle thought—mistakenly, according to Mill—signalled the arrival of “a new mystic” (p. 104).

In 1830 Mill met Harriet Taylor; soon they were exchanging passionate letters. This affair became a scandal in London, at first because Harriet Taylor was a married woman with children, and subsequently because the affair remained platonic. (Carlyle referred to her sarcastically as Mill’s “Platonica.”) From the scanty evidence we have it seems that their marriage, which took place in 1851, two years after the death of
the husband, was equally platonic. Harriet Taylor, “the chief blessing” of Mill’s existence, in a sense “completed” him as a thinker though, personally, his passion for her developed into an extraordinary dependence.  

Whatever else may be said of Harriet Taylor, it cannot be denied that she made Mill more alive emotionally. Mill the reasoning machine threatened, as Marshall Cohen has commented, to become a sensitive plant. And perhaps it was more the emotional influence of Harriet Taylor than, say, the intellectual influence of Coleridge or Carlyle, that moved Mill to write sentences like the following typical one in On Liberty: “Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living being.” Harriet Taylor embodied warmth, emotion, feeling, tenderness, poetry, imagination, the force of concreteness over abstraction, the liveliness of intuition over reason. She even embodied the mother, for Mill clung to her, as Ruth Borchard writes, the way a small child would cling to a mother. Perhaps she gave him that warmth and affection which his mother supposedly denied him. And perhaps there was something in a name, for Mill’s real mother was also named Harriet. The recovery of meaning for Mill necessitated the creation—or recreation—of the mother. So helpless did Mill apparently feel that he gave himself over to Harriet Taylor’s guidance. At first she instructed Mill in matters of feeling, just as his father had instructed him in matters of intellect. Later she seemed to have come close to instructing him in everything: from such profound and timeless matters as the question of liberty to more mundane ones, as the handling of his neighbors. 

Mill’s intellectual development seems to have been based on his changing emotional states. As Mazlish suggests, the work arises directly out of the character.
Not only did Mill become a literary critic at a time when literature was desperately important to him emotionally, but his political and philosophical writings may be said to have emotional roots as well. In retrospect, according to Mill, one of the greatest obstacles to his happiness was the analytical habit of mind which his father had taught him. That analytic habit was both deductive and syllogistic (James Mill’s own *Elements of Political Economy* was written and argued on deductive principles). Mill’s first and extended important work, one of the works on which he thought his reputation would rest, was *A System of Logic*, begun while his father was still alive and published seven years after his death. Mill’s *Logic* was conceived as an attack on the Aristotelian categorical syllogism as an instrument for obtaining truth. Mill’s criticism would, without distortion, be called a criticism of the deductive syllogism, of reasoning which operates by dropping middles in attaining conclusions. Mill maintained that the conclusion of a categorical syllogism contained no information which was not already implicit in the major premise. Since, in Mill’s view, the conclusion added no new information, the categorical, deductive syllogism could not be used as an instrument to discover “truth.” At most, it could be used to test the validity of existing arguments. In the place of deduction, that is, argument from major premises, argument which Mill maintained involves a *petitio principii*, Mill would put induction, that is, argument from particulars. In other words, Mill wanted to argue from concrete experience first; his logic was therefore “empirical.” Induction which led to inference was the main instrument for evaluating “evidence” *and* for discovering “truth.” Putting concreteness, particularity, and experience back into logic is perhaps analogous—on a personal level for Mill—to putting emotion, feeling and poetry back into life.

The movement away from mechanical, deductive processes to more organic, inductive ones occasioned
Mill’s criticisms of his father and actually signified Mill’s intention, perhaps subliminal, to supplant him. Mill had become convinced by 1830 that “there was really something more fundamentally erroneous in my father’s conception of philosophical method, as applicable to politics, than I had hitherto supposed there was” (p. 95). Mill’s own Principles of Political Economy was therefore argued inductively, a necessary correction, Mill thought, of his father’s deductive work. Correction was, in effect, supersession, the idea of which existed at least in Mill’s unconscious mind immediately after his father’s death. A sentence deleted from the final draft, describing Mill’s reaction at the time, makes this clear: “I now had to try how far I might be capable of supplying his place” (Stillinger, p. 161). This is exactly like Marmontel’s reaction to his own father’s death.

The place of honor in the Autobiography is given, of course, to Harriet Taylor, who nourished Mill’s feelings and thoughts and who eventually came to signify everything to him. It is therefore entirely appropriate that her death should evoke the most moving writing in the whole work. Her death made him re-experience, in a different way, the loss of meaning. For the remaining fifteen years of his life Mill felt orphaned intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. Perhaps that was why her memory became for him—as Utilitarianism had been years earlier—a kind of religion. Perhaps that was also why Mill in time became so dependent upon his stepdaughter. In effect, he tried to make her take the place of Harriet Taylor, who had in turn taken the place of the mother he thought he never had.

Mill dedicated the remainder of his work and life to the memory of Harriet Taylor; and he seemed also by the time of her death to have fused—or “woven” (p. 94)—an emotional content with a rational style. The content: subjects like liberty, nature, religion and, most importantly, the subjection of women. The style: clear, precise, logical, heavily dependent upon the
syntax of ordination and subordination. One example, taken from the essay *On Liberty*, will illustrate this fusion:

But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error. It is necessary to consider separately these two hypotheses, each of which has a distinct branch of the argument corresponding to it.24

To his contemporaries, in the last years of his life Mill had become, in a way, a sage. He seemed to have succeeded in balancing—philosophically at least—the eighteenth century and the nineteenth, Neoclassicism and Romanticism, reason and emotion. In one view, he even did more than merely balance apparent opposites. What Mill achieved, according to John Durham, was a “synthetic view,” a view which allowed him, in two essays, to describe Bentham, the great Utilitarian, and Coleridge, the great Romantic, as allies. Whoever could master the premises and methods of these two utterly different seminal minds would, Mill wrote, “possess the entire philosophy of his age.” Mr. Durham thinks that Mill himself “came very near to achieving that mystery.”25 “Verbindet die Extreme,” as Friedrich Schlegel writes, “so habt ihr die wahre Mitte.”26

IV

Mill was a man whose individuation seemed—against heavy odds—to be successful. He was a man who overcame his “parthenogenetic” upbringing, who worked his way through various crises and losses of meaning to emerge a better and stronger human being. Speaking in terms of the psychology of individuation and of the illustration from the *Oresteia*, one may say that until his crisis Mill had (in our interpretation of his retrospective
analysis) "killed" his mother, or that she had been "killed" for him, and that his interest in logical argumentation and Utilitarian philosophy was the equivalent of Apollo's position. His crisis occurred because he discovered that he was living a lie—the lie that Apollo and Athene gave credence to. And Mill could not acquit himself as easily as Athene had acquitted Orestes. Therefore, in order to establish the balance necessary for psychological well-being, he "killed" his father, or "killed" his domination, and resurrected his mother both in his new-found philosophy of life and in the person of Harriet Taylor. Subsequently he took the place of his father and he made Harriet Taylor take the place, with differences of course, of his mother. From that time forward his work demonstrated the kind of balance between motherly and fatherly values which he had achieved in his personal life.

This interpretation remains, however, unsatisfactory and too incomplete, even though it is more or less consistent with the evidence presented in the text of the Autobiography itself. Yet even some of that evidence is, by implication, contradictory. For example, Mill wrote the Autobiography as a mature man, supposedly as a fully—or nearly so—individuated human being and nonetheless he suppressed his mother completely and was bitterly antagonistic towards her in the deleted passages. That action, inconsistent as it is with those of a fully individuated human being, points to problems so deep as never to have been resolved. In order to explore those problems more fully we cannot rely on the Autobiography alone but must consider its "biographical" context. That context points in turn to the tragic dimensions of Mill's far from "uneventful" life.

From the Autobiography the reader draws a picture of a child who revered, respected, feared and obeyed his father. This picture, in comparison with other accounts of Mill's relationship with his father, seems to be largely accurate. The Autobiography gives absolutely no impression of Mill's mother, for she has vanished
from the surface of the text. Earlier drafts reveal Mill’s deep antagonism towards her. If one had only the drafts to go on, one might conclude either that the mother was totally unimportant in his life as a boy or that he really had disliked her and that, by not mentioning her in the final draft, he had chosen the kinder solution.

Biographers, however, keep us from reaching this kind of superficial conclusion, for they reveal a different Mill as a boy. The young Mill seems to have been devoted to his mother. One contemporary notes that ‘‘John Mill always seemed to be a great favorite with the family. He was evidently very fond of his mother and sisters, and they of him . . .’’ Another states that ‘‘John was devotedly attached to his mother and exuberant in his playful tokens of affection.’’ Letters to his mother written during his youth, though not many in number, show a genuine affection.

What happened to change the loving young man into an indifferent and occasionally bitter middle-aged one? No single satisfactory answer has really been given, for there is no single cause. The core of an answer might emerge, however, when one looks at Mill’s reactions to the deaths of his father and mother, at Mill’s estrangement from his family and more closely at his relationship with Harriet Taylor.

The death of a father, maintains Freud in what is certainly a patriarchal assertion, is perhaps the most moving experience in a man’s life. And yet it seemed for Mill not to have been so. The language describing his father’s death (p. 122) is austere and formal; it might have concerned the death of a distant colleague. Carlyle’s account of a visit to Mill just after his father’s death would seem to substantiate this impression. ‘‘There was,’’ writes Carlyle, ‘‘little sorrow visible in their house, or rather none, nor any human feeling at all; but the strangest unheimlich kind of composure and acquiescence, as if all human spontaneity had taken refuge in invisible corners. Mill himself talked much,
and not stupidly—far from that—but without any emotion of any discernible kind. He seemed to me withered into the miserablest metaphysical scrae [old shoe], body and mind, that I had almost ever met with in the world.”

But it cannot be maintained that Mill was totally unaffected, for he suffered his first major illness in ten years during and after his father’s death: a painful affliction of the head which required a three month’s leave of absence from India House and a tour in Switzerland and Italy. Alexander Bain writes that the illness was an “obstinate derangement of the brain.” While any single diagnosis must remain suspect, it is possible to consider Mill’s illness to be in part psychosomatic. The outer man showed no visible emotion; the inner man became ill. Mill was ill quite often after 1836 and took several extended leaves of absence from India House. One severe illness came in 1848, after the completion of Principles of Political Economy, the work that was Mill’s final gesture toward supplanting his father. He was also ill in 1854, before, during and after his mother’s death.

The death of Mill’s mother was, as I have mentioned, passed over in silence in the Autobiography. For the last three years of her life, Mill’s mother seems to have been mostly ignored by her son. Though he lived in London, he seldom visited the family. If the mother wished to see her son she could make a fifteen minute appointment with him at India House. During her final illness, Mill visited her bedside but once, and, knowing she was dying, took off yet again on a tour of the continent in pursuit of his own health. His last letter to her, written six days before her death, betrays a chilling formality:

My dear mother,

I hope that you are feeling better than when I saw you last week & that you continue free from pain. I write to say that I am going
immediately to the Continent by the urgent recommendation of Clark who has been pressing me to do so for some time past & though I expect to return in a few weeks it will probably be to leave again soon after. I wish again to remind you in case it has not already been done how desirable it is that some one who is fixed in England should be named executor to your will, either instead of me, which I shd prefer, or as well as myself.

My wife sends her kindest wishes & regrets that her weak health makes it difficult for her to come to see you as she would otherwise have done. Ever my dear mother affectionately yours

J.S.M.

When news of her death reached Mill on the 26th of June, it was received, according to Borchard, without emotion. In a letter to Harriet Taylor Mill on the same day, Mill professed relief at having been away at the time: "It is a comfort that my poor mother suffered no pain—& since it was to be, I am glad that I was not in England when it happened, since what I must have done & gone through would have been very painful & wearing & would have done no good to anyone." It was, one might say, a utilitarian response. No one knows exactly why Mill cut his mother off the way he did. Perhaps he feared the depth of his response and the possibility of losing control of the tenuous "balance" he had achieved. In any case, even Mill's family did not know, though extracts from a letter Mill's sister wrote to him are extremely suggestive. The indirect cause was Mill's relationship and marriage with Harriet Taylor; the direct cause, if any, might be said to be a matter of principle. "My dear John," writes Mary Colman on the 18th of July 1851,

In thinking over the strange change which appears to have taken place in your character, which has taken place in your conduct towards your family, during the last six months . . . I determined honestly to write and remonstrate with you on your present conduct. Under these circumstances I could not help recalling the letters which you sent me immediately before my marriage, letters which first made me aware that individually I was an object of no interest to you, that you had no affection for me . . .

I thought that I had perhaps been presumptuous that the expressions of kindness which you had been in the habit of using
towards me, the uniform kindness you had shown me, I had no right to suppose proceeded from love to myself, but from a principle of not giving others needless pain . . .

[Mary continues, mentions the break with a sister and the family and asks]: What has she done, what has anyone done, what do you allledge? I can find nothing except that my mother did not call on your wife the day after you had announced your engagement, the propriety of which step as a matter of Etiquette remains to be settled. Anyhow however you know full well, that if you had only expressed a wish to my Mother on the subject anything would have been done . . .

Mary ends this letter by appealing to "the only feeling that now seems remaining to you, 'your love for your wife.' "

Mary’s was a courageous act, for she sensed that Mill might cut her off for such frankness. Certainly he had cut others off for far more trivial acts or comments. A key word, emphasized by Mary, tells us something of fundamental importance for understanding Mill’s personality: principle. Under the influence of a notion of principle—whether the act that called it up was real or imagined—Mill’s behavior contained a moral rigidity and conceptual absoluteness that allowed little room for human emotion and apparently no room for human fallibility. This rigidity illustrates the ossification of fatherly values in Mill, the effects of his education by his father being more pervasive and long-lasting than he perhaps realized. He loved his wife, and possibly only his wife while she lived, and could not allow the slightest aspersion to be cast upon her or upon their relationship. Since that relationship lasted through nineteen years of her former marriage, two of widowhood, and seven and a half of marriage to Mill, it is not surprising that Mr. and Mrs. John Stuart Mill led a retiring and isolated life in the 1850s.

Mill’s relationship with Harriet Taylor was remarkable in many ways. If one compares Mill’s account of her with other accounts, it becomes evident that Mill was blinded by his love. Mill would have us believe that a more noble, more wonderful, more intelligent, more compassionate human being could not be imagined. But
others describe her as a selfish, domineering woman with a "deep seated masochism" which made her unfit for normal physical love. 36 "She was clever and remarkable," said George Mill, "but nothing like what John took her to be." 37 One contemporary maintained that she parroted John in conversation with others, also that she listened to him very carefully on one day and then gave back to him the substance of his talk on the next. Mill just did not realize that he was only hearing himself again.

Although probably both the criticism and the praise of Harriet Taylor are exaggerated, what remains relatively certain is that Mill's image of Harriet does not square with the real person, 38 that he idealized her, 39 that she became his symbol of the perfect mind, 40 that she was, in sum, the idealized principle of perfection in womanhood. Erich Fromm calls this kind of love "idolatrous love" and identifies it as a form of pseudo-love found in some immature people. According to Fromm, "if a person has not reached the level where he has a sense of identity, of I-ness, rooted in the productive unfolding of his own powers, he tends to 'idolize' the loved person. He is alienated from his own powers and projects them into the loved person, who is worshipped as the summmum bonum, the bearer of all love, all light, all bliss." 41

Principles or the highest good may tarnish or soil if allowed to remain in touch for too long with grimier reality. Perhaps that was one reason for the curious fact that the Mills spent so much of their married life apart, now one travelling in search of health, now the other. Both were ill, it is true, and perhaps needed a change of scene and climate. But their letters also show them to have enjoyed missing each other. Beneath the protestations of love runs a gentle current of desire for separation. "Pray my darling," wrote Mill to Harriet when she decided to return home earlier than expected, "do not attempt the crossing till you feel better—much bet-
ter. I am going on here with everything that can be done & your presence is not at all necessary, pleasant as it will be.”

Despite avowals of the importance of feeling (and poetry, women and mothers) in life, Mill seemed on many occasions and with many people to have kept feeling itself at arm’s length. In the Autobiography, Mill would have us believe that after his crisis his life was conducted on a different level, with due attention to motherly values, to poetry and feeling. But ultimately the change was not profound enough. It became a matter of principle for Mill that he love humanity at large, that he cultivate the feelings. But it remained a matter of fact that he could not love individuals enough to forgive their peccadilloes—real or imagined. The result was that logos, as Ruth Borchard writes, was forever slaying eros. Or, in other words, the fatherly side of his conscience was constantly slaying the motherly.

V

Because of the details of Mill’s life, one is tempted to end an analysis of this sort with an indictment of the overwhelming importance of reason and “fatherly values” in the life of an individual and, universalizing his experience, in the life of a culture or civilization, especially western civilization. Certainly one is tempted to “indict” Aristotle and syllogistic logic. But at least with these actors (Athene, Mill, etc.) such an indictment, and the generalization upon which it is based, would be misleading because Athene’s parthenogenetic birth is—like the birth of Jesus for that matter—virtually unique. Athene is the exception rather than the rule in Greek culture, and, though it is oversimple to say so, Orestes’ acquittal is attained by allowing the exception to stand for the rule. Similarly, John Stuart Mill, though of course not a Greek god, was an exceptional man; if they do nothing else, his upbringing and accomplishments attest eloquently to that.
On the other hand, one may consider Athene and Mill as instances of the exception being made into the rule, instances of the extreme exaggeration of fatherly values and the rational style. For both Athene and Mill do point at least by implication to concerns important to western civilization: motherly and fatherly values in relation to the civilizing process, and the place and the function of reason in civilized society. Athene’s decision to declare Orestes innocent of the murder of his mother is viewed in the play as a decision in favor of the forces of civilization. Also, in arriving at this decision Athene considers that she is in favor of “the male” and that she is strongly on her “father’s side” (11.738-39).44 Freud advances a similar point of view when he writes the following sentences in “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis”: “A great advance was made in civilization when men decided to put their inferences upon a level with the testimony of the senses and to make the step from matriarchy to patriarchy.—The prehistoric figures which show a smaller person sitting upon the head of a larger one are representations of patrilineal descent: Athene had no mother, but sprang from the head of Zeus.”45 In light of this statement, the reactions of Jung and others against Freud may be in part reactions against the patriarchal bias in Freudian psychoanalytic thought. Certain other intellectual or literary movements may be seen in analogous ways. Romanticism, for example, may be regarded in general as a revolt against fatherly values. Insofar as fatherly values are “civilized” values, movements like Jungian depth psychology and Romanticism represent a resurgence—and not necessarily in a negative sense—of “primitive” values in western culture. Fatherly oriented movements indicate a reassertion of the western status-quó and a reaffirmation of so-called civilized western values. Victorian society as a whole may be seen, in this framework, to shift from the motherly values of Romanticism to a more paternalistic order. A

As far as civilizational analysis is concerned, the methods used in this interpretation of Mill’s life and work may help us to begin to explore what Benjamin Nelson has called a “civilization complex,” that is, “a segment of [a] paradigmatic cultural pattern” in western society.46 and of exploring that complex in the lives of individuals. For the complex explored here—the structures of rationality in relation to family patterns, the life of reason and the life of emotion—may be part of a larger issue, an issue which Nelson calls “The Rationalization Revolution”; in the context of my argument in this essay, I would define this revolution in broad terms as the institutionalization of the philosophy of ends over means. In any case, whatever the uses one may wish to make of the thematics concerning syllogistic thinking, dropped and recovered middles, fathers and mothers, male and female, ends and means, logos and eros, Mill’s life and work seem to document not only the theoretical process by which meaning may be lost and subsequently recovered (demonstrating that good work may indeed have “pathological” beginnings) but also the potentially tragic results of an incomplete recovery.

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Notes

1John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969), p. 3. All subsequent references to the *Autobiography* are to this edition, except when otherwise stated, and are placed in parentheses following the citation from, or reference to, the text.

2This sentence was originally the first sentence of the *Autobiography*; what now stands as the first paragraph is a later addition. I have studied the original manuscript of the early draft, in the


The use of Euler’s circles as an illustration of Apollo’s argument was first pointed out to me by a colleague, Marvin Bram; I thank him for allowing me to base part of my argument on his insights.

The dropped middle should not be mistaken for the principle in logic known as the excluded middle, a principle which, along with the law of identity and the law of contradiction, is at the foundation of precision in logic. The principle of the excluded middle goes like this: “a plus not-a equals one.” Or, in another formulation, “A is B, or A is not B.” Every individual in the universe is, in this western form of logic, a member either of a (A) or not-a (B). There is no middle; it is excluded (tertium non datur). It may or may not be of some significance that the universal validity of this principle is denied by the school of mathematical intuitionism and by certain forms of non-western logic in China and India and, in the west, by the pre-Aristotelian “logic” of Heraclitus.

For reminding me of this important fact and its immediate consequences I am grateful to E.V. Walter.


Fromm, p. 35.

Fromm, p. 36.

Fromm, p. 55.

Fromm, p. 38.


See, for example, Stillinger, “Introduction” to The Early Draft, p. 18.


See also Stillinger, pp. 183-85.

While in France, the fourteen-year-old Mill kept a journal, addressed to his father, for almost nine months. The journal demon-
strates Mill’s unquestioning subservience to his father, his studious habits, his constant desire to please and his considerable interest in logic. Of this time Mill wrote to Comte twenty years later that it was the happiest of his youth. See John Mill’s Boyhood Visit to France—Being a Journal and Notebook written by John Stuart Mill in France, 1820-21, ed. Anna Jean Mill (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960).

17This would be a standard psychoanalytic description. See Levi, pp. 98, 100.


19Bain, Borchard, Mazlish, Packe and Stillinger all speak of Mill’s dependence on Harriet Taylor. Many of the primary documents of this relationship have been collected in F.A. Hayek, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor: Their Friendship and Subsequent Marriage (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).


21Borchard, p. 104.

22See Stillinger, p. 26. H.O. Pappe has demonstrated that Mill’s claims for her brilliance, wisdom and influence were grossly exaggerated. That may be true on one level, but what is most important here is that Mill himself believed in—and insisted on—his dependence on her. See H.O. Pappe, John Stuart Mill and the Harriet Taylor Myth (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1960).

23Alice S. Rossi has collected the essays on women’s liberation by both John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill and has written a perceptive chapter to introduce them. See Alice S. Rossi, ed., Essays on Sex Equality (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).


27Hayek, pp. 32 & 33.

28In fact, one might argue that Mill was so affected that he could not trust himself to speak with emotion of his father’s death and still retain control. Packe tends toward this kind of interpretation.

29Bain, p. 42.

30Borchard, p. 110.

Mill, XIV (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 207-08.

33Borchard, p. 111.
35Hayek, pp. 171-75.
36Borchard, p. 67; Stillinger, p. 27.
37Bain, p. 166.
38Borchard, p. 47.
39Stillinger, p. 27.
40Autobiography, p. xvii.
41Fromm, p. 83.
4211 April 1854, in Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, XIV, 203. Stillinger probably has the best short summary of this aspect of their relationship.
43Borchard, p. 34.

The situation in the play is not quite as clear as I have made it appear, and there is some controversy here as to the meaning of Athene’s verdict. Many critics (Jane Harrison among them) see Athene’s decision as one in favor of patriarchy. Certainly the language would seem to support this position. Robert Fagles, however, takes another approach and sees Athene’s decision as not against matriarchy per se but in favor of justice. This for two reasons: first, under a principle of Greek legal practice, all defendants who receive an equally divided vote are acquitted [The difficulty here is that Athene gives her opinion before the votes are in]; second, in killing his mother Clytaemnestra, Orestes is both avenging the murder of his father and following the injunction of Apollo. His act, therefore, instead of being condemned as matricide, is judged as justifiable homicide. This justification of Athene’s decision is more complex than I have the space to discuss here. For a brilliant analysis of it—and of the Oresteia in general—see Robert Fagles’ introduction to his translation of The Oresteia (New York: Bantam, 1977), pp. 3-99.