

# Essays on Bentham and Coleridge

John Stuart Mill

1838

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth; except for two ellipses on page 49, which mark omissions by Mill in quotations from Coleridge. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. —The division of each essay into sections with headings is not Mill's. —For Mill's later thoughts about these two essays of his, see his *Autobiography*, pages 147–8 of the version on the website from which the present text comes.

First launched: December 2018

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## Glossary

**clerisy:** 'A distinct class of learned or literary persons' (OED). This is the 'primary meaning' referred to on page 48.

**Continent:** The continent of Europe excluding Great Britain; similarly with 'continental'.

**disinterested:** Not self-interested.

**entail:** A legal device prohibiting the sale of a property to anyone not descended from the present owner.

**induction:** 'The process of inferring or verifying a general law or principle from the observation of particular instances' (OED); similarly **inductive**.

**nationalty:** Not a typo! See page 48 for an explanation.

**peculiar:** Someone's 'peculiar' qualities (opinions, skills, etc.) are ones that are unique to him, ones that no-one else has.

**philosophes:** French intellectuals of the 18th century.

**point d'appui:** Literally = 'fulcrum'; used on page 22 in its standard meaning of 'place where the troops are assembled before the battle'.

**property:** In some places, especially on pages 54–55, the word is used not as a concrete noun referring to things or stuff that are owned but as an abstract noun meaning 'ownership'. 'Can land be a subject of property?' means 'Can land be owned?'

**sophistry:** Logical trickery. Similarly **sophistical**.

**speculation:** Theorising.

**sympathy:** Fellow-feeling.

## Bentham

There are two men, recently deceased, to whom their country is indebted not only for the greater part of the important ideas that have been thrown into circulation among its thinking men in their time, but for a revolution in its general modes of thought and investigation. These men, dissimilar in almost all else, agreed in being closet-students—secluded by circumstances and character from the business and intercourse of the world: and both were, through a large portion of their lives, regarded by those who took the lead in opinion (when they happened to hear of them) with feelings akin to contempt. But they were destined to renew a lesson given to mankind by every age, and always disregarded—to show that theoretical philosophy, which to superficial people appears so remote from the business of life and the outward interests of men, is in reality the thing on earth that most influences them, and in the long run outweighs every other influence except the ones it must itself obey. The writers of whom I speak have never been read by the multitude; except for the more slight of their works, their readers have been few: but they have been the teachers of the teachers; there is hardly to be found in England any individual of any importance in the world of the mind who (whatever opinions he may later have adopted) did not first learn to think from one of these two; and though their influences have only begun to diffuse themselves through these intermediate channels over society at large, there is already scarcely a publication of any consequence addressed to the educated classes that would not have been different from what it is if these persons had not existed. These men are Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—the two great seminal minds of England in their age.

No comparison is intended here between the minds or influences of these remarkable men: this would be impossible unless there were first formed a complete judgment of each, considered apart. All I intend in this essay is to attempt an estimate of one of them; the only one a complete edition of whose works is still in progress, and who, in the classification that can be made of all writers into Progressive and Conservative, belongs to the same division as myself. Although they were far too great to be correctly designated by either label exclusively, still in the main Bentham was a Progressive philosopher, Coleridge a Conservative one. Bentham's influence has made itself felt chiefly on minds of the Progressive class; Coleridge's on those of the Conservative; and the two systems of concentric circles that the shock given by them is spreading over the ocean of the mind have only just begun to meet and intersect. The writings of each contain severe lessons to his own side, on many of the errors and faults it is addicted to; but to Bentham it was given to discern more particularly the truths with which existing doctrines and institutions were at variance; to Coleridge, the neglected truths that lay *in* them.

### Breaking the yoke of authority

A man with great knowledge of the world and the highest reputation for practical talent and sagacity among the official men of his time once said to me that the questioning spirit, the disposition to demand the *why* of everything, that had gained so much ground and was producing such important consequences in these times was due to Bentham more than to any other source. He was not a follower of Bentham or of

any sect whatever; he was speaking on the basis of his own observations. The more this assertion is examined, the more true it will be found. In this age and this country, Bentham has been the great questioner of things established. It is by the influence of the modes of thought that his writings inoculated many thinking men that the yoke of authority has been broken, and innumerable opinions—formerly received on tradition as incontestable—are put on their defence and required to give an account of themselves.

Apart from controversies on points of detail, who before Bentham dared to speak with open disrespect of the British Constitution or the English Law? He did so; and his arguments and his example encouraged others. I do not mean that his writings caused the Reform Bill, or that the Appropriation Clause owns him as its parent; the changes that have been made in our institutions—and the greater ones that will be made—are the work not of philosophers but of the interests and instincts of large portions of society recently grown into strength. But Bentham gave voice to those interests and instincts: until he spoke out, those who found our institutions unsuited to them did not dare to say so, did not dare consciously to *think* so; they had never heard the excellence of those institutions questioned by men of acknowledged intellect; and it is not in the nature of uninstructed minds to resist the united authority of the instructed. Bentham broke the spell. It was not Bentham by his own writings; it was Bentham through the minds and pens that were *fed* by those writings, the minds and pens of men in more direct contact with the world than he was, into whom his spirit passed. If the superstition about ancestral wisdom has fallen into decay; if the public are grown familiar with the idea that their laws and institutions are largely the product not of intellect and virtue but of modern corruption grafted onto ancient barbarism;

if the hardest innovation is no longer dismissed out of hand because it is an innovation—establishments no longer considered sacred because they are establishments—it will be found that those who have accustomed the public mind to these ideas have learned them in Bentham's school, and that the assault on ancient institutions has been and still is conducted mostly with his weapons. These thinkers have not been numerous or prominent at the head of the Reform movement; nor indeed have *thinkers* of any kind. But this is not important. All movements, except directly revolutionary ones, are headed not by those who originate them but by those who know best how to compromise between the old opinions and the new. The father of English innovation, both in doctrines and in institutions, is Bentham: he is the great *subversive* thinker—or, in the language of continental [see Glossary] philosophers, the great *critical* thinker—of his age and country.

I do not, however, consider this to be his highest title to fame. If it were, he would have to be ranked down among the negative or destructive philosophers; those who can perceive what is false but not what is true; who awaken the human mind to the inconsistencies and absurdities of time-sanctioned opinions and institutions but substitute nothing in their place. I have no desire to undervalue the services of such persons: mankind have been deeply indebted to them; and there will never be a lack of work for them in a world where so many false things are believed, and where so many that used to be true are still believed long after they have become false. But the qualities that fit men for perceiving anomalies without perceiving the truths that would rectify them are not among the rarest of endowments. Courage, verbal acuteness, command over the forms of argumentation, and a popular style, will make a considerable negative philosopher out of the shallowest man

who has a sufficient lack of reverence. Such men have never been lacking in periods of culture; and the period in which Bentham formed his early impressions was emphatically their reign, in proportion to its barrenness in the more noble products of the human mind. An age of formalism in the Church and corruption in the State, when the most valuable part of the meaning of traditional doctrines had faded from the minds even of those who retained from habit a mechanical belief in them, was the time to raise up all kinds of sceptical philosophy. Accordingly, France had Voltaire and his school of negative thinkers, and England (or rather Scotland) had the profoundest negative thinker on record, David Hume. The unique features of *his* mind qualified him to detect failure of proof and lack of logical consistency at a depth that French sceptics—with their comparatively feeble powers of analysis and abstraction—stopped far short of, and that only German subtlety could thoroughly appreciate or hope to rival.

If Bentham had merely continued Hume's work, he would scarcely have been heard of in philosophy; for he was far inferior to Hume in Hume's qualities, and was in no way fitted to excel as a metaphysician. We must not look for subtlety, or the power of intricate analysis, among his intellectual characteristics. In the former quality, few great thinkers have ever been so deficient; and to find the latter in any considerable measure in a mind anything like his we must have recourse to the late Mr. Mill—a man who united the great qualities of the metaphysicians of the 18th century with others of a different kind, admirably qualifying him to complete and correct their work. [This refers to James Mill, our author's father.] Bentham did not have these special gifts; but he had others, not inferior to them, that were not possessed by any of his precursors; gifts that have made him •a source of light to a generation that has far outgrown their influence,

and (to repeat the phrase) •the chief subversive thinker of an age that has long lost all that they could subvert.

I shall speak of him first as a merely negative philosopher—as one who refutes illogical arguments, exposes sophistry [see Glossary], detects contradiction and absurdity. Even in that role there was a wide field left vacant for him by Hume—one that he has occupied to an unprecedented extent—namely the field of practical abuses. This was Bentham's peculiar [see Glossary] province, to which he was called by the whole bent of his disposition to carry the warfare against absurdity into things practical. His was an essentially practical mind. It was first turned to speculation [see Glossary] by practical abuses, the abuses of the profession that was chosen for him, that of the law. He has himself stated what particular abuse first gave that shock to his mind, the recoil of which has made the whole mountain of abuse totter; it was the custom of making the client pay for three attendances in the office of a Master in Chancery, when only one was given. The law, he found, on examination, was full of such things. But these were not discoveries of his: they were known to every practising lawyer, to every presiding judge, and they did not cause any apparent uneasiness to the consciences of these learned persons, or hinder them from asserting in books, in parliament, or on the bench, that the law was the perfection of reason. During so many generations, in each of which thousands of well-educated young men were placed in Bentham's position with his opportunities, he alone was found with sufficient moral sensibility and self-reliance to say to himself that these things, however profitable they might be, were frauds, and that a gulf should be fixed between them and himself. To this rare combination of self-reliance and moral sensibility we are indebted for all that Bentham has done. Sent to Oxford by his father at the unusually early age of fifteen, and required

on admission to declare his belief in the Thirty-nine Articles [stating the doctrines of the Church of England], he felt it necessary to examine them; the examination suggested scruples, which he sought to get removed; but instead of the satisfaction he expected, he was told that boys like him should not set up their judgment against the great men of the Church.

After a struggle, he signed; but he always felt that he had done an immoral act; he considered himself to have committed a falsehood, and throughout life he never relaxed in his indignant denunciations of all laws that command such falsehoods, all institutions that reward them.

By thus carrying the war of criticism and refutation, the conflict with falsehood and absurdity, into the field of *practical* evils, Bentham would have earned an important place in the history of intellect, even if he had done nothing else. He carried on the warfare without intermission. Many of his most piquant chapters and some of the most finished of his entire works are entirely devoted to it: the *Defence of Usury*; the *Book of Fallacies*; and the onslaught on Blackstone, published anonymously under the title *A Fragment on Government*, which, though a first production, and of a writer afterwards so much ridiculed for his style, aroused the highest admiration as much for its composition as for its thoughts, and was attributed by turns to Lord Mansfield, to Lord Camden, and (by Dr. Johnson) to Dunning, one of the greatest masters of style among the lawyers of his day. These writings are altogether original; though of the negative school, they resemble nothing previously produced by negative philosophers, and would have sufficed to create a special place for Bentham among the subversive thinkers of modern Europe. But these writings do not constitute the real distinction between him and them. There was a deeper difference, namely that they were purely negative thinkers, whereas he was positive: they only assailed error,

he made it a point of conscience not to do so until he thought he could plant instead the corresponding truth. Their character was exclusively analytic, his was synthetic. They took for their starting-point the received opinion on any subject, dug around it with their logical implements, pronounced its foundations defective, and condemned it; he began afresh, laid his own foundations deeply and firmly, built up his own structure, and bade mankind compare the two; it was when he had solved the problem himself, or thought he had done so, that he declared all other solutions to be erroneous. Hence, what the purely negative thinkers produced will not last; it is bound to perish—much of it *has* already perished, along with the errors that it exploded; whereas what Bentham did has its own value, by which it must outlast all errors to which it is opposed. Though we may reject, as we often must, his practical conclusions, yet his premises—the collections of facts and observations from which his conclusions were drawn—remain for ever a part of the materials of philosophy.

So a place must be assigned to Bentham among the masters of wisdom, the great teachers and permanent intellectual ornaments of the human race. He is among those who have enriched mankind with imperishable gifts; and although these do not transcend all other gifts, nor entitle him to those honours ‘above all Greek, above all Roman fame’ which many of his admirers, by a natural reaction against the neglect and contempt of the world, were once disposed to heap on him, yet to refuse an admiring recognition of what he was, on account of what he was not, is a much worse error, and one which—pardonable in the vulgar—is no longer permitted to any cultivated and instructed mind. [The quoted phrase is from a poem by Pope.]

## Bentham's method

If I were asked to say, in the fewest possible words, what I conceive to be Bentham's place among these great intellectual benefactors of humanity, what he was and what he was not, what kind of service he did and did not render to truth, I would say that he was not a great philosopher, but was a great reformer in philosophy. He brought into philosophy something it greatly needed, for lack of which it was at a stand-still. It was not his doctrines that did this, but his way of arriving at them. He introduced into morals and politics the habits of thought and modes of investigation that are essential to the idea of science; and the absence of which made morals and politics, as physics had been before Bacon, a field of interminable discussion leading to no result. It was not his opinions but his method that constituted the novelty and the value of what he did; a value beyond all price, even if we were to reject the whole (as we unquestionably must a large part) of the opinions themselves.

Bentham's method may be briefly described as *the method of detail*—treating

- wholes by separating them into their parts,
- abstractions by resolving them into Things,
- classes and generalities by distinguishing them into the individuals of which they are made up,

and breaking every question into pieces before trying to answer it. The precise amount of originality of this process, considered as a logical conception—its degree of connection with the methods of physical science, or with the previous labours of Bacon, Hobbes, or Locke—is not an essential consideration here. Whatever originality there was in the method itself, there was the greatest originality in the subjects he applied it to and in how strictly he adhered to it. Hence his interminable classifications. Hence his elaborate

demonstrations of the most acknowledged truths. That murder, arson, robbery are harmful actions, he will not take for granted without proof; let the thing appear ever so self-evident, he wants to know the why and the how of it with the last degree of precision. He will distinguish into three orders all the different harms of a crime:

- (1) the evil to the sufferer, and to his personal connections,
- (2) the *danger* from example, and the *alarm* or painful feeling of insecurity, and
- (3) the discouragement to industry and useful pursuits arising from the *alarm*, and the trouble and resources that must be expended in warding off the *danger*.

After this enumeration, he will prove from the laws of human feeling that even the first of these evils, the sufferings of the immediate victim, will on the average greatly outweigh the pleasure reaped by the offender; much more when all the other evils are taken into account. Unless this could be proved, he would judge the infliction of punishment to be unwarrantable; and for taking the trouble to prove this formally, his defence is:

'There are truths that it is necessary to prove, although no-one disputes them, so that an opening may be made for the reception of other truths that depend on them. This is how we provide for the reception of first principles, which, once received, prepare the way for admission of all other truths.'

To which may be added that in this way we also discipline the mind for practising the same sort of dissection on questions that are more complicated and of more doubtful issue [i.e. with less obviously right answers].

It is a sound maxim, and one that all rigorous thinkers have felt though no-one before Bentham ever so consistently applied it, •that error lurks in generalities; •that the human



mind cannot embrace a complex whole until it has surveyed and catalogued the parts it is made up of; •that abstractions are not realities *per se* but an abridged way of expressing facts, and should be traced back to the facts (whether of experience or of consciousness) of which they are the expression. Proceeding on this principle, Bentham makes short work of the ordinary procedures of moral and political reasoning. When these were hunted to their source, most of them seemed to him to terminate in *phrases*. In politics the catchwords were 'liberty', 'social order', 'constitution', 'law of nature', 'social compact', and so on. Ethics had its analogous ones. Such were the arguments on which the gravest questions of morality and policy were made to turn; not reasons but mentions of reasons, sacramental expressions by which a summary appeal was made to some general sentiment of mankind, or to some maxim in familiar use, which *might* be true but the limitations of which no-one had ever critically examined. This satisfied other people, but not Bentham. He required something more than opinion as a reason for opinion. Whenever he found a phrase used as an argument for or against anything, he insisted on knowing what it meant; whether it appealed to any standard, or indicated any matter of fact relevant to the question; and if he could not find that it did either, he treated it as an attempt on the part of the disputant to impose his own individual opinion on other people without giving them a reason for it; a 'contrivance for avoiding the obligation of appealing to any external standard, and for prevailing on the reader to accept the author's opinion as a reason, and that a sufficient one, for itself.' I shall let Bentham speak for himself on this subject: the passage is from his first systematic work, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, and it vividly illustrates both the strength and weakness of his way of philosophising.

·START OF QUOTATION FROM BENTHAM)·

It is interesting to see the variety of inventions men have come up with, and the variety of phrases they have presented, in order to conceal from the world (and if possible from themselves) this very general and therefore very pardonable self-sufficiency.

One man says that he has something made on purpose to tell him what is right and what is wrong, calling it his '**moral sense**'; and then he goes to work comfortably, saying that x is right and y is wrong 'because my moral sense tells me so'.

Another man replaces 'moral' by 'common', and tells you that his '**common sense**' teaches him what is right and wrong, as surely as the other's moral sense did. By 'common sense' he means a sense of some kind or other, which he says everyone has—and the sense of those whose sense is not the same as his is disregarded as not worth attending to. This device does better than the other: a moral sense is a new thing, and a man may search within himself for a long time without being able to find it; whereas common sense is as old as the creation, and any man would be ashamed to be thought to have less of it than his neighbours. . . .

Another man says that he can't find that he has any such thing as a moral sense, but that he has an '**understanding**', which will do quite as well. This understanding, he says, is the standard of right and wrong; it tells him so and so. All good and wise men understand as he does; if other men's understandings differ in any point from his, so much the worse for them; it is a sure sign that their understandings are either defective or corrupt.

Another man says that there is an eternal and immutable '**rule of right**'; that this rule of right dictates so and so; and then he begins giving you his opinions on anything that comes uppermost; and these opinions (you are to take for granted) are so many branches of the eternal rule of right.

Another man, or perhaps the same man, says that certain practices conform to the **fitness of things**, while others don't; and then he tells you, at his leisure, which practices conform and which don't, just as he happens to like a practice or dislike it.

A great multitude of people are continually talking of the **law of nature**; and when they give you their sentiments about what is right and what is wrong you are to understand that these sentiments are so many chapters and sections of the law of nature.

Instead of 'law of nature' you have sometimes 'law of reason', 'right reason', 'natural justice', 'natural equity', 'good order'. Any of them will do equally well. The last of them is most used in politics. It and the two just before it are much more tolerable than the others, because they don't explicitly claim to be anything more than *phrases*; they don't strongly insist on being seen as positive standards, and seem content to be taken as merely ways of saying that the thing in question conforms to the proper standard, whatever that may be. On most occasions, however, it will be better to say 'utility'; that is clearer because it refers more explicitly to pain and pleasure.

We have one philosopher [William Wollaston] who says that there's no harm in anything in the world but in **telling a lie**; and that if, for example, you murder your father this is a way of saying that he isn't your father. When this philosopher sees anything that he doesn't like, he of course says that it is a particular way of telling a lie. It is saying that the act ought to be done, or may be done, when in truth it ought not to be done.

The fairest and most open of them all is the sort of man who says: 'I am one of the elect [= "the chosen"]; God himself takes care to tell the elect what is right, doing this with such good effect that however much they struggle they *can't help*

not only knowing it but doing it. So if you want to know what is right and what is wrong, come to me.'

·END OF QUOTATION FROM BENTHAM·

Few will contend that this is a perfectly fair representation of the state of mind of those who employ the various phrases so amusingly criticised here; but the phrases contain no argument except what is based on the very feelings they are supposed to justify, and this is a truth that Bentham had the eminent merit of first pointing out.

It is the introduction into the philosophy of human conduct of this method of detail—of this practice of never reasoning about wholes till they have been resolved into their parts, or about abstractions till they have been translated into realities—that constitutes Bentham's originality in philosophy, and makes him the great reformer of its moral and political branch. He himself ascribes everything original in the systematic and elaborate work from which I have quoted to the 'exhaustive method of classification', as he calls it; though it is only one branch of this more general method of detail. The generalities of his philosophy itself have little or no novelty: to ascribe novelty to the doctrine that general utility is the foundation of morality would show great ignorance of the history of philosophy, of general literature, and of Bentham's own writings. He derived the idea, as he says himself, from Helvetius; and it was equally the doctrine of the religious philosophers of that age before Reid and Beattie. I never saw an abler defence of the doctrine of utility than in Brown's *Essays on the Characteristics*, a book written in refutation of Shaftesbury and now little read; and in Johnson's celebrated review of Soame Jenyns, the same doctrine—that general utility is the foundation of morality—is presented as something accepted by both the author and the reviewer. In all ages of philosophy one

of its schools has been utilitarian—not only from the time of Epicurus, but long before. It was by mere accident that this opinion became connected in Bentham with his peculiar [see Glossary] method. The utilitarian philosophers before him had no more claims to the method than their antagonists. Take for example the Epicurean philosophy, according to the most complete view we have of the moral part of it, by the most accomplished scholar of antiquity, Cicero. I ask anyone who has read his philosophical writings, *De Finibus* for instance, whether the arguments of the Epicureans do not, just as much as those of the Stoics or Platonists, consist of mere rhetorical appeals to common notions—picked up as it were casually and never examined closely enough to ascertain in what sense and under what limitations they are true, when they are true at all. The application of a real inductive [see Glossary] philosophy to the problems of ethics is as unknown to the Epicurean moralists as to any of the other schools; they never take a question to pieces, and join issue on a definite point. Bentham certainly did not learn his sifting and anatomising method from them.

Bentham has finally installed this method in philosophy; has made it henceforth imperative on philosophers of all schools. By it he has formed the intellects of many thinkers, who never adopted—or have since abandoned—many of his personal opinions. He has taught the method to men of the most opposite schools to his; he has made them perceive that if *they* do not test their doctrines by the method of detail, their adversaries will do so. He has thus (it is not too much to say) for the first time introduced precision of thought into moral and political philosophy. Instead of taking up their opinions •by intuition or •by reasoning from premises adopted on a mere rough view and stated so vaguely that it is impossible to say exactly whether they are true or false, philosophers are now forced to understand one another,

to break down the generality of their propositions, and in every dispute to come to grips over something precise. This is nothing less than a revolution in philosophy. Its effect is gradually becoming evident in the writings of English thinkers of every variety of opinion, and will be felt more and more in proportion as Bentham's writings are diffused, and as the number of minds to whose formation they contribute is multiplied.

It will naturally be presumed that some portion at least of the fruits of this great philosophical improvement will have been reaped by its author. Armed with such a potent instrument, and wielding it with such singleness of aim; cultivating the field of practical philosophy with such unwearied and such consistent use of a method that is right in itself and not adopted by his predecessors; Bentham *must* by his own inquiries have accomplished something considerable. And so he has; something not only considerable, but extraordinary; though not much when compared with what he has left undone, and far short of what his hopeful and almost boyish fancy made him flatter himself that he had accomplished. His peculiar method, admirably suited to making thinkers *clear* and to making them *sure* [here = 'secure'] so far as their materials went, is not equally effective in making those materials *complete*. It is a security for accuracy, but not for comprehensiveness; or rather, it is a security for one sort of comprehensiveness but not for another.

Bentham's method of laying out his subject is admirable as a preservative against one kind of narrow and partial views. He begins by placing before himself the whole of the field of inquiry to which the particular question belongs, and subdivides it till he arrives at the thing he is in search of; and thus by successively rejecting all the things that are *not* it, he gradually works out a definition of what it *is*. This, which he calls 'the exhaustive method', is as old as philosophy itself.

Plato owes everything to it, and does everything by it; and the use made of it by that great man in his Dialogues is said by Bacon—in one of those pregnant logical hints scattered through his writings and so much neglected by most of his would-be followers—to be the nearest approach to a true inductive method in the ancient philosophy. Bentham was probably not aware that Plato had anticipated him in the process to which he too declared that he owed everything. His use of it makes his speculations eminently systematic and consistent; for him, no question is an insulated one; he sees every subject in connection with all the other subjects with which in his view it is related, and from which it requires to be distinguished; and as everything he knows that is even slightly related to the subject has been set out in an orderly manner before him, he does not—as do people who use a looser method—forget and overlook a thing on one occasion and then remember it on another. Hence there is probably no philosopher of so wide a range in whom there are so few inconsistencies. If he had come to see any of the truths that he did not see, he would have remembered it everywhere and always, and would have adjusted his whole system to it. This is another admirable quality that he has impressed on the best of the minds trained in his habits of thought: when those minds open to admit new truths, they digest them as fast as they receive them.

But this system, though excellent for keeping before the thinker's mind everything he knows, does not make him know enough; it does not make a knowledge of some of a thing's properties suffice for the whole of it, or make a steady habit of surveying a complex object (however carefully) in one of its aspects tantamount to the power of contemplating it comprehensively. To have *this* power, a thinker needs other qualities. Let us see whether Bentham had them.

### **The strengths and weaknesses of Bentham's mind**

Bentham's mind, as I have already said, was eminently synthetic. He begins all his inquiries by supposing nothing to be known on the subject, and reconstructs all philosophy *ab initio*, without reference to the opinions of his predecessors. But to build a philosophy—to build *anything*—there must be materials. For the philosophy of matter, the materials are the properties of matter; for moral and political philosophy, they are the properties of man and of man's position in the world. An inquirer's knowledge of these properties constitutes a limit that he cannot pass as a moralist or political philosopher, whatever the powers of his mind. Nobody's synthesis can be more complete than his analysis. If someone omits any element from his survey of human nature and life, then wherever that element exerts any influence his conclusions will fail, more or less, in their application. If he has left out many elements, and those very important, his labours may be highly valuable; he may have largely contributed to that body of partial truths which, when completed and corrected by one another, constitute practical truth; but the applicability of his system to practice in its own proper shape will be of an exceedingly limited range.

Human nature and human life are wide subjects, and anyone embarking on a project requiring a thorough knowledge of them needs a large stores of his own as well as b all aids and appliances from elsewhere. His qualifications for success will be proportional to a the degree in which his own nature and circumstances furnish him with a correct and complete picture of man's nature and circumstances and b his ability to derive light from other minds.

Bentham failed in deriving light from other minds. His writings contain few traces of the accurate knowledge of any schools of thinking but his own, and many proofs of his

confidence that they could teach him nothing worth knowing. For some of the most illustrious of previous thinkers his contempt was unmeasured. In a passage in the 'Deontology' which...is certainly Bentham's, Socrates and Plato are spoken of in terms distressing to his greatest admirers; and his inability to appreciate such men is perfectly in unison with the general habits of Bentham's mind. All moral speculations [see Glossary] to which his method had not been applied, or (which he considered as the same thing) were not based on a recognition of utility as the moral standard, he dismissed as 'vague generalities'. Whatever presented itself to him in such a shape he dismissed as unworthy of notice, or dwelt on only to denounce as absurd. The nature of his mind prevented it from occurring to him that these generalities contained the whole unanalysed experience of the human race.

Even the originality that can think for itself, and the courage that dares to do so, are not more necessary parts of the philosophical character than a thoughtful regard for previous thinkers and for the collective mind of the human race. If you reject that, you'll have to accept that mankind did not know anything until logicians taught it to them—that until the last hand has been put to a moral truth by giving it a metaphysically precise expression, all the previous rough-hewing that it has undergone by the common intellect at the suggestion of common wants and common experience is worth nothing. What has been the opinion of mankind has been the opinion of persons of all temperaments and dispositions, of all partialities and prepossessions, of all varieties in position, in education, in opportunities of observation and inquiry. No one inquirer is all this; every inquirer is either young or old, rich or poor, sickly or healthy, married or unmarried, meditative or active, a poet or a logician, an ancient or a modern, a man

or a woman; and if the inquirer is a thinking person, he has in addition the accidental peculiarities [see Glossary] of his individual modes of thought. Every detail that gives a character to the life of a human being carries with it its peculiar biases, its peculiar facilities for perceiving some things and for missing or forgetting others. But, from points of view different from his, different things are perceptible; and those who do not see what he sees are the ones most likely to have seen what he does not see. The general opinion of mankind is the average of the conclusions of all minds, stripped indeed of their choicest and most specialised thoughts, but freed from their twists and partialities: a net result, in which everybody's particular point of view is represented, nobody's predominant. The collective mind does not penetrate below the surface, but it sees *all* the surface, which profound thinkers often fail to do. Perhaps they fail *because of* their profundity: their intenser view of a thing in some of its aspects diverts their attention from others.

So the hardest assertor of the freedom of private judgment—the keenest detector of the errors of his predecessors, and of the inaccuracies of current modes of thought—is the very person who *most* needs to fortify the weak side of his own intellect by studying •the opinions of mankind in all ages and nations and •the speculations of philosophers whose modes of thought are most opposite to his own. That is where he will find the experiences denied to himself—the remainder of the truth of which he sees only half—the truths of which the 'errors' he detects are often merely exaggerations. If, like Bentham, he brings with him an improved instrument of investigation, the more likely he is to find ready prepared a rich abundance of rough ore, which was merely waiting for that instrument. A man with clear ideas errs grievously if he imagines that whatever is seen confusedly does not exist;

when he meets with such a thing, his job is to dispel the mist and fix the outlines of the vague form looming through it.

Bentham's contempt for all other schools of thinkers—his determination to create a philosophy wholly out of the materials provided by his own mind and by minds like it—was his first disqualification as a philosopher. His second was the incompleteness of his own mind as a representative of universal human nature. He had no sympathy [see Glossary] with many of the strongest and most natural feelings of human nature; from many of its graver experiences he was altogether cut off; and his deficiency of imagination robbed him of the ability to understand a mind different from his own and to throw itself into the feelings of that other mind.

Bentham was endowed with a certain amount of 'imagination' in the popular sense—command of imagery and metaphorical expression. He lacked poetical culture, and the images his fancy supplied with him were seldom beautiful; but they were quaint and humorous, or bold, forcible, and intense; passages might be quoted from him of playful irony and of declamatory eloquence seldom surpassed in the writings of philosophers. The 'imagination' that he did *not* have was what the best writers of the present day generally call by that name, namely the power by a voluntary effort to conceive the absent as if it were present, the imaginary as if it were real, and to clothe it in the feelings it would bring along with it if it were indeed real. This is the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another. This power is what makes the poet a *poet*, in so far as he does anything but melodiously express his own actual feelings. It is what makes someone a real *dramatist*. It is one of the *historian's* powers, through which he enables us to understand other times; by it

- Guizot interprets to us the middle ages,
- Nisard, in his beautiful *Studies* on the later Latin poets, places us in the Rome of the Caesars,
- Michelet disengages the distinctive characters of the different races and generations of mankind from the facts of their history.

Someone who lacks this power doesn't know even his own nature beyond what has been called into play by actual circumstances, or the nature of his fellow-creatures beyond such generalisations as he has been able to make from observing their outward conduct.

So these are the limits of Bentham's knowledge of human nature. It is wholly empirical; and the empiricism of one who has had little experience. He had neither internal experience nor external; the quiet, even tenor of his life and his healthiness of mind collaborated in excluding him from both. He never knew prosperity or adversity, passion or satiety; he never had even the experiences that sickness brings: he lived from childhood to the age of 85 in boyish health. He knew no dejection, no heaviness of heart. He never felt life a sore and a weary burden. He was a boy to the last. Self-consciousness, that daemon [= 'in-dwelling spirit'] of the men of genius of our time—from Wordsworth to Byron, from Goethe to Chateaubriand—to which this age owes so much of its cheerful *and* its mournful wisdom, was never awakened in him. He did not know, and nor can we, how much of human nature slumbered in him. He had never been made alive to the unseen influences that were acting on himself or on his fellow-creatures. Other ages and other nations, considered as sources of instruction, were a blank to him. He measured them by only one standard; their knowledge of facts, and their ability to form correct views of utility and to merge all other objects in it. His own lot was cast in a generation of the leanest and barrenest

men England had yet produced, and when a better sort came in with the present century he was an old man. So he saw in man little but what the commonest eye can see; recognised no diversities of character except utterly obvious ones. Knowing so little of human feelings, he knew still less of the influences by which those feelings are formed; all the more subtle workings of the mind on itself and of external things on the mind escaped him; and probably no-one in a highly instructed age ever tried to give a rule to all human conduct, embarking on this project with a more limited conception either of the agencies by which human conduct *is*, or of those by which it *should be*, influenced.

This, then, is my idea of Bentham. He was a man of remarkable endowments for philosophy, and of remarkable deficiencies for it; fitted, beyond almost any man, for drawing from his premises conclusions that are not only correct but sufficiently precise and specific to be practical; but whose general conception of human nature and life provided him with an unusually thin stock of premises. It is obvious what such a man would be likely to achieve—what a thinker thus gifted and thus disqualified could do in philosophy. He could, with close and accurate logic, track half-truths to their consequences and practical applications, on a scale of greatness and of minuteness not previously exemplified; and this is what posterity will probably think about Bentham.

I express my sincere and well-considered conviction when I say that there is hardly anything positive in Bentham's philosophy that is not true; that when his practical conclusions are erroneous, which in my opinion they very often are, it is not because the reasons he gives are not rational and valid in themselves, but because some more important factor that he did not perceive supersedes those considerations and turns the scale. The bad part of his writings is his resolute denial of everything that he does not see, of all truths but those

that he recognises. That is the only way he has exercised any bad influence on his age. He has been accused of creating a school of deniers, but that is an ignorant prejudice. What he has done is to put himself at the head of a school that exists always, though it does not always find a great man to give it the sanction of philosophy; he has thrown the mantle of intellect over the natural tendency of men in all ages to deny or disparage all feelings and mental states that they are not aware of in themselves.

The truths that Bentham's philosophy takes no account of are many and important; but his non-recognition of them does not put them out of existence; they are still with us, and we have the comparatively easy task of harmonising those truths with his. To reject his half of the truth because he overlooked the other half would be to fall into his error without having his excuse. We have a large tolerance for one-eyed men if their one eye is a penetrating one; if they saw more, they would probably not see so keenly or pursue so eagerly one course of inquiry. Almost all rich veins of original speculation have been opened by systematic half-thinkers; though whether these new thoughts drive out others as good, or are peacefully superadded to them, depends on whether these half-thinkers are followed by complete thinkers. The field of man's nature and life cannot be too much worked, or in too many directions; until every clod is turned up the work is imperfect; a whole truth has to come from combining the points of view of all the fractional truths, so it requires us to see what each fractional truth can do by itself.

The best way to show what Bentham's fractional truths could do is through a review of his philosophy; and such a review, though inevitably a most brief and general one, I must now attempt.

## Review of Bentham's philosophy

The first question regarding any man of speculation is: what is his theory of human life? In the minds of many philosophers, any theory they have of this sort is submerged, and it would be a revelation to *them* to have it pointed out in their writings as others can see it, unconsciously moulding everything to its own likeness. But Bentham always knew his own premises, and made his reader know them; he did not leave to conjecture the theoretical grounds of his practical conclusions. Few great thinkers have provided the means of assigning with so much certainty their exact conception of man and of man's life.

Man is conceived by Bentham as a being susceptible of pleasures and pains, and governed in all his conduct partly •by the different varieties of self-interest and the passions commonly classed as 'selfish', partly •by sympathies (or occasionally antipathies) towards other beings. And here Bentham's conception of human nature stops. He does not exclude religion: the prospect of divine rewards and punishments he includes under the head of 'self-regarding interest', and the devotional feeling under that of sympathy with God. But the whole of the impelling or restraining principles that he recognises—whether of this or of another world—are either self-love, or love or hatred towards other sentient beings. There can be no doubt about what he thought on this subject: he has drawn out a 'Table of the Springs of Action', an explicit listing and classification of human motives, with their various names, laudatory, vituperative, and neutral. I recommend this table to the study of those who want to understand his philosophy.

Man is never recognised by him as a being capable of

pursuing spiritual perfection as an end, of desiring for its own sake the conformity of his own character to his standard of excellence, without hope of good or fear of evil from any source but his own inward consciousness. Even in the more limited form of *conscience*, this great fact in human nature escapes him. Nothing is more curious than the absence of recognition in any of Bentham's writings of the existence of conscience as something distinct from •philanthropy, from •affection for God or man, and from •self-interest in this world or in the next. He carefully abstains from any of the phrases that others use to acknowledge such a fact.<sup>1</sup> When we find the words **a** 'Conscience', **b** 'Principle', 'Moral Rectitude' and 'Moral Duty', in his 'Table of the Springs of Action', it is among the synonyms of the 'love of reputation'; with an indication that **a**, **b** the first two phrases are also sometimes synonymous with the *religious motive* or the motive of *sympathy*. He seems unaware of the existence of the feeling of moral approval or disapproval, properly so-called, towards ourselves or our fellow-creatures; and neither the word 'self-respect' nor the idea to which that word is appropriated occurs even once, so far as I can remember, in his whole writings.

Nor is it only the moral part of man's nature, in the strict sense of the word 'moral'—the desire for perfection, or the feeling of an approving or accusing conscience—that he overlooks; he only faintly recognises, as a fact in human nature, the pursuit of any other ideal goal for its own sake:

- the sense of honour and personal dignity—that feeling of personal exaltation and degradation that acts independently of other people's opinion or even in defiance of it;

<sup>1</sup> In a very few places the 'love of justice' is spoken of as a feeling inherent in almost all mankind. We cannot now learn what sense is to be put on casual expressions so inconsistent with the general tenor of his philosophy.



- the love of beauty, the passion of the artist;
- the love of order, of congruity, of consistency in all things, and conformity to their end;
- the love of power, not in the limited form of power over other human beings, but abstract power, the power of making our volitions effective;
- the love of action, the thirst for movement and activity, a force with almost as much influence in human life as its opposite, the love of ease.

None of these powerful constituents of human nature are thought worthy of a place among the 'Springs of Action'; and though for each of them an acknowledgment might be found in some corner of Bentham's writings, no conclusions are ever founded on the acknowledgment. Man, that most complex being, is a very simple one in Bentham's eyes. Even under the head of *sympathy* his recognition does not extend to the more complex forms of the feeling—the love of *loving*, the need for a sympathising support or for objects of admiration and reverence. If he thought at all of any of the deeper feelings of human nature, it was only as idiosyncrasies of taste that the moralist had no concern with, any more than did the legislator, except to prohibit any harmful actions they might happen to lead to. To say that man should or that he should not take pleasure in one thing and displeasure in another appeared to him as much an act of despotism in the moralist as in the political ruler.

It would be most unjust to Bentham to conjecture (as narrow-minded and passionate adversaries are apt to do in such cases) that this picture of human nature was copied from himself; that all those constituents of humanity that he rejected from his table of motives were lacking in himself. The unusual strength of his early feelings of virtue was, as I have shown, the original cause of all his speculations; and they are all guided and pervaded by a noble sense of morality,

and especially of justice. But having been early accustomed to keep before his mind's eye the happiness of mankind (or rather of the whole sentient world) as the only thing that is desirable in itself or makes anything else desirable, he confused all disinterested [see Glossary] feelings that he found in himself with the desire for general happiness; just as some religious writers, who loved virtue for its own sake as much perhaps as men could do, habitually confused their love of virtue with their fear of hell. It would have required greater subtlety than Bentham possessed to distinguish from each other feelings that had always acted in the same direction; and his lack of imagination prevented him from reading the distinction in the hearts of others, where it is legible enough.

Accordingly, he has not been followed in this great oversight by any of the able men whose intellectual obligations to him have led to their being regarded as his disciples. They may have followed him in his doctrine of utility, and in his rejection of a moral sense as the test of right and wrong; but while repudiating it as such, they have joined Hartley in acknowledging it as a fact in human nature; they have tried to account for it, to assign its laws; and they cannot be fairly accused of undervaluing this part of our nature, or of being disposed to throw it into the background of their speculations. If any part of the influence of this cardinal error has extended itself to them, it is in a roundabout way through the effect on their minds of other parts of Bentham's doctrines.

*Sympathy* is the only disinterested motive that Bentham recognised. He felt its inadequacy as a guarantee of virtuous action, except in certain limited cases. He knew that personal affection is as liable to operate to the injury of third parties, and requires as much to be kept under government, as any other feeling; and *general philanthropy*, considered as a motive influencing mankind in general, he rightly regarded

as the very weakest and most unsteady of all feelings when divorced from the feeling of duty. There remained, as a motive by which mankind are influenced and may be guided to their good, only *personal interest*. Accordingly, Bentham's idea of the world is that of a collection of persons each pursuing his separate interest or pleasure, and the prevention of whom from jostling one another more than is unavoidable can be attempted by hopes and fears derived from **a** the law, **b** religion, and **c** public opinion. These three powers, considered as binding human conduct, he called 'sanctions': **a** the *political* sanction, operating by the rewards and penalties of the law; **b** the *religious* sanction, operating by the rewards and penalties expected from the Ruler of the Universe; and **c** the *popular* sanction—which he characteristically calls also the *moral* sanction—operating through the pains and pleasures arising from the favour or disfavour of our fellow-creatures.

### What Bentham's philosophy cannot do

Such is Bentham's theory of the world. And now, in a spirit neither of apology nor of censure but of calm appreciation, I want to inquire how far this view of human nature and life will carry anyone—how much it will accomplish in morals, and how much in political and social philosophy; what it will do for the individual, and what for society.

All it will do for the conduct of the individual is to prescribe some of the more obvious dictates of worldly prudence, and *outward* probity and beneficence. I need not go on about the deficiencies of a system of ethics that •does not offer to aid individuals in the formation of their own character; that •recognises no such wish (perhaps even no such power) as that of self-culture as existing in human nature; and if it did recognise that great duty, •could provide little help in

performing it because it overlooks the existence of about half the mental feelings that human beings are capable of, including *all* those of which the direct objects are states of their own mind.

Morality consists of two parts. One of these is self-education—the human being's training of himself, of his affections and will. That department is a blank in Bentham's system. The other and co-equal part, the regulation of his outward actions, must be halting and imperfect without the first; for how can we judge how many an action will affect even the worldly interests of ourselves or others, unless we include in the question its influence on the regulation of our affections and desires or of theirs? A moralist on Bentham's principles may get as far as this, that he ought not to slay, burn, or steal; but what will qualify him to regulate the finer shades of human behaviour, or to lay down even the broad strokes of morality relating to the facts in human life that are liable to influence the depths of character independently of any influence on worldly circumstances—such, for instance, as sexual relations, or family relations in general, or any other social and sympathetic connections of an intimate kind? The moralities of these questions depend essentially on considerations that Bentham never so much as considered; and when he happened to be in the right, it was always inevitably on wrong or insufficient grounds.

It is fortunate for the world that Bentham's taste lay in the direction of jurisprudential rather than of properly ethical inquiry. Nothing expressly of the latter kind has been published under his name. [Mill devotes nearly a page to a possible exception to that, a book called 'Deontology', which he regards as embarrassingly bad, is not sure is entirely by Bentham, and would be glad to see omitted from his collected works.]

If Bentham's theory of life can do so little for the individual, what can it do for society?

It will enable a society that has reached a certain state of *spiritual* development, and can remain in that state, to prescribe the rules by which it may protect its *material* interests. It will do nothing for the spiritual interests of society [Mill adds 'except sometimes as an instrument in the hands of a higher doctrine', without explaining this]; nor does it suffice even for the material interests. What causes any material interests to exist—the sole cause enabling any body of human beings to exist as a society—is national character; *that* is what

- causes one nation to succeed in what it attempts, another to fail;
- causes one nation to understand and aspire to elevated things, another to grovel in mean ones;
- makes the greatness of one nation lasting, and dooms another to early and rapid decay.

The true teacher of the fitting social arrangements for England, France or America is the one who can point out how the English, French or American character can be improved, and how it has been made what it is. A philosophy of laws and institutions not based on a philosophy of national character is an absurdity. But what could Bentham's opinion on national character be worth? How could he, whose mind contained so few and such poor types of *individual* character, rise to that higher generalisation? He can only indicate means by which, in any given state of the national mind, the material interests of society can be protected; setting aside the question, which others must answer, whether the use of those means would have any injurious influence on the national character.

I have arrived, then, at a sort of estimate of what a philosophy like Bentham's can do. It can teach the means of organising and regulating the merely *business* part of the social arrangements. His philosophy can handle anything that can be understood or done without reference to moral

influences; where those influences require to be taken into account, it is at fault. He wrongly thought that the business part of human affairs was the whole of them, or at least the only part that the legislator and the moralist had to do with. Not that he disregarded moral influences when he perceived them; but he rarely did so, because of his lack of imagination, small experience of human feelings, and ignorance of the connection of feelings with one another.

Thus, the business part is the only province of human affairs that Bentham has cultivated with any success; into which he has introduced any considerable number of comprehensive and enlightening practical principles. That is the field of his greatness; and in it he is indeed great. He has swept away the accumulated cobwebs of centuries—he has untied knots that the efforts of the ablest thinkers down through the centuries had only pulled tighter; and it is no exaggeration to say that over a great part of the field he was the first to shed the light of reason.

I turn with pleasure from what Bentham could not do, to what he did. It is an ungracious task to criticise a great benefactor for not being a greater—to insist on the errors of a man who has originated more new truths, has given to the world more sound practical lessons, than it ever received from any other individual, with a few glorious exceptions. The unpleasing part of my work is ended. I now have to show the greatness of the man: the grasp that his intellect took of the subjects it was fitted to deal with; the giant's task that was before him, and the hero's courage and strength with which he achieved it. Don't regard his achievement as unimportant because its province was limited: man has to choose between going a little way in many paths or a great distance along only one. The field of Bentham's labours was like the space between two parallel lines; narrow to excess in one direction, in another it reached to infinity.

Bentham's speculations, as we are already aware, began with law; and in that department he accomplished his greatest triumphs. He found the philosophy of law a chaos, he left it a science; he found the practice of the law an Augean stable, and subjected it to a river which is mining and sweeping away mound after mound of its rubbish.

### **How English law became such a mess**

Without joining in the exaggerated invectives against lawyers that Bentham sometimes permitted himself, or blaming one portion of society alone for the fault of all, we may say that circumstances had made English lawyers in a peculiar [see Glossary] degree open to Voltaire's description of lawyers as the 'preservers of ancient barbarous usages'. The basis of the English law was, and still is, the feudal system. That system—like all that existed as custom before they were established as law—was in some degree suitable to the needs of the society in which it grew up, that is to say, of a tribe of primitive soldiers holding a conquered people in subjection and dividing its spoils among themselves. Advancing civilisation had, however, converted this •armed encampment of barbarous warriors in the midst of enemies reduced to slavery into •an industrious, commercial, rich, and free people. The laws that were suitable to the first of these states of society were absolutely irrelevant to the second, which could not even have come into existence unless something had been done to adapt those laws to it. But the adaptation was not the result of thought and design; it arose not from any comprehensive consideration of the needs of the new state of society. What was done involved centuries-long struggle between the old barbarism and the new civilisation; between •the feudal aristocracy of conquerors, holding fast to the rude system they had established, and •the conquered,

emancipating themselves from it. The conquered constituted the growing power, but it was never strong enough to break its bonds, though occasionally some weak point gave way. So the law came to be like the costume of a full-grown man who had never put off the clothes made for him when he first went to school. Seam after seam had burst, and as the gap widened the hole was darned, or patches of fresh law were brought from the nearest shop and stuck on, without *removing* anything except what might drop off of itself.

Hence all ages of English history have a meeting-point in English law; their various products may be seen all together, not interfused but heaped on one another, in the way different ages of the earth can be read in some perpendicular section of its surface, with the deposits of each successive period superimposed on—not substituted for—those of preceding periods. And in the world of law no less than in the physical world, every commotion and conflict of the elements has left its mark behind in some break or irregularity of the strata; every struggle that ever wounded the bosom of society is apparent in the disjointed condition of the part of the law that covers the spot; indeed, the very traps and pitfalls that one contending party set for another are still standing, and the teeth not only of hyenas but also of foxes and all cunning animals are imprinted on the curious remains found in these antediluvian caves.

In the English law, as in Roman law before it, the adaptations of barbarous laws to the growth of civilised society were chiefly made by stealth. They were generally made by the courts of justice, who could not help reading the new wants of *mankind* in the cases between *individual men* that came before them; but who, having no authority to make new laws for those new wants, were obliged to do the work covertly, evading the jealousy and opposition of an ignorant, prejudiced, and mostly brutal and tyrannical legislature.

Some of the most necessary of these improvements, such as the giving force of law to trusts, and the breaking up of entails [see Glossary], were carried out in actual opposition to the strongly-declared will of Parliament, whose clumsy hands—no match for the acuteness of judges—could not manage to make any law that the judges could not find a trick for making inoperative. The whole history of the contest about trusts may still be read in the words of a conveyance, as could the contest about entails, till the abolition of this whole business by a bill of the present Attorney-General; but the client paid dearly for the show-case of historical curiosities that he was obliged to purchase every time he made a settlement of his estate. The result of this way of improving social institutions was that new things had to be done in consistency with old forms and names; and the laws were improved with much the same effect as if, in the improvement of agriculture, the plough could have been introduced only by making it look like a spade. . . .

When the conflicts were over, and the mixed mass had settled down into something like a fixed state—a state that was very profitable and therefore very agreeable to lawyers—the natural tendency of the human mind led the lawyers to begin theorising on it, and they had to digest it and give it a systematic form. It was by induction [see Glossary] and abstraction from

this thing of shreds and patches [a phrase from *Hamlet*], in which the only part that came close to order or system was the early barbarous part, already more than half superseded,

that English lawyers had to construct their philosophy of law, without having the logical habits and general intellectual cultivation that the lawyers of the Roman empire brought to a similar task.

### What Bentham did about it

Bentham found the **philosophy** of law what English **practising** lawyers had made it; a jumble, in which ‘real property’, ‘personal property’, ‘law and equity’, ‘felony’, ‘premunire’, ‘misprision’, and ‘misdemeanour’,

- words without a vestige of meaning when detached from the history of English institutions,
- mere tide-marks to point out the line that the sea and the shore, in their endless struggles, had adjusted as their mutual boundary,

were all taken to mark distinctions inherent in the nature of things, in which every absurdity, every lucrative abuse, had a reason found for it. It wasn’t often that the reason was even *claimed* to be drawn from expediency; usually it was a technical reason, one of mere form, derived from the old barbarous system. While the **theory** of the law was in this state, to describe what the **practice** of it was would require the pen of a Swift, or of Bentham himself. The whole course of a lawsuit seemed like a series of contrivances for lawyers’ profit, in which the suitors were regarded as the prey. . . .

It may be fancied by some people that Bentham did an easy thing in merely calling all this absurd, and proving it to be so. But he began the contest a young man, and he had grown old before he had any followers. History will some day refuse to believe the intensity of the superstition which, until very recently, •protected this mischievous mess from examination or doubt, •passed off the charming representations of Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* for a sound estimate of the English law, and •proclaimed the shame of human reason to be the perfection of it. Glory to Bentham that he has dealt to this superstition its deathblow—that he has been the Hercules of this hydra, the St. George of this pestilent dragon! The honour is all his—nothing but his

peculiar qualities could have done it. The task required his indefatigable perseverance, his firm self-reliance, needing no support from other men's opinion; his intensely practical turn of mind, his synthetical habits—above all, his peculiar [see Glossary] method. Metaphysicians, armed with vague generalities, had often tried their hands at the subject, and left it no more advanced than they found it. Law is a matter of business; means and ends are the things to be considered in it, not abstractions; vagueness was to be met not by vagueness but by definiteness and precision; details were to be encountered not with generalities but with details. Nor could any progress be made on such a subject by merely showing that existing things were bad; it was necessary also to show how they might be made better. No great man we read of was qualified to do this thing except Bentham. He has done it, once and for ever.

### Some details

I cannot go into the particulars of what Bentham has done; hundreds of pages would be required to give a tolerable abstract of it. To sum up my estimate under a few heads. **(i)** He has expelled mysticism from the philosophy of law, and set the example of viewing laws in a practical light, as means to certain definite and precise ends. **(ii)** He has cleared up the confusion and vagueness attaching to the idea of *law* in general, to the idea of a body of laws, and all the general ideas involved in it. **(iii)** He demonstrated the necessity and practicability of *codification*—the conversion of all law into a written and systematically arranged code; not like the Code Napoleon, which doesn't contain a single definition and requires constant reference to earlier precedents for

the meanings of its technical terms; but one containing within itself everything needed for its own interpretation, together with a perpetual provision for its own emendation and improvement. He has shown what the parts would be of such a code, and the relation of those parts to one another; by his distinctions and classifications he has done much towards showing what should be, or could be, its nomenclature and arrangement; and he has made it comparatively easy for others to do what he has left undone. **(iv)** He has taken a systematic view of the needs of society that the civil code is intended to meet, and of the principles of human nature by which its provisions are to be tested; I have already indicated that this view is defective wherever spiritual interests have to be taken into account, but it is excellent for the large portion of the laws of any country that are designed for the protection of material interests. **(v)** He found the philosophy of judicial procedure, including that of judicial establishments and of evidence,<sup>1</sup> in an even more wretched state than other parts of the philosophy of law; he carried it at once almost to perfection. He left it with every one of its principles established, and little remaining to be done even in the suggestion of practical arrangements.

These assertions on Bentham's behalf may be left, without fear for the result, in the hands of those who are competent to judge concerning them. There are now even in the highest seats of justice men to whom the claims made for him will not appear extravagant. Moreover, principle after principle of those propounded by him is seeping into the understandings that are most shut against his influence, driving nonsense and prejudice from one corner of them to another. The reform of the laws of any country according to his principles can only be gradual and may take years; but the work is in

<sup>1</sup> But excluding the subject of punishment, for which something considerable had already been done.

progress, and both parliament and the judges are every year doing something, and often something quite considerable, towards pushing it forward.

### The doctrine of codification

I should take notice here of an accusation sometimes made against Bentham and against the principle of codification, namely that they require one uniform suit of ready-made laws for all times and all states of society. The doctrine of codification, as the word imports, relates to the *form* of the laws only, not to their *substance*; it does not concern itself with what the laws should be, but declares that whatever they are, they ought to be systematically arranged and expressed in a determinate form of words. His essay 'On the Influence of Time and Place in Matters of Legislation' is a complete answer to that accusation so far as it concerns Bentham. That essay shows that the different needs of different nations with respect to law occupied his attention as systematically as any other portion of the wants that make laws necessary—admittedly with the limitations set to all his speculations by the imperfections of his theory of human nature. Taking next to no account of national character and the causes that form and maintain it (as we have seen), he was precluded from giving much thought to the laws of a country as an instrument of national culture. This is one of their most important roles, and they must of course vary in how they play it according to the degree and kind of culture already attained; as a tutor gives his pupil different lessons according to the progress already made in his education. The laws that suited **a** our wild ancestors, accustomed to rude independence, would not have suited **b** a people of Asiatics bowed down by military despotism; the **b** slave needs to be trained to govern himself,

the **a** savage to submit to the government of others. The same laws will not suit the English, who distrust everything that *does* emanate from general principles, and the French, who distrust whatever does *not*. To train a people to the perfection of their nature, getting them to constitute a united national and social polity, very different institutions are needed for •an essentially *subjective* people like the Germans from what are needed for an essentially *objective* people like those of Northern and Central Italy:

- one affectionate and dreamy, the other passionate and worldly;
- one trustful and loyal, the other calculating and suspicious;
- one not practical enough, the other over-much;
- one lacking individuality, the other lacking fellow-feeling;
- one failing for lack of exacting enough for itself, the other for lack of conceding enough to others.

Bentham was little accustomed to look at institutions in their relation to these topics. The effects of this oversight must of course be perceptible throughout his speculations, but I do not think the errors it led into matter much in the greater part of *civil* and *penal* law: it is in the department of *constitutional* legislation that they were fundamental.

The Benthamic theory of government has made so much noise in the world in recent years, holding such a conspicuous place among Radical philosophies, with Radical modes of thinking participating in its spirit so much more extensively than any others, that many worthy persons imagine there is no other Radical philosophy extant. Leaving such people to discover their mistake as they may, I shall try briefly to discriminate between the truth and error of this celebrated theory.

There are three great questions in government. **(1)** To what authority is it for the good of the people that they should be subject? **(2)** How are they to be induced to obey that authority? The answers to these two questions vary indefinitely, according to the degree and kind of civilisation and cultivation already attained by a people, and their peculiar aptitudes for receiving more. **(3)** The third question is not liable to so much variation: by what means are the abuses of this authority to be checked? This third question is the only one of the three that Bentham seriously addresses, and he gives it the only answer it admits of—*Responsibility*. That is, responsibility to persons whose obvious and recognisable interest accords with the end in view, namely good government. This being granted, the next question is: in what body of persons is this identity of interest with good government—i.e. with the interest of the whole community—to be found? In nothing less, says Bentham, than the numerical majority; to which I add that it can't be found even in the numerical majority, because in no portion of the community less than *all* will the interest coincide always and in every respect with the interest of all. But, since power given to •all by a representative government is in fact given to •a majority, I am obliged to fall back on question **(1)**, namely, under what authority is it for the good of the people that they be placed? If the answer to this is *under the authority of a majority among themselves*, Bentham's system cannot be questioned. This one assumption being made, his 'Constitutional Code' is admirable. His extraordinary power of at once seizing comprehensive principles and scheming out minute details is brought into play with surpassing vigour in devising means •for preventing rulers from escaping from the control of the majority; •for enabling and inducing the majority to exercise that control unremittingly; and •for providing them with servants—ministers—with every desirable endowment,

moral and intellectual, compatible with entire subservience to the will of the majority.

### Is majority rule essential?

But is this fundamental doctrine of Bentham's political philosophy a universal truth? Is it, always and everywhere, good for mankind to be under the absolute authority of the majority of themselves? I do not say the *political* authority merely, because it is fanciful to suppose that whatever has absolute power over men's bodies will not arrogate [= 'illegitimately seize'] it over their minds—will not seek to control opinions and feelings that depart from its standard; will not try to shape the education of the young by its model, and to extinguish all books, schools, and combinations of individuals for joint action on society, which may be attempted for the purpose of keeping alive a spirit at variance with the authority's own. (It may do this not by legal penalties, but by the persecutions of society.) Is it, I ask, the proper condition of man in all ages and nations to be under the despotism of Public Opinion?

It is very conceivable that such a doctrine should be accepted by some of the noblest spirits at a time of reaction against the aristocratic governments of modern Europe; governments founded on the entire sacrifice (except when prudence and sometimes humane feeling interfere) of the community generally to the self-interest and ease of a few. European reformers have been accustomed to see the numerical majority everywhere unjustly depressed, everywhere trampled on, or at the best overlooked, by governments; nowhere having enough power to •extort redress of their most positive grievances, •provide for their mental culture, or even •prevent themselves from being taxed openly for the pecuniary profit of the ruling classes. To see these things and seek to put an end to them, by means (among other things)



of giving more political power to the majority, constitutes Radicalism; and it is because so many in this age have felt this wish, and have felt that the realization of it was an object worthy of men's devoting their lives to it, that such a theory of government as Bentham's has found favour with them. But though to pass from one form of bad government to another is the ordinary fate of mankind, philosophers ought not to make themselves parties to it by sacrificing one portion of important truth to another.

The numerical majority of any society whatever must consist of unskilled manual labourers—persons all standing in the same social position and having the same pursuits. I do not mean to disparage them; whatever I say to their disadvantage I say equally of a numerical majority of shopkeepers, or of squires. Where there is identity of position and pursuits, there also will be identity of preferences, passions and prejudices; and to give to any one set of these absolute power, without counter-balance from preferences, passions, and prejudices of a different sort, is the way •to make it impossible to correct any of those imperfections, •to make one narrow, low type of human nature universal and perpetual, and •to crush every influence that tends to the further improvement of man's intellectual and moral nature. There must of course be some paramount power in society; and that the majority should be that power is on the whole right, not as being outright just but as being less unjust than any other footing on which the matter can be placed. But the institutions of society should make provision for keeping up, in some form or other—as a corrective to partial views, and a shelter for freedom of thought and individuality of character—a perpetual and standing opposition to the will of the majority. All countries that have long continued progressive, or been durably great, have been so because there has been an organised opposition to the ruling

power—plebeians to patricians, clergy to kings, freethinkers to clergy, kings to barons, commons to king and aristocracy. Almost all the greatest men who ever lived have formed part of such an Opposition. Wherever some such quarrel has not been going on—wherever it has been terminated by the complete victory of one of the contending principles, and no new contest has taken the place of the old—society has either hardened into Chinese stationariness, or fallen into dissolution. A centre of resistance, round which all the moral and social elements that the ruling power views with disfavour can cluster, finding shelter from the attempts of that power to hunt them out of existence, is as necessary where the opinion of the majority is sovereign as where the ruling power is a hierarchy or an aristocracy. Where no such *point d'appui* [see Glossary] exists, there the human race will inevitably degenerate; and the question of whether the United States (for instance) will in time sink into being another China (which is also a most commercial and industrious nation) is for me tantamount to the question of whether such a centre of resistance will gradually evolve itself or not.

These things being considered, I cannot think that Bentham made the most useful employment of his great powers when—not content with enthroning the majority as sovereign by means of universal suffrage, without king or house of lords—he exhausted all the sources of ingenuity in devising means for riveting the yoke of public opinion closer and closer round the necks of all public functionaries, excluding every possibility of even a slight or temporary exercise being had either by a minority or by the functionary's own notions of right. Surely when any power has been made the strongest power, enough has been done for it; from then onwards, care is needed ·not to strengthen that strongest power but· rather to prevent it from swallowing up all others. Wherever all the forces of society act in one direction, the just claims of the

individual human being are in extreme peril. The power of the majority is salutary so far as it is used defensively, not offensively—so far as its exercise is tempered by •respect for the personality of the individual and •deference to the superiority of cultivated intelligence. If Bentham had employed himself in pointing out the means by which fundamentally democratic institutions might be best adapted to the preservation and strengthening of •those two sentiments, he would have done something more permanently valuable and more worthy of his great intellect. If Montesquieu had had the lights of the present age, he would have done it; and we may be going to receive this benefit from the Montesquieu of our own times, M. de Tocqueville.

Do I then consider Bentham's political speculations useless? Far from it. I consider them only as one-sided. He has

- brought out into a strong light,
- cleared from a thousand confusions and misconceptions, and
- pointed out with admirable skill the best means of promoting,

one of the ideal qualities of a perfect government, namely identity of interest between the trustees and the community for whom they hold their power in trust. This quality cannot be had in its ideal perfection, and moreover it must be fought for with a perpetual eye to all other requisites; but those other requisites must still more be fought for without losing sight of this one; and when it is even slightly subordinated to any other end, which it often must be, the sacrifice always brings with it some evil. Bentham pointed out how complete this sacrifice is in modern European societies: how exclusively ruling power is exercised there by partial and harmful interests, checked only by public opinion. (Because in the existing order of things public opinion constantly appeared as a source of good, he was naturally led to

exaggerate its intrinsic excellence.) Bentham hunted this harmful interest of rulers through all its disguises, and especially through those that hide it from the very men who are influenced by it. Perhaps his greatest service to the philosophy of universal human nature is his illustration of what he calls 'interest-begotten prejudice'—the common tendency of man to make a duty and a virtue of following his self-interest. The idea was far from being peculiarly Bentham's: the tricks by which we persuade ourselves that we are *not* yielding to our selfish inclinations when we *are* had attracted the notice of all moralists, and had been probed by religious writers to a depth as much below Bentham's as their knowledge of the profundities and windings of the human heart was superior to his. But what Bentham has illustrated is selfish interest in the form of *class*-interest, and the class morality based on it—the manner in which any set of persons who mix much together and have a common interest are apt to make that common interest their standard of virtue, and the •social feelings of the members of the class are made to play into the hands of their •selfish ones; which is why history shows so many examples in which the most heroic personal disinterestedness [see Glossary] is combined with the most odious class-selfishness. This was one of Bentham's leading ideas, and almost the only one by which he contributed to the explanation of history, much of which must have been entirely inexplicable to him except so far as this explained it. The idea was given him by Helvetius, whose book *De l'Esprit* is one continued and most acute commentary on it. This, together with the other great idea of Helvetius, the influence of circumstances on character, will make his name live by the side of Rousseau when most of the other French metaphysicians of the 18th century will survive only in literary history.

## The principle of utility

In the brief view I have been able to give of Bentham's philosophy, it may surprise the reader that I have said so little about its first principle, with which his name is more identified than with anything else—the 'principle of utility', or, as he afterwards named it, 'the greatest-happiness principle'. It is a topic on which much could be said if there were room, or if it were really needed for a just estimation of Bentham. On an occasion more suitable for discussing the metaphysics of morality, where it would be convenient to give the explanations needed to make an opinion on such an abstract subject intelligible, I would be fully prepared to say what I think on this subject. At present I shall only say that although (under proper explanations) I entirely agree with Bentham in his principle, I do not agree with him that all right thinking on the details of morals depends on its explicit assertion. I think that *utility* or *happiness* is much too complex and indefinite a goal to be sought except through various intermediate goals concerning which there may be, and often is, agreement among persons who differ in their ultimate standard; and about which there is in fact much more unanimity among thinking persons than might be supposed from their diametrical divergence on the great questions of moral metaphysics. As mankind are much more nearly of one •nature than of one •opinion about their own nature, they are more easily brought to agree in their intermediate principles. . . . than in their first principles; and the attempt to •make the relevance of actions to the ultimate goal more evident than they can be made by relating them to the intermediate goals, and to •estimate their value by a direct reference to human happiness, generally ends by attaching most importance not to the effects that are really the greatest but to the ones that can most easily

be pointed to and individually identified. Those who adopt utility as a standard can seldom apply it truly except through the secondary principles; those who reject it, generally do no more than erect those secondary principles into first principles. It is when two or more secondary principles conflict that a direct appeal to some first principle becomes necessary; and then begins the practical importance of the utilitarian controversy; which in other respects is a question of arrangement and logical subordination rather than of practice—important mainly from a purely scientific point of view, for the sake of the systematic unity and coherence of ethical philosophy. Yet it's to the principle of utility, probably, that we owe everything Bentham did. It is probable that it was necessary to him to find a first principle that he could accept as self-evident, and to which he could attach all his other doctrines as logical consequences, because to him systematic unity was an indispensable condition of his confidence in his own intellect. And there is something further to be noted. Whether or not happiness is the goal to which morality should be related, that it be related to a goal of some sort and not left in the realm of vague feeling or inexplicable internal conviction—that it be made a matter of reason and calculation, and not merely of sentiment—is essential to the very idea of moral philosophy. It is in fact what makes argument or discussion on moral questions possible. That *the morality of actions depends on the consequences they tend to produce* is the doctrine of rational persons of all schools; that *the good or evil of those consequences is measured solely by pleasure or pain* is the whole doctrine of the school of utility, and is peculiar [see Glossary] to it.

So far as Bentham's adoption of the principle of utility led him to focus on the consequences of actions as the consideration determining their morality, so far he was indisputably on the right path; though to go far without

straying from it he needed more knowledge than he had of the formation of character and of the consequences of actions on the agent's own frame of mind. His lack of power to estimate this class of consequences, together with his lack of the degree of modest deference which those who don't have competent experience of their own owe to the experience of others on that part of the subject, greatly limit the value of his speculations on questions of practical ethics.

### Over-weighting morality

He can also be accused of another error that it would be improper to pass over, because nothing has tended more to place him in opposition to the common feelings of mankind, and to give to his philosophy that cold, mechanical, and ungenial air that characterises the popular idea of a Benthamite. This error, or rather one-sidedness, belongs to him not as a utilitarian but as a moralist by profession, and he shares it with almost all professed moralists, whether religious or philosophical. It consists in treating the *moral* view of actions and characters, which is unquestionably the first and most important way of looking at them, as if it were the sole one; whereas really it is only one of three, by all of which our sentiments towards the human being •can be and •ought to be significantly influenced—and •must be, if we are not to crush our own nature. Every human action has three aspects:

(1) its moral aspect, or that of its right and wrong;

(2) its aesthetic aspect, or that of its beauty;

(3) its sympathetic aspect, or that of its loveableness.

Of these, (1) addresses itself to our reason and conscience; (2) to our imagination; (3) to our human fellow-feeling. According to (1) we approve or disapprove; according to (2) we admire or despise; according to (3) we love, pity or dislike.

The morality of an action depends on its foreseeable consequences; its beauty and its loveableness—or the reverse—depend on the qualities that it is evidence of. Thus, a lie is *wrong* because its effect is to mislead, and because it tends to destroy the confidence of man in man; it is also *mean* because it is cowardly—because it proceeds from not daring to face the consequences of telling the truth—or at best is evidence of inability to achieve our goals by straightforward means, which is conceived as something that every person not deficient in energy or in understanding is able to do. The action of Brutus in sentencing his sons was (1) *right*, because it was executing a law essential to the freedom of his country, against persons of whose guilt there was no doubt; it was (2) *admirable* because it evinced a rare degree of patriotism, courage, and self-control; but there was nothing (3) *loveable* in it; it provides no presumption in regard to loveable qualities, or a presumption that they are lacking. If one of the sons had engaged in the conspiracy from affection for the other, his action would have been loveable, though neither moral nor admirable. It is not possible for any sophistry to confuse these three ways of viewing an action; but it is very possible to focus exclusively on one of them, and lose sight of the other two. Sentimentality consists in setting (2) and (3) above (1); the error of moralists in general is to sink (2) and (3) entirely. This is pre-eminently the case with Bentham: he both wrote and felt as if the moral standard ought not only to be paramount (which it ought), but to be alone; as if it ought to be the sole master of all our actions, and even of all our feelings; as though it would be an injustice and a prejudice to admire or like (or despise or dislike) a person for any action that does neither good nor harm, or which does not do a good or a harm proportional to the feeling entertained. He carried this so far that there were certain phrases which, being expressive of what he

considered to be this groundless liking or aversion, he could not bear to hear pronounced in his presence. Among these phrases were 'good taste' and 'bad taste'. He thought it an insolent piece of dogmatism in one person to praise or condemn another in a matter of taste; as though men's likings and dislikings, on things in themselves indifferent, were not full of information about their character; as though a person's tastes did not show him to be wise or a fool, cultivated or ignorant, gentle or rough, sensitive or callous, generous or sordid, benevolent or selfish, conscientious or depraved.

### **Bentham and poetry**

Connected with the same topic are Bentham's peculiar [see Glossary] opinions on poetry. Much more has been said than there is any basis for about his contempt for the pleasures of imagination, and for the fine arts. Music was throughout life his favourite amusement; as for painting, sculpture, and the other arts addressed to the eye, he was so far from holding them in contempt that he occasionally recognises them as means to important social ends; though his ignorance of the deeper springs of human character prevented him (as it prevents most Englishmen) from suspecting how profoundly such things enter into the moral nature of man and into the education of the individual and of the race.

But his attitude towards 'poetry' in the narrower sense, that which employs the language of *words*, was entirely unfavourable. Words, he thought, were perverted from their proper role when they were used in uttering anything but precise logical truth. He says somewhere in his works that 'quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry': but this is only a paradoxical way of saying what he would equally have said of the things he most valued

and admired. Another aphorism attributed to him is much more characteristic of his view of this subject: 'All poetry is misrepresentation.' Poetry, he thought, consists essentially in exaggeration for effect, in proclaiming one view of a thing very emphatically and suppressing all the limitations and qualifications. This trait of character seems to me a curious example of what Mr. Carlyle strikingly calls 'the completeness of limited men'. Here is a philosopher who is happy within his narrow boundary as no man of indefinite range ever was; who flatters himself that he is so completely emancipated from the essential law of poor human intellect, by which it can only see one thing at a time *well*, that he can even turn round on the imperfection and solemnly condemn it. Did Bentham really suppose that it is only in poetry that propositions cannot be exactly true, cannot contain in themselves all the limitations and qualifications they need when applied to practice? We have seen how far his own prose propositions are from realising this Utopia; and even the attempt to approach it would be incompatible not merely with poetry but with oratory and popular writing of every kind. Bentham's accusation is perfectly true; all writing that undertakes to make men *feel* truths as well as *see* them does take up one point at a time, seeking to impress that one point, driving it home, making it sink into and colour the whole mind of the reader or hearer. It is justified in doing so, if the portion of truth that it is enforcing is the one called for by the occasion. All writing addressed to the feelings has a natural tendency to exaggeration; but Bentham should have remembered that in this, as in many things, we must aim at too much if we are to be sure of doing enough.

### Bentham's writing style

From the same source in Bentham came the intricate and involved style that makes his later writings suitable for the student only, not the general reader. It was from his perpetually aiming at impracticable precision. Nearly all his earlier writings (and many parts of his later ones) are, as I have already remarked, models of light, playful, and popular style; a *Benthamiana* might be made of passages worthy of Addison or Goldsmith. But in his later years and more advanced studies, he moved to a Latin or German structure of sentence that is foreign to the spirit of the English language. For the sake of clearness and the reader's ease, ordinary writers are content to say a little more than the truth in one sentence, and correct it in the next; Bentham could not bear to do this. All the qualifying remarks that he intended to make he insisted on embedding as parentheses in the very middle of the sentence itself. And thus the sense being so long suspended, and attention to the accessory ideas being required before the principal idea had been properly seized, it became difficult without some practice to follow the train of thought. It is fortunate that so many of the most important parts of his writings are free from this defect. I regard it as a *reductio ad absurdum* of his objection to poetry. In trying to write in a way that was not open to the same objection, he could not stop short of utter unreadableness; and even then he attained no more accuracy than is compatible with opinions as imperfect and one-sided as those of any poet or sentimentalist alive. Judge then what the state of literature and philosophy would be, and what chance they would have of influencing the multitude, if his objection were allowed and all styles of writing banished that did not stand his test!

I must here close this brief and imperfect view of Bentham and his doctrines; in which many parts of the subject have been entirely untouched, and no part done justice to, but

which at least comes from an intimate familiarity with his writings, and is nearly the first attempt at an impartial estimate of his character as a philosopher, and of the effect of his labours on the world.

After every criticism of him—and you have seen that I have not been sparing in my criticisms—there remains to Bentham an indisputable place among the great intellectual benefactors of mankind. His writings will long form an indispensable part of the education of the highest order of practical thinkers; and the collected edition of them ought to be in the hands of anyone who wants to understand his age or take any beneficial part in the great business of it.

·FINAL FOOTNOTE·

Since the first publication of this paper, Lord Brougham's brilliant series of characters has been published, including a sketch of Bentham. Lord Brougham's view of Bentham's characteristics mainly agrees with the result of my more detailed examination; but he imputes to Bentham a jealous and angry disposition in private life, and I feel called on to contradict this and to give a relevant explanation. To have a correct estimate of any of Bentham's dealings with the world, one must bear in mind that in everything except abstract speculation he was to the last—what I have called him—essentially a *boy*. He had the freshness, the simplicity, the confidingness, the liveliness and activity, all the delightful qualities of boyhood, and the weaknesses that are the reverse side of those qualities—the undue importance attached to trifles, the habitual mismeasurement of the practical bearing and value of things, the readiness to be either delighted or offended on inadequate cause. These were the real sources of what was unreasonable in some of his attacks on individuals, and in particular on Lord Brougham in connection with his Law Reforms; they were no more the effect of envy or malice, or any really unamiable quality, than the freaks of a pettish child, and are scarcely a fitter subject of censure or criticism.

## Coleridge

The name of Coleridge is one of the few English names of our time that are likely to be oftener pronounced, and to symbolise more important things, in proportion to how much the inward workings of the age manifest themselves in outward facts. Bentham excepted, no Englishman of recent date has left his impress so deeply in the opinions and mental tendencies of those among us who try to enlighten their practice by philosophical meditation. If it is true, as Bacon affirms, that a knowledge of the speculative opinions of the men between 20 and 30 years of age is the great source of political prophecy, then the existence of Coleridge will show itself by no slight or ambiguous traces in the coming history of our country; for no-one has contributed more to shape the opinions of such among its younger men as have opinions at all.

### Relating Coleridge to Bentham

The influence of Coleridge, like that of Bentham, extends far beyond those who share in the peculiarities [see Glossary] of his religious or philosophical creed. He has been the great awakener in this country of the spirit of philosophy, within the bounds of traditional opinions. He has been, almost as truly as Bentham, 'the great questioner of things established', for a questioner need not be an enemy. By Bentham, beyond all others, men have been led to ask themselves concerning any ancient or received opinion *Is it true?* and by Coleridge *What is the meaning of it?* One took his stand *outside* the received opinion, and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it; the other looked at it from within, and tried to see it with the eyes of a believer in it;

to discover what apparent facts at first suggested it, and what appearances have made it continually credible ever since, making it seem to a succession of persons to be a faithful interpretation of their experience. Bentham judged a proposition true or false depending on whether it accorded with the result of his own inquiries; and he did not search very curiously into what might be meant by the proposition, given that it obviously did not mean something that he thought true. With Coleridge, on the contrary, the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men and accepted by whole nations or generations of mankind was part of the problem to be solved—of the phenomena to be explained. Bentham's short and easy method of explaining everything in terms of the selfish interests of aristocracies, priests, lawyers, or some other species of impostors could not satisfy a man who saw so much further into the complexities of the human intellect and feelings. Coleridge considered the long or widespread prevalence of any opinion as evidence that it was not altogether a fallacy; that its first authors at least were struggling to express in words something that had a reality to them, though perhaps not to many of those who have since accepted the doctrine by mere tradition. The long duration of a belief, he thought, shows that it is adapted to some part of the human mind; and if, on digging down to the root we do not find some *truth* (as we generally do), we shall find some natural *want or requirement* of human nature that the doctrine in question is fitted to satisfy. The instincts of selfishness and of credulity have a place among these wants, but by no means an exclusive one.

From this difference in the points of view of the two philosophers, and from the too-rigid adherence of each

to his own, it was to be expected that Bentham would continually miss the truth that is in the traditional opinions, and Coleridge would miss the truth that is not in them and is at variance with them. But it was also likely that each would find, or show the way to finding, much of what the other missed.

It is hardly possible to speak of Coleridge and his position among his contemporaries without bringing in Bentham; they are connected by two of the closest bonds of association—resemblance, and contrast. It would be hard to find two persons of philosophical eminence more exactly opposite to one another. Compare their modes of treatment of any subject, and you might fancy them to be inhabitants of different worlds. They seem to have scarcely a principle or a premise in common. Each sees hardly anything except what the other does not see. Bentham would have regarded Coleridge with a peculiar measure of the good-humoured contempt with which he was accustomed to regard all kinds of philosophising different from his own. Coleridge—to the credit of his mode of philosophising—extended an enlarged and liberal appreciation to most thinkers of any eminence from whom he differed; but he would probably have made Bentham one of the exceptions to this. But opposites, as logicians say, are merely the things that are furthest from one another *in the same kind*. These two were alike in being the men whose teachings and examples did most, in their age and country, to enforce the need for a philosophy.

They agreed in making it their occupation to bring opinions back to first principles, taking no proposition for granted without examining the grounds for it and ascertaining that it had the kind and degree of evidence suitable to its nature. They agreed in recognising that sound theory is the only foundation for sound practice, and that whoever despises theory—whatever airs of wisdom he may give himself—is

self-convicted of being a quack. If we put into a book all the best things ever said on •the rule-of-thumb school of political craftsmanship, and on •the inadequacy for practical purposes of what the mere practical man calls ‘experience’, it is hard to say whether the collection would owe more to the writings of Bentham or to those of Coleridge. They agreed, too, in perceiving that the groundwork of all other philosophy must be laid in the philosophy of the mind. To lay this foundation deeply and strongly, and to raise a superstructure in accordance with it, were the goals to which their lives were devoted. They used mostly different materials; but the materials of both were real observations—the genuine product of experience—so the results will in the end be found to be not hostile but supplementary to one another. Of their methods of philosophising, the same thing holds: they were different, yet both were legitimate logical processes. In every respect the two men are each other’s ‘completing counterpart’: the strong points of each correspond to the weak points of the other. Anyone who could master the premises and combine the methods of both would possess the entire English philosophy of his age. Coleridge used to say that everyone is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian; it can be similarly affirmed that every Englishman of the present day is by implication either a Benthamite or a Coleridgean, holding views of human affairs that can be proved true only on the principles of Bentham or those of Coleridge.

In one respect, indeed, the parallel fails. Bentham so improved and added to the system of philosophy he adopted that for his successors he may almost be accounted its founder; while Coleridge, though he has left on the system he inculcated such traces of himself as are bound to be left by any mind with original powers, was •anticipated in all the essentials of his doctrine by the great Germans of the latter



half of the last century, and was accompanied in it by the remarkable series of their French expositors and followers. Hence, although Coleridge is to Englishmen the type and the main source of that doctrine, he is the creator not of the doctrine itself but rather of the shape in which it has appeared among us.

It will take many years for there to be anything like unanimity in the estimation of Coleridge and of his influence on the intellect of our time. As a poet, he has taken his place. The healthier taste and more intelligent canons of poetic criticism that Coleridge was himself mainly instrumental in spreading have at last assigned to him his proper rank as one of the great names in our literature—and, if we look to the powers shown rather than to the amount of actual achievement, one of the *greatest*. But as a philosopher, the class of thinkers has scarcely yet arisen by whom he is to be judged. The limited philosophical public of this country is still too exclusively divided between those to whom Coleridge and the views he promulgated or defended are everything, and those to whom they are nothing. A true thinker cannot be justly estimated until his thoughts have worked their way into minds formed in a different school; have been wrought and moulded into consistency with all other true and relevant thoughts; when the noisy conflict of angrily opposed half-truths has subsided, and ideas that seemed incompatible have been found only to require mutual limitations.

This time has not yet come for Coleridge. The spirit of philosophy in England, like that of religion, is still rootedly sectarian. **a** Conservative thinkers and **b** liberals, **a** transcendentalists and **b** admirers of Hobbes and Locke, regard each other as unfit for philosophical dialogue. They look on each other's speculations as vitiated by a fundamental taint that makes all study of them, except for purposes of

attack, useless if not harmful. An error much like this would have occurred if Kepler had refused to profit by Ptolemy's or Tycho's observations because those astronomers believed that the sun moved round the earth; or if Priestley and Lavoisier, because they differed on the doctrine of phlogiston, had rejected each other's chemical experiments. It is indeed a still greater error than either of those would be. For in the present imperfect state of mental and social science, antagonist modes of thought are *essential*; the time will come when they are felt to be as necessary to one another in speculation as mutually checking powers are in a political constitution. Indeed, a clear insight into this necessity is the only rational or enduring basis for philosophical tolerance, the only condition under which liberality in matters of opinion can be anything better than a polite synonym for indifference between one opinion and another. (This need for opposing modes of thought has long been recognised by Continental [see Glossary] philosophers, but very few Englishmen have yet seen it.)

### Oscillation between extremes

All students of man and society who have the first thing they need for such a difficult study, namely a proper sense of its difficulties, are aware that the constant danger is not so much of accepting falsehood for truth as of mistaking part of the truth for the whole of it. It might be plausibly maintained that in almost every one of the leading controversies, past or present, in social philosophy, both sides were in the right in what they affirmed and wrong in what they denied; and that if either side had been made to accept the other's views in addition to its own, little more would have been needed to make its doctrine correct. Take for instance the question *How far has mankind gained by civilisation?*

One observer is forcibly struck by

- the multiplication of physical comforts,
- the advancement and spread of knowledge,
- the decay of superstition,
- the softening of manners,
- the decline of war and personal conflict,
- the progressive limitation of the tyranny of the strong over the weak,
- the great works accomplished throughout the globe by the co-operation of multitudes;

and he becomes that very common character, the worshipper of 'our enlightened age'. Another is struck not by the value of these advantages but by the high price paid for them:

- the slackening of individual energy and courage,
- the loss of proud and self-relying independence,
- the slavery of so much of mankind to artificial wants,
- their effeminate shrinking from even the shadow of pain,
- the dull, unexciting monotony of their lives and the passionless insipidity, and absence of any marked individuality, in their characters,
- the contrast between the narrow mechanical understanding produced by a life spent in carrying out a fixed task by fixed rules and the varied powers of the man of the woods, whose livelihood and safety constantly depend on his ability to adapt means to ends in an emergency,
- the demoralising effect of great inequalities in wealth and social rank, and
- the sufferings of the great mass of the people of civilised countries, whose wants are scarcely better provided for than those of the savage, while they are bound by a thousand fetters in lieu of the freedom and excitement that are his compensations.

Someone who attends to these things, and only to them, will be apt to infer that savage life is preferable to civilised; that the work of civilisation should as far as possible be undone; and from the premises of Rousseau he may well be led to the practical conclusions of Rousseau's disciple, Robespierre. No two thinkers can be more entirely at variance than the two I have presented—the **a** worshippers of Civilisation and **b** of Independence, of **a** the present and of **b** the remote past. Yet all that is positive in the opinions of each of them is true; and we see •how easy it would be to choose one's path if either half of the truth were the whole of it, and •how hard it may be to develop a set of practical maxims that combine both.

Another example. One person sees in a very strong light the need the great mass of mankind have of being ruled over by a degree of intelligence and virtue superior to their own. He is deeply impressed with the harm done to uneducated and uncultivated folk by weaning them from all habits of reverence, appealing to them as a competent tribunal to decide the most intricate questions, and making them think themselves capable not only of being a light to themselves but of giving the law to their superiors in culture. He sees further that cultivation, to be carried beyond a certain point, requires leisure; that leisure is the natural attribute of a hereditary aristocracy; that such a body has all the means of acquiring intellectual and moral superiority; and he can easily endow them with abundant motives for it. He cannot help seeing that aristocrats, being human, need (as do their inferiors) to be controlled and enlightened by a wisdom and goodness still greater than their own. He relies for this on reverence for a Higher ·power· above them, carefully inculcated and fostered by the course of their education. We thus see brought together all the elements of a conscientious zealot for an **aristocratic** government, supporting and supported

by an established Christian church. There is important truth in this thinker's premises. But there is a thinker of a very different kind whose premises contain an equal portion of truth. He is the one who says that an average man—even an average aristocrat—if he can subordinate the interests of other people to his own calculations or instincts of self-interest, will do so; that all governments in all ages have done so, as far as they were permitted, and generally to a ruinous extent; and that the only possible remedy is a pure **democracy**, in which the people are their own governors, and can have no selfish interest in oppressing themselves.

That's how it is with every important partial truth; there are always two conflicting modes of thought, one tending to give to that truth too large, the other to give it too small, a place: and the history of opinion is generally an oscillation between the extremes. Because of the imperfection of the human faculties, it seldom happens, even in the minds of eminent thinkers, that each partial view of their subject is credited with its worth and no more than its worth. But even if this just balance does exist in the mind of the wiser teacher, it will not exist in his disciples, let alone in the general mind. He cannot prevent what is new in his doctrine—which he is forced to insist on the most strongly because it is new—from making a disproportionate impression. The impetus needed to overcome the obstacles that resist all novelties of opinion usually carries the public mind almost as far on the opposite side of the perpendicular. Thus every excess in either direction produces a corresponding reaction; and the only improvement comes from the fact that each time the oscillation is a little less wide than before, so that there is an ever-increasing tendency to settle finally in the centre.

Now the Germano-Coleridgean doctrine is, in my view, the result of such a reaction. It expresses human mind's revolt the against the philosophy of the 18th century. It is

- ontological because the other was experimental;
- conservative because the other was innovative;
- religious because so much of the other was infidel;
- concrete and historical because the other was abstract and metaphysical;
- poetical because the other was matter-of-fact and prosaic.

In every respect it flies off in the opposite direction to its predecessor; yet faithful to the general law of improvement that I have just mentioned, it is less extreme in its opposition—denying less of what is true in the doctrine it wars against—than had been the case in any previous philosophic reaction; and in particular, far less than when the philosophy of the 18th century triumphed over what preceded it, memorably abusing its victory.

### **The dispute about sources of knowledge**

I could start my consideration of the two systems either with their highest philosophical generalisations or with their ·ground-floor· practical conclusions. The former seems preferable, because it is in their highest generalities that the difference between the two systems is most commonly known.

Every consistent scheme of philosophy has to start with a theory about •the sources of human knowledge and •the things the human faculties are capable of coming to know about. On this most comprehensive of questions the prevailing theory in the 18th century was that proclaimed by Locke, and commonly attributed to Aristotle—that all knowledge consists of generalisations from experience. According to this theory, we know nothing about nature or anything whatever external to ourselves except •the facts that present themselves to our senses and •such other facts as can by analogy

be inferred from these. There is no knowledge *a priori*; no truths knowable by the mind's inward light and based on intuitive evidence. Sensation and the mind's awareness of its own acts are not only the exclusive *sources* but the sole *materials* of our knowledge. Coleridge strongly dissents from this doctrine, as do the German philosophers since Kant (not to go further back) and most of the English since Reid. He claims that the human mind is able within certain limits to perceive the nature and properties of 'Things in themselves'. He distinguishes in the human intellect two faculties, which, in the technical language he shares with the Germans, he calls Understanding and Reason. The former faculty judges concerning phenomena, i.e. the appearances of things, and forms generalisations from these; it is the role of the latter to perceive things by direct intuition, recognising truths not knowable by our senses. These perceptions are not indeed innate, and could never have been awakened in us without experience; but they are not copies of it: experience is only the occasion [here = 'trigger'] by which they are irresistibly suggested. The appearances in nature arouse in us, by an inherent law, ideas of the invisible things that are the causes of the visible appearances, and on whose laws those appearances depend; and we then perceive that these things must have pre-existed to make the appearances possible; just as (to use a frequent illustration of Coleridge's) we see before we know that we have eyes, but once this is known to us we perceive that eyes must have pre-existed to enable us to see. Among the truths that are thus known *a priori*—by occasion of experience, but not themselves the subjects of experience—Coleridge includes •the fundamental doctrines of religion and morals, •the principles of mathematics, and •the ultimate laws even of physical nature; which he contends cannot be proved by experience, though they must be consistent with it, and would, if we knew them perfectly,

enable us to account for all observed facts and to predict all those that are not yet observed.

Everyone who concerns himself with such subjects knows that between the partisans of these two opposite doctrines there reigns a *bellum internecinum* [= 'war of mutual destruction']. Neither side is sparing in the imputation of intellectual and moral dishonesty to its antagonists' perceptions, and of pernicious consequences to their creed. *Sensualism* is the common term of abuse for the one philosophy, *mysticism* for the other. One doctrine is accused of making men beasts, the other of making them lunatics. Many on one side of the controversy sincerely believe that their adversaries are driven by a desire to break loose from moral and religious obligation; and many on the other side think that their opponents are either men fit for a madhouse or men who cunningly pander to the interests of hierarchies and aristocracies by manufacturing superfine new arguments in favour of old prejudices. I hardly need say that those who are freest with these mutual accusations are seldom those who are most at home in the real intricacies of the question, or who are best acquainted with the argumentative strength of the opposite side, or even of their own. But without going to these extreme lengths, even sober men on each side have an uncharitable view of the tendencies of the other side's opinions.

It is said that the doctrine of Locke and his followers, that all knowledge is experience generalised, leads by strict logical consequence to atheism; that Hume and other sceptics were right when they contended that it is impossible to prove a God on grounds of experience; and Coleridge (like Kant) maintains positively that the ordinary argument for a Deity, from marks of design in the universe—i.e. from the resemblance of the order in nature to the effects of human skill and contrivance—is not tenable. It is further said that the same doctrine annihilates moral obligation; reducing

morality either to the blind impulses of animal sensibility, or to a calculation of prudential consequences, both equally fatal to morality's essence. Even science, it is said, loses the character of science on this view of it, and becomes empiricism—a mere enumeration and arrangement of facts, not explaining or accounting for them, because a fact is only accounted for when we see in it the manifestation of laws which, as soon as they are perceived at all, are perceived to be *necessary*. These are the charges brought by the transcendental philosophers against the school of Locke, Hartley, and Bentham.

They in their turn allege that the transcendentalists make imagination, and not observation, the criterion of truth; that they lay down principles under which a man may enthrone his wildest dreams in the chair of philosophy, and impose them on mankind as intuitions of 'pure reason', which has in fact been done by all sorts of mystical fanatics down the centuries. And even if the private revelations of any individual Behmen or Swedenborg are disowned—i.e. outvoted, this being the only means of discrimination that the theory is said by its opponents to allow—this is still only substituting, as the test of truth, the dreams of the majority for the dreams of each individual. Any group that forms a strong enough party can at any time set up the immediate perceptions of *their* reason, i.e. of any reigning prejudice, as a truth independent of experience; a truth not only requiring no proof but to be believed in opposition to all that appears proof to the mere understanding; indeed, the more to be believed because it cannot be put into words and into the logical form of a proposition without a contradiction in terms; for no less authority than this is claimed by some transcendentalists for their *a priori* truths. And thus a ready mode is provided by which whoever is on the strongest side may dogmatise at his ease, and instead of proving his propositions may scold all

who deny them as being bereft of 'the vision and the faculty divine', or blinded to its plainest revelations by a corrupt heart.

This is a very temperate statement of the accusations these two classes of thinkers bring against each other. How much of either representation is correct cannot conveniently be discussed here. In truth, a system of consequences drawn from an opinion by an adversary of it is seldom worth much. Disputants are rarely sufficiently masters of each other's doctrines to be good judges what is fairly deducible from them, or how a consequence that seems to flow from one part of the theory may or may not be defeated by another part. To combine the different parts of a doctrine with one another, and with all admitted truths, is not indeed a small trouble or one a person is often inclined to take for other people's opinions. Enough if each does it for his own, which he has a greater interest in and is more disposed to be fair to. If we searched among men's recorded thoughts for the choicest examples of human stupidity and prejudice, our specimens would mostly come from their opinions of one another's opinions. Imputations of horrid consequences ought not to bias the judgment of any person capable of independent thought. Coleridge himself wrote: 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all.'

As to the fundamental difference of opinion respecting the sources of our knowledge (apart from the corollaries either party may have drawn from its own principle or imputed to its opponent's), the question lies far too deep in the recesses of psychology for me to discuss it here. The lists having been open ever since the dawn of philosophy, it is not surprising that the two parties should have been forced to put on their strongest armour, both of attack and of defence.

The question would not so long have remained a question if the more obvious arguments on either side had been unanswerable. Each party has been able to urge in its own favour numerous and striking facts, and reconciling these with the opposing theory has required all the metaphysical resources the opposing theory could command. You will not be surprised, then, that I here content myself with a bare statement of my opinion. It is that the truth on this much-debated question lies with the school of Locke and of Bentham. The nature and laws of 'Things in themselves', i.e. the hidden causes of the phenomena that are the objects of experience, seem to me to be radically inaccessible to the human faculties. I see no ground for believing that anything can be the object of our knowledge except •our experience and •what can be inferred from our experience by the analogies of experience itself; or for believing that there is any idea, feeling, or power in the human mind that needs some other source in order to account for it. I am therefore at issue with Coleridge on the central idea of his philosophy; and I find no need of, and have no use for, the peculiar technical terminology that he and his masters the Germans have introduced into philosophy for the double purpose of •giving logical precision to doctrines that I do not admit, and of •marking a relation between those abstract doctrines and many concrete experimental truths—a relation which this language, in my judgment, serves not to clarify but to disguise and obscure. Indeed, if it weren't for these peculiarities [see Glossary] of language, it would be hard to understand how the reproach of mysticism (which in common parlance simply means unintelligibility) has been fixed on Coleridge and the Germans in the minds of many people to whom substantially the same doctrines, when taught by Reid and Dugald Stewart in a more superficial way and less fenced round against objections, have appeared to be

the plain dictates of 'common sense', successfully asserted *against* the subtleties of metaphysics.

Yet though I think the doctrines of Coleridge and the Germans, in the pure science of mind, to be erroneous, and though I have no taste for their peculiar terminology, I am far from thinking that even in respect of this least valuable part of their intellectual exertions those philosophers have lived in vain. The doctrines of the school of Locke needed an entire renovation. To borrow a physiological illustration from Coleridge, they required, like certain secretions of the human body, to be reabsorbed into the system and secreted afresh. In what form did that philosophy generally prevail throughout Europe? In what may be the shallowest set of doctrines that were ever passed off on a cultivated age as a complete psychological system—the ideology of Condillac and his school; a system that purported to resolve all the phenomena of the human mind into 'sensation', by a process that essentially consisted in merely *calling* all states of mind, however heterogeneous, by that name; a philosophy now acknowledged to consist solely of a set of verbal generalisations, explaining nothing, distinguishing nothing, leading to nothing. That men should begin by sweeping this away was the first sign that the age of real psychology was about to commence.

In England the case, though different, was scarcely better. The philosophy of Locke, as a popular doctrine, had remained nearly as it stood in his own book, which, as its title implies, did not claim to give an account of any but the intellectual part of our nature; and even within that limited sphere it was only the start of a system. Its errors and defects have been exaggerated beyond all just bounds, but it did expose many vulnerable points to the searching criticism of the new school. The least imperfect part of it, the purely logical part, had almost dropped out of sight. With respect to those of

Locke's doctrines that are properly metaphysical: however the *sceptical* part of them may have been followed up by others, and carried beyond the point at which he stopped, the only one of his successors who attempted (and achieved) any considerable improvement and extension of the *analytical* part, thereby adding to the explanation of the human mind on Locke's principles, was Hartley. But Hartley's doctrines, so far as they are true, were so much in advance of the age, and the way had been so little prepared for them by the general tone of thinking that still prevailed even under the influence of Locke's writings, that the philosophical world did not regard them as being worthy of being attended to. Reid and Stewart were allowed to run them down uncontradicted; Brown, though a man of a similar spirit, evidently never read them; and but for the accident of their being taken up by Priestley, who transmitted them as a kind of heirloom to his Unitarian followers, the name of Hartley might have perished, or survived only as the name of a visionary physician, the author of an exploded physiological hypothesis. It may have required all the violence of the assaults made by Reid and the German school on Locke's system to recall men's minds to Hartley's principles, as alone adequate to the solution on that system of the peculiar difficulties that those assailants pressed on men's attention as altogether insoluble by it.

Coleridge, before he adopted his later philosophical views, was an enthusiastic Hartleian; so that his abandonment of the philosophy of Locke cannot be imputed to ignorance of the highest form of that philosophy that had yet appeared. His passing through that highest form without stopping at it is itself a strong reason to think there were more difficulties in the question than Hartley had solved. That anything has since been done to solve them we probably owe to the revolution in opinion of which Coleridge was one of the organs; and even in abstract metaphysics, his writings—and

those of his school of thinkers—are the richest mine from which the opposite school can draw the materials for what remains to be done to perfect their own theory.

### **The practical doctrines of the two schools**

If we now pass from the purely abstract to the concrete and practical doctrines of the two schools, we shall see still more clearly the necessity of the reaction, and the great service rendered to philosophy by its authors. This will be best shown by a survey of the state of practical philosophy in Europe, as Coleridge and his associated found it, towards the close of the last century.

The state of opinion in the latter half of the 18th century was by no means the same on the Continent of Europe as in our own island; and the difference was still greater in appearance than it was in reality. In the more advanced nations of the Continent, the prevailing philosophy had done its work completely: it had spread itself over every department of human knowledge; it had taken possession of the whole Continental mind, and scarcely one educated person was left who retained any allegiance to the opinions or institutions of ancient times. In England, the country where compromise was *born*, things had stopped far short of this; the philosophical movement had been brought to a halt at an early stage, and a peace had been patched up by concessions on both sides, between the philosophy of the time and the country's traditional institutions and creeds. Hence the aberrations of the age were generally on the Continent the extravagances of new opinions, in England the corruptions of old ones.

I hardly need to stress the deficiencies of the Continental philosophy of the last century—the so-called 'French philosophy'. That philosophy is indeed as unpopular in England

as its bitterest enemy could desire. If its faults were as well understood as they are much scolded, criticism might be considered to have finished its work. But this is not yet the case. Of the accusations currently made against the French philosophers, many are as inconsistent with a sound philosophical grasp of their thought as with charity towards the men themselves. It is not true, for example, that any of them denied moral obligation or sought to weaken its force. So far were they from deserving this accusation that they could not even tolerate the writers who, like Helvetius, ascribed a selfish origin to the feelings of morality. . . . Those writers were as much cried down among the *philosophes* [see Glossary] themselves, and the considerable amount that was true and good in them met with as little appreciation then as it does now. The error of the philosophers was rather that they trusted too much to those ·moral· feelings, believing them to be more deeply rooted in human nature and less dependent on collateral influences than they are in fact. They thought the feelings to be the natural and spontaneous growth of the human heart, so firmly fixed in it that they would survive unharmed—indeed invigorated—when the whole system of opinions and observances they were habitually intertwined with was violently torn away.

Tearing away was indeed all that most of these philosophers aimed at; they had no conception that anything else was needed. They hoped for a time when superstition, priestcraft, error and prejudice of every kind would be annihilated; some of them gradually added that despotism and hereditary privileges must share the same fate; and they never for a moment suspected that when this was accomplished the virtues and graces of humanity might fail to flourish, i.e. that when the noxious weeds had been rooted out, the soil would need to be cultivated.

In this they committed the common error of mistaking

•the state of things they had always been familiar with for  
 •the universal and natural condition of mankind. They were accustomed to seeing the human race agglomerated in large nations, all (except the occasional madman or criminal) obeying more or less strictly a set of laws prescribed by a few of their own number, and a set of moral rules prescribed by each other's opinion; renouncing the exercise of individual will and judgment except within the limits imposed by these laws and rules; and accepting the sacrifice of their individual wishes when the point was decided against them by lawful authority, or persevering only in hopes of altering the opinion of the ruling powers. Finding matters to be so generally in this condition, the philosophers apparently concluded that they could not possibly be in any other. They simply did not know what a host of civilising and restraining influences has contributed to this state of things that is so repugnant to man's self-will and love of independence, and how imperatively it demands the continuance of those influences as the condition of its own existence. The very first element of the social union, namely obedience to a government of some sort, has not been found easy to establish in the world. Among a timid and spiritless race, like the inhabitants of the vast plains of tropical countries, •passive obedience may be of natural growth; though even there I doubt whether •it has ever been found among any people with whom fatalism—i.e. submission to the pressure of circumstances as the decree of God—did not prevail as a religious doctrine. But the difficulty of inducing a brave and warlike race to submit their individual *arbitrium* to any common umpire has always been felt to be so great that nothing short of supernatural power could overcome it; and such tribes have always assigned a divine origin to the first institution of civil society. Those who knew savage man by actual experience judge very differently from those who had no acquaintance with him except in the



civilised state. In modern Europe after the fall of the Roman empire, subduing feudal anarchy and bringing the whole people of any European nation into subjection to government (although Christianity in the most concentrated form of its influence was co-operating in the work) required three times as many centuries as have elapsed since that time.

Now, if these philosophers had known human nature in any way other than through their own age and through the particular classes of society they lived among, it would have occurred to them that wherever this habitual submission to law and government has been firmly and durably established, and yet the vigour and manliness of character that resisted its establishment have been to some extent preserved, certain conditions have been fulfilled, of which the following may be regarded as the principal.

### **Requirements for political stability**

(1) There has existed, for all who were accounted citizens—for all who were not slaves, kept down by brute force—a system of education, beginning with infancy and continued through life, of which one main and incessant ingredient was restraining discipline—training the human being in the habit, and thence the power, of

- subordinating his personal impulses and aims to what were regarded as the goals of society,
- adhering against all temptation to the course of conduct that those ends prescribed,
- controlling in himself all the feelings that were liable to militate against those goals, and encouraging all that tended towards them.

Every outward motive that the authorities could command, and every inward power or drive that their knowledge of human nature enabled them to evoke, were to serve this

purpose. The entire civil and military policy of the ancient commonwealths was such a system of training; in modern nations its place has been attempted to be taken principally by religious teaching. And whenever the strictness of the restraining discipline was somewhat relaxed, the natural tendency of mankind to anarchy reasserted itself to a corresponding extent; the State became disorganised from within; mutual conflict for selfish ends neutralised the energies required for the contest against *natural* causes of evil; and the nation, after a longer or briefer interval of progressive decline, became the slave of a despotism or else the prey of a foreign invader.

(2) The second condition of permanent political society has been the existence, in some form or other, of the feeling of allegiance, or loyalty. This feeling may vary in its objects, and is not confined to any particular form of government; but whether in a democracy or in a monarchy, its essence is always the same, namely that there is in the constitution of the State something that is settled, something permanent, and not to be called in question; something that is generally agreed to have a right to be where it is and to be secure against disturbance, whatever else may change. This feeling may attach itself—as among the Jews (and indeed in most of the commonwealths of antiquity)—to a common God or gods, the protectors and guardians of their State. Or it may attach itself to certain persons who are deemed to be the rightful guides and guardians of the rest, whether by divine appointment, by long prescription, or by the general recognition of their superior capacity and worthiness. Or it may attach itself to laws; to ancient liberties, or ordinances. Or finally (and this is the only form in which the feeling is likely to exist from now on) it may attach itself to the principles of individual freedom and political and social equality, as realised in institutions that don't yet exist anywhere

except perhaps in a rudimentary state. But in every political society that has had a durable existence there has been some fixed point, something that men agreed in holding sacred. Wherever freedom of discussion was a recognised principle, it was of course lawful to contest this in theory, but no-one could either fear or hope to see it shaken in practice; in short (except perhaps during some temporary crisis), it was by common consent placed beyond discussion. And the necessity of this can easily be made evident. A State never is—and until mankind are vastly improved, can never hope to be—for any long time exempt from internal dissension; for there has never been any state of society in which collisions did not occur between the immediate interests and passions of powerful sections of the people. What, then, enables society to weather these storms, and pass through turbulent times without any permanent weakening of the guarantees of peaceable existence? Precisely this:

However important the interests men were quarrelling about, the conflict did not •affect the fundamental principles of the system of social union that happened to exist, •or threaten large portions of the community with subversion of the basis on which they had built their calculations and with which their hopes and aims had become identified.

But when the questioning of these fundamental principles, rather than being the *occasional* disease or salutary medicine, is the *habitual* condition of the body politic, and when all the violent animosities are called forth that spring naturally from such a situation, the State is virtually in a position of civil war, and cannot long remain free from it in act and fact.

(3) The third essential condition of stability in political society is a strong and active force of *cohesion* among the members of the same community or state. I need scarcely

say that I do not mean 'nationality' in the vulgar sense of the term:

- a senseless antipathy to foreigners,
- an indifference to the general welfare of the human race, or an unjust preference for the supposed interests of our own country;
- a cherishing of bad peculiarities [see Glossary] because they are national, or a refusal to adopt what has been found good by other countries.

I mean a force of sympathy, not of hostility; of union, not of separation. I mean a feeling of common interest among those who live under the same government and are contained within the same natural or historical boundaries. I mean that one part of the community do not consider themselves as foreigners with regard to another part; that they set a value on their connection; feel that they are one people, that their lot is cast together, that evil to any of their fellow-countrymen is evil to themselves; and do not selfishly want to free themselves from their share of any common inconvenience by breaking the connection. Everyone knows how strong this feeling was in the ancient commonwealths that attained any durable greatness. How happily Rome, in spite of all its tyranny, succeeded in establishing the feeling of a common country among the provinces of its vast and divided empire, will be obvious when anyone who has given due attention to the subject takes the trouble to point it out.

·START OF LONG FOOTNOTE·

I am glad to quote a striking passage from Coleridge's *Church and State* on this very subject. He is speaking of the misdeeds of England in Ireland; towards which misdeeds this Tory entertained feelings scarcely surpassed by the feelings aroused by M. de Beaumont's recent masterly exposure. (I call him a Tory because the Tories, who neglected him in his

lifetime, are eager to give themselves the credit of his name after his death.) He writes:

‘Let us discharge what may well be regarded as a debt of justice from every well-educated Englishman to his Roman Catholic fellow-subjects of the Sister Island. At least, let us ourselves understand the true cause of the evil as it now exists. To what and to whom is the present state of Ireland mainly to be attributed? I answer aloud, that it is mainly attributable •to those who during a period of little less than a century used as a substitute what Providence had given into their hand as an opportunity; •to those who chose to consider as superseding the most sacred duty a code of law that could be excused only on the plea that it enabled them to perform their duty; •to the sloth and wastefulness, the weakness and wickedness, of the gentry, clergy and governors of Ireland, who persevered in preferring intrigue, violence, and selfish expatriation [shipping goods to England] to a system of preventive and remedial measures, the efficacy of which had been warranted for them alike by the whole provincial history of ancient Rome, and by the happy results of the few exceptions to the contrary scheme unhappily pursued by their and our ancestors.

‘I can imagine no work of genius that would more appropriately decorate the dome or wall of a Senate-house than an abstract of Irish history from the landing of Strongbow to the battle of the Boyne or to a yet later period, embodied in intelligible emblems—an allegorical history-piece designed in the spirit of a Rubens or a Michelangelo, and with the wild lights, ominous shades and saturated colours of a Rembrandt, Caravaggio, and Spagnoletti. All that would be needed to complete the great moral and political lesson by the historic contrast is some equally effective means to possess the spectator’s mind with the state and condition of ancient Spain less than half a century after the final conclusion of

an obstinate and almost unremitting conflict of two hundred years by Agrippa’s subjugation of the Cantabrians. . . . At the breaking up of the Roman Empire, the West Goths conquered the country and made division of the lands. Then came eight centuries of Moorish domination. Yet so deeply had Roman wisdom impressed the fairest characters of the Roman mind that even today, if we except a comparatively insignificant portion of Arabic derivatives, the natives throughout the whole Spanish Peninsula speak a language less different from the *Romana rustica* or provincial Latin of the times of Lucan and Seneca than any two of its dialects differ from each other. I hope the time is coming when our political economists will study the provincial policy of the ancients in detail, under the auspices of hope, for immediate and practical purposes.’

•END OF FOOTNOTE•

[Picking up from the remark about Rome’s success ‘in establishing the feeling of a common country’ across its vast empire.] In modern times the countries that have had that feeling in the strongest degree have been the most powerful countries; England, France, and—in proportion to their territory and resources—Holland and Switzerland; while England in its connection with Ireland is one of the most striking examples of what results from its absence. Every Italian knows why Italy is under a foreign yoke; every German knows what maintains despotism in the Austrian empire; the evils of Spain flow as much from the absence of nationality among the Spaniards themselves as from the presence of it in their relations with foreigners; while the completest illustration of all is provided by the republics of South America, where the parts of a single state adhere together so slightly that as soon as any province thinks itself aggrieved by the general government it proclaims itself a separate nation.

The French philosophers of the 18th century unfortunately overlooked these essential requisites of civil society. Indeed, they found **(1)** and **(2)** and most of what nourishes and invigorates **(3)** to be already undermined by the vices of the institutions and men that were set up as the guardians and bulwarks of them. If innovators in their *theories* disregarded the elementary principles of the social union, Conservatives in their *practice* had set the first example. The existing order of things had ceased to reflect those first principles: because of the force of circumstances and the short-sighted selfishness of its administrators, it no longer satisfied the essential conditions of permanent society, and was therefore tottering to its fall. But the philosophers did not see this. Bad as the existing system was in the days of its decrepitude, according to them it was still worse when it actually did what it now only claimed to do. Instead of feeling that the effect of a bad social order in undermining the necessary foundations of society itself is one of the worst of its many harms, the philosophers only saw, joyfully, that it was undermining its own foundations. In the weakening of all government they saw only the weakening of bad government; and they thought they could not better employ themselves than in finishing the task so well begun: •discrediting all that still remained of restraining discipline, because it rested on the ancient and decayed creeds against which they made war; •unsettling everything that was still considered settled, making men doubtful of the few things they still felt certain of; and •uprooting what little remained in the people's minds of reverence for anything above them, of respect to any of the limits that custom and law had set to the indulgence of each man's fancies or inclinations, or of attachment to any of the things that belonged to them as a nation and made them feel their unity as such.

### Political rebuilding

No doubt much of this was unavoidable, and not fairly a matter for blame. When the vices of all constituted authorities, added to natural causes of decay, have eaten the heart out of old institutions and beliefs, and the growth of knowledge and the altered circumstances of the age would have required institutions and creeds different from these even if they had remained uncorrupt, I am far from saying that any level of wisdom on the part of speculative thinkers could avert the political catastrophes—and the subsequent moral anarchy and unsettledness—that we have witnessed and are witnessing. Still less do I claim that the forces and influences that I have listed as conditions of the permanent existence of the social union, once they have been lost, can ever be, or should be attempted to be, revived in connection with the same institutions or the same doctrines as before. When society needs to be rebuilt, it is useless trying to rebuild it on the old plan. By the union of •the enlarged views and analytic powers of speculative men with •the observation and designing skills of men of practice, better institutions and better doctrines must be developed; and until this is done we cannot hope for much improvement in our present condition. The effort to do it in the 18th century would have been premature, as the attempts of the Economistes (who, of all persons then living, came nearest to it, and who were the first to form clearly the idea of a Social Science), sufficiently testify. The time was not ripe for doing effectively any work except that of destruction. But the work of the day should have been done in such a way as not to impede that of the morrow. No-one can calculate what struggles that the cause of improvement has yet to undergo might have been spared if the philosophers of the 18th century had done anything like justice to the Past. Their mistake was that they

did not acknowledge the historical value of much that had ceased to be useful, and did not see that institutions and creeds that had become effete had given essential services to civilisation and still filled, in the human mind and in the arrangements of society, a place that could not without great peril be left empty. Their mistake was that they did not recognise in many of the errors they attacked corruptions of important truths, and in many of the institutions most infected with abuse necessary elements of civilised society, though in a form no longer suited to the age. So they involved many great truths in a common discredit with the errors that had grown up around them. They threw away the shell without preserving the kernel; and trying to new-model society without the binding forces that hold society together they met with such success as might have been expected.

Now I claim on behalf of the philosophers of the reactionary school—of the school to which Coleridge belongs—that they have *done* exactly what I have just blamed the philosophers of the 18th century for *not* doing.

Every reaction in opinion inevitably brings into view the portion of the truth that was overlooked before. It was natural that •a philosophy that anathematised [= 'solemnly condemned'] everything that had been going on in Europe from Constantine to Luther, or even to Voltaire, should be succeeded by •another that was both a severe critic of the new tendencies of society and an impassioned defender of what was good in the past. This is the easy merit of all Tory and Royalist writers. But the peculiarity [see Glossary] of the Germano-Coleridgean school is that they saw beyond the immediate controversy to the fundamental principles involved in *all* such controversies. They were the first (except a solitary thinker here and there) who inquired with any comprehensiveness or depth into the inductive [see Glossary] laws of the existence and growth of human society. They were

the first to bring prominently forward the three requisites I have listed [on pages 38–40] as essential forces behind all permanent forms of social existence; as *forces*, I say, and not as mere accidental advantages of the particular politics or religion that the writer happened to patronise. They were the first who pursued philosophically and in the spirit of Baconian investigation, not only this inquiry, but others behind and collateral to it. They thus produced not a piece of party advocacy but a philosophy of society in the only form in which that is still possible, namely as a philosophy of history; not a defence of particular ethical or religious doctrines, but a contribution—the largest made by any class of thinkers—towards the philosophy of human culture.

### **Learning from history**

The brilliant light that has been thrown on history during the last half century has come almost wholly from this school. The disrespect in which history was held by the *philosophes* is notorious; one of the soberest of them, D'Alembert I believe, was the author of the wish that all record of past events could be blotted out. And indeed the ordinary way of writing history and the ordinary way of drawing lessons from it were almost sufficient to excuse this contempt. But the *philosophes* saw what wasn't true, not what was. It is no wonder that they—who looked on most of what had been handed down from the past as sheer hindrances to man's achieving a well-being that would otherwise be easy to get—should content themselves with a very superficial study of history. But the case was otherwise with those who regarded the maintenance of society at all, and especially its maintenance in a state of progressive advancement, as a very difficult task that had actually been achieved, however imperfectly, for a number of centuries against the strongest

obstacles. It was natural that they should feel a deep interest in discovering how this had been done, and be led to ask •what the requisites were of the permanent existence of the body politic, and •what the conditions were that had made the preservation of these permanent requisites compatible with perpetual and progressive improvement. And hence that series of great writers and thinkers from Herder to Michelet, by whom history—that was till then ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’ [quoted from *Macbeth*—has been made a science of causes and effects. By making the facts and events of the past have a meaning and an intelligible place in the gradual evolution of humanity, they have *both* given history (even to the imagination) an interest like romance, *and* provided the only means of predicting and guiding the future, by unfolding the agencies that have produced and still maintain the Present.

The same causes have naturally led the same class of thinkers to do for the philosophy of human culture what their predecessors never could have done. The tendency of their speculations compelled them to see the character of the national education in any political society as being both

- the principal cause of its permanence as a society, by operating as a system of restraining discipline, and
- the chief source of its progressiveness, to the extent that it called forth and invigorated the active faculties.

Besides, not to have looked on the culture of the inward man as the problem of problems would have been incompatible with the Christian belief that many of these philosophers had, and the recognition by all of them of Christianity’s historical value and its large role in the progress of mankind. But here, too, they rose to ·very general· principles and did not stay with the particular case ·of a single religion·. The culture of the human being had been carried to extraordinary heights and human nature had exhibited many of its noblest mani-

festations not only in Christian countries but in the ancient world—in Athens, Sparta, Rome. Indeed even barbarians such as the Germans or still more unmitigated savages, the wild Indians, all had their own education, their own culture; and so did the Chinese, the Egyptians and the Arabs. In each case, this culture, whatever might be its tendency on the whole, had been successful in some respect or other. Every form of polity, every condition of society, whatever else it had done, had formed its type of national character. What that type was, and how it had been made to be what it was, were questions that the metaphysician might overlook, but the historical philosopher could not. Accordingly, the views about the various elements of human culture and the causes influencing the formation of national character, which pervade the writings of the Germano-Coleridgean school, throw into the shade everything that had been achieved before or that has been attempted simultaneously by any other school. Such views are chiefly the characteristic feature of the Goethian period of German literature, and are richly diffused through the historical and critical writings of the new French school, as well as of Coleridge and his followers.

In this long [from page 32 to here] though most compressed dissertation on the Continental philosophy preceding the reaction, and on the nature of the reaction directed against that philosophy, I have unavoidably been led to speak of the movement itself rather than of Coleridge’s particular share in it; and, given that he came somewhat later, his share was necessarily a subordinate one. And it would be useless, even if my limits permitted, to bring together from the scattered writings of a man who produced no systematic work any of the fragments that he may have contributed to an edifice that is still incomplete, and even the general character of which I cannot have made perfectly intelligible to those who are not acquainted with the theory itself. My aim is to invite

readers to the study of the original sources, not to substitute for such a study. What was peculiar to Coleridge will be better exhibited when I now proceed to review the state of popular philosophy immediately preceding him in our own island; which was different in some significant respects from the contemporaneous Continental philosophy.

### **Setting the scene for Coleridge: politics**

In England the philosophical speculations of the age had not—except in a few highly metaphysical minds, whose example served to deter rather than to invite others—taken such an audacious flight, or achieved anything like as complete a victory over the counteracting influences, as was achieved on the Continent. There is in the English mind, both in speculation and in practice, a highly salutary shrinking from all extremes. But as this shrinking is an instinct of caution rather than a result of insight, it is too ready to accept any medium merely because it is a medium, and to agree to a union of the disadvantages of both extremes instead of a union of their advantages. The circumstances of the age, too, were unfavourable to decided opinions.

- The peace that followed the great struggles of the Reformation and the Commonwealth;
- the final victory over Popery and Puritanism, Jacobitism and Republicanism, and
- the lulling of the controversies that kept speculation and spiritual consciousness alive;
- the lethargy that came over all governors and teachers after their position in society became fixed; and
- the growing absorption of all classes in material interests

—all this caused the diffusion of a state of mind with less deep inward workings and less ability to interpret those it did

have, than had existed for centuries. The age seemed smitten with an incapacity for producing deep or strong feeling such as at least could *ally itself* with meditative habits. There were few poets, and none of a high order; and philosophy fell mostly into the hands of men of a dry prosaic nature, who had not enough of the materials of human feeling in them to be able to imagine any of its more complex and mysterious manifestations; all of which they either left out of their theories, or introduced with explanations that could not be accepted as adequate by anyone who had experienced the feelings. An age like this, an age without earnestness, was the natural era of compromises and half-convictions.

To make out a case for the feudal and ecclesiastical institutions of modern Europe was by no means impossible; they had a meaning, had existed for honest ends, and an honest theory of them could be made. But the administration of those institutions had long ceased to square with any honest theory. It was impossible to justify them in principle except on grounds that •condemned them in practice and in any case •had little or no recognition in the philosophy of the 18th century. So the natural tendency of that philosophy, everywhere but in England, was to seek the extinction of those institutions. In England it would doubtless have done the same if it [= the tendency] had been strong enough; but because this was beyond its strength, there had to be an adjustment between the rival powers. Neither party cared about the goals of existing institutions, the work that was to be done by teachers and governors, and that was all flung overboard. The teachers and governors *did* care about the wages paid for that work, and those wages were secured to them. The existing institutions in Church and State were to be preserved inviolate, in outward appearance at least, but were required to be in practice as much a nullity as possible. The Church continued to 'rear her mitred front in

courts and palaces', but not as in the days of Hildebrand or Becket, as the champion of •arts against arms, of •the serf against the seigneur, •peace against war, or •spiritual principles and powers against the domination of animal force. Nor even (as in the days of Latimer and John Knox) as a body divinely commissioned to train the nation in a knowledge of God and obedience to his laws, whatever became of temporal principalities and powers, and whether this end might not effectively be achieved by their assistance or by trampling them under foot.

No; but the people of England liked old things, and nobody knew what might fill the place left vacant by the abolition of such a conspicuous institution; and *quieta ne movere* [= 'don't interfere with things that are settled'] was the favourite doctrine of those times. Therefore, on condition of not making too much noise about *religion* or taking it too much in earnest, the *church* was supported, even by philosophers, as a 'bulwark against fanaticism', a sedative for the religious spirit to prevent it from disturbing the harmony of society or the tranquillity of states. The clergy of the establishment thought they had a good bargain on these terms, and kept its conditions very faithfully.

Also, the State was no longer regarded (as it was in the old ideal) as a concentration of the force of all the individuals of the nation in the hands of certain of its members, to accomplish whatever could be best accomplished by systematic co-operation. It was found that the State was a bad judge of society's needs, that in reality it cared very little for them, and that when it tried anything beyond a the police against crime and b arbitration of disputes that are indispensable to social existence, its proceedings were usually prompted by the private harmful interest of some class or individual. The natural inference would have been that the constitution of the State was somehow not suited to the existing needs of

society, having indeed descended—with hardly any changes that could be avoided—from a time when the most prominent requirements of society were quite different. This conclusion, however, was shrunk from; and it required the peculiarities of very recent times, and the speculations of the Bentham school, to produce even a considerable tendency that way. The existing Constitution, and all the arrangements of existing society, continued to be applauded as the best possible. The celebrated theory of the three powers was got up, which made the excellence of our Constitution consist in doing less harm than would be done by any other form of government. Government altogether was regarded as a necessary evil, and was required to hide itself, making itself as little felt as possible. The cry of the people was not 'Help us', 'Guide us', 'Do for us the things we cannot do, and instruct us in how to do well those that we can'—and truly asking for such help from such rulers would have been a bitter jest. The cry was 'Let us alone!' Power to decide b questions of *meum* and *tuum*, and to protect society from a open violence and from some of the most dangerous modes of fraud, could not be withheld; the Government was left in possession of these functions, and the public came to expect it to confine itself to them.

### Setting the scene for Coleridge: religion

Such was the prevailing tone of English belief in temporal matters; what was it in spiritual ones? Here too a similar system of compromise had been at work. Those who pushed their philosophical speculations to the denial of the received religious belief, whether they went to the extent of unbelief or only of heterodoxy, met with little encouragement; neither religion itself nor the accepted forms of it were at all shaken by the few attacks made on them from outside.



But the philosophy of the time made itself felt as effectively in another fashion; it pushed its way *into* religion. The *a priori* arguments for a God were first dismissed. This was indeed inevitable. The internal evidences of Christianity shared nearly the same fate: if not absolutely thrown aside, they fell into the background and were little thought of. In forgetfulness of the most solemn warnings of the Author of Christianity, as well as of the Apostle who was the main diffuser of it through the world, belief in his religion was left to stand on *miracles*—a species of evidence which, according to the universal belief of the early Christians themselves, was by no means peculiar [see Glossary] to true religion; and it is melancholy to see on what frail reeds able defenders of Christianity preferred to rest, rather than on the better evidence that alone gave to their so-called evidences any value as a collateral confirmation. In the interpretation of Christianity the most obvious *bibliolatry* prevailed, that being Coleridge's term for the superstitious worship of particular texts, which persecuted Galileo and in our own day condemned the discoveries of geology. Men whose faith in Christianity rested on the literal infallibility of the sacred volume shrank in terror from the idea that the scheme of Providence could have allowed that the human opinions and mental habits of the particular writers might mix with and colour their way of conceiving and narrating the divine transactions. Yet this slavery to the letter has not only •treated as an objection to revelation every difficulty that envelops the most unimportant passage in the Bible, but has •paralysed many a well-meant effort to bring Christianity home to human experience and capacities of apprehension—through the thought that much of it had better be left *in nubibus* [= 'in a state of suspension'] because in the attempt to make the mind seize hold of it as a reality some text might be found to stand in the way. It might have been expected that this

idolatry of the words of Scripture would at least have saved its doctrines from being tampered with by human notions; but the contrary proved to be the effect; for the vague and sophistical [see Glossary] mode of interpreting texts, which was necessary to reconcile things that were plainly irreconcilable, created a habit of playing fast and loose with Scripture and finding in it or leaving out of it whatever one pleased. Hence, while Christianity was in theory and in intention accepted and submitted to unconditionally, much alacrity was in fact displayed in accommodating it to the accepted philosophy and even to the popular notions of the time. To take only one example, but such a striking one as to be *instar omnium* [= 'a prime example of the type']. If there is any one requirement of Christianity less doubtful than another, it is that of being spiritually-minded; of loving and practising good from a pure love, simply because it is good. But one of the errors of the philosophy of the age was that all virtue is self-interest; and accordingly, in the text-book adopted by the Church (in one of its universities) for instruction in moral philosophy, the reason for doing good is declared to be that God is stronger than we are and can damn us if we do not. This is no exaggeration of the views of Paley, and hardly even of the crudity of his language.

### Coleridge as a blessing

Thus on the whole England did not have the benefits (such as they were) of either the new ideas or the old. We were just sufficiently under the influence of each to render the other powerless. We had a Government that we respected too much to try to change it, but not enough to trust it with any power or look to it for any services that were not compelled. We had a Church that had ceased to fulfil the honest purposes of a church but which we made a great

point of keeping up as the pretence or simulacrum of one. We had a highly spiritual religion (which we were instructed to obey from selfish motives), and the most mechanical and worldly notions on every other subject; and we were so afraid of lacking reverence for each particular syllable of the book that contained our religion that we let its most important meanings slip through our fingers, and entertained the most grovelling conceptions of its spirit and general purposes. This was not a state of things that could recommend itself to any earnest mind. It was certain before long to call forth two sorts of men—one demanding the extinction of the institutions and creeds that had hitherto existed, the other that they be made a reality; one pressing the new doctrines to their utmost consequences, the other reasserting the best meaning and purposes of the old. The first type reached its greatest height in Bentham, the second in Coleridge.

I hold that these two sorts of men, who seem to be enemies and believe themselves to be so, are really allies. The powers they wield are opposite poles of one great force of progression. What was really hateful and contemptible was the state that preceded them, and that each in its way has been trying now for many years to improve. Each ought to hail with rejoicing the advent of the other. But most of all an enlightened Radical or Liberal ought to rejoice over such a Conservative as Coleridge. For such a Radical must know •that the Constitution and the Church of England, and the religious opinions and political maxims professed by their supporters, are not mere frauds or sheer nonsense; •that they were not at first invented and then all along maintained for the sole purpose of picking people's pockets, without aiming at—or being found conducive to—any honest end during the whole process. Nothing of which that is a sufficient account would have lasted a tenth part of five, eight, or ten centuries in the most improving period and

(during much of that period) the most improving nation in the world. These things, we can depend on it, were not always without much good in them, however little of it may now be left; and reformers ought to hail as a brother reformer the man who points out what this good is; what it is that we have a right to expect from things established—what they are bound to do for us as the justification for their being established, so that they may be recalled to it and compelled to do it, or the impossibility of their any longer doing it may be conclusively shown. What is any case for reform good for unless it has passed this test? How can we determine whether a thing is fit to exist without first considering what purposes it exists for and whether it is still capable of fulfilling them?

I do not have room here to consider Coleridge's Conservative philosophy in all its aspects, or in relation to all the quarters from which objections might be raised against it. I shall consider it in relation to Reformers, and especially to Benthamites. I would like to help them to determine whether they prefer to engage with a Conservative philosophers or with b Conservative dunces; and whether, since there *are* Tories, it would be better for them to learn their Toryism from b Lord Eldon or even Sir Robert Peel or from a Coleridge.

### **Church establishment**

Take, for instance, Coleridge's view of the grounds for a Church Establishment. He treats any institution by investigating what he terms the Idea of it, or what in common parlance would be called the principle involved in it. According to him, the idea or principle of a national church, and of the Church of England considered as a national church, is the setting aside of a portion of the land (or of a right to a portion of its produce) as a fund. For what purpose?

For the worship of God? For the performance of religious ceremonies? No; for the advancement of knowledge, and the civilisation and cultivation of the community. He does not call this fund Church-property, but ‘the nationalty’—a word coined by him to mean national property. He considers it as destined for [the following quotation from Coleridge runs to the end of the paragraph] ‘the support and maintenance of a permanent class or order, with the following duties. A certain smaller number were to remain at the fountainheads of the humanities, in cultivating and enlarging the knowledge already possessed, and in watching over the interests of physical and moral science; being likewise the instructors of such as constituted, or were to constitute, the remaining more numerous classes of the order. The members of this latter and far more numerous body were to be distributed throughout the country, so as not to leave even the smallest integral part or division without a resident guide, guardian, and instructor; the objects and final intention of the whole order being these—•to preserve the stores and to guard the treasures of past civilisation, and thus to bind the present with the past; •to perfect and add to the same, and thus to connect the present with the future; but especially •to diffuse through the whole community, and to every native entitled to its laws and rights, the quantity and quality of knowledge that was indispensable both for the understanding of those rights, and for the performance of the corresponding duties; finally, •to secure for the nation an equality (at least) with the neighbouring states in that character of general civilisation which—more than fleets, armies and revenue—is the basis for its defensive and offensive power.’

This organised body, set apart and endowed for the cultivation and diffusion of knowledge, is not in Coleridge’s view necessarily a religious corporation. [The next two paragraphs are quoted from chapter 5 of Coleridge’s *Church and State*.]

‘Religion may be an indispensable ally, but is not the essential constitutive end, of that national institute which is improperly called “the Church”, a name which in its best sense is exclusively appropriate to the Church of Christ. The *clerisy* [see Glossary] of the nation or national church, in the primary meaning and original intention of that word, comprehended the learned of all kinds, the sages and professors of the law and jurisprudence, of medicine and physic, of music, of military and civil architecture, with the mathematical disciplines as the common organ of those; in short, all the so-called liberal arts and sciences, the possession and application of which constitute the civilisation of a country, as well as the theological. The last was indeed placed at the head of all, and it was entitled to precedence. But why? Because under the name of theology or divinity were contained •the interpretation of languages, •the conservation and tradition of past events, the momentous epochs and revolutions of the race and nation, •the continuation of the records, logic, ethics, and the determination of ethical science in application to the rights and duties of men in all their various relations, social and civil; and lastly •the ground-knowledge, the *prima scientia* as it was named—philosophy, or the doctrine and discipline of ideas.

Theology formed only a part of the objects, the theologians formed only a portion of the clerks or clergy, of the national Church. The theological order deserved its precedence, but not because its members were priests whose office was to placate the invisible powers and superintend the interests that survive the grave; or as being exclusively or even principally devoted to sacrifices or temple rituals (when those occurred, they were an accident of the age, a misgrowth of ignorance and oppression, a falsification of the constitutive principle and not a constituent part of it). No; the theologians took the lead because the science of

theology was the root and the trunk of the knowledge of civilised man; because it gave unity and the circulating sap of life to all other sciences, by virtue of which alone they could be contemplated as forming collectively the living tree of knowledge. It had precedence because under the name “theology” were comprised all the main aids, instruments, and materials of national education, the *nisus formativus* [= ‘life force’] of the body politic, the shaping and informing spirit which brings out the latent powers in all the natives of the soil, training them to be citizens of the country, free subjects of the realm. And, lastly, because to divinity belong those fundamental truths that are the common groundwork of our civil and our religious duties, as indispensable to a right view of our temporal concerns as to a rational faith respecting our immortal well-being. Without celestial observations, even terrestrial charts cannot be accurately constructed.’

According to Coleridge, the nationality or national property ‘cannot rightfully—and without foul wrong to the nation never has been—alienated from its original purposes’, from the promotion of ‘a continuing and progressive civilisation’ to the benefit of individuals or to any public purpose of merely economical or material interest. But the State may withdraw the fund from its actual holders, for the better execution of its purposes. There is no sanctity attached to the means, but only to the ends. The fund is not dedicated to any particular scheme of religion, nor even to religion at all; religion comes into it only as an instrument of civilisation, along with all the other instruments. [The rest of this paragraph is quoted from chapter 6 of Coleridge’s *Church and State*.] ‘I do not assert that the proceeds from the nationality cannot be rightfully vested except in what we now mean by clergymen and the established clergy. I have everywhere implied the contrary. . . . In relation to the national church, Christianity,

i.e. the Church of Christ, is a blessed accident, a providential boon, a grace of God. . . . As the olive tree is said in its growth to fertilise the surrounding soil, to invigorate the roots of the vines in its immediate neighbourhood, and to improve the strength and flavour of the wines, such is the relation of the Christian and the national Church. But as the olive is not the same plant as the vine, or as the elm or poplar (that is, the State) with which the vine is wedded; and as the vine with its prop can exist, though in less perfection, without the olive, even so Christianity—and thus any particular scheme of theology *derived* from Christianity and supposed by its partisans to be *deduced* from it—is not an essential part of the being of the national Church, however conducive or even indispensable it may be to its well-being.’

What would Sir Robert Inglis, or Sir Robert Peel, or Mr Spooner say to such a doctrine as this? Will they thank Coleridge for this advocacy of Toryism? What would become of the three years’ debates on the Appropriation Clause, which so disgraced this country before the face of Europe? Will the ends of practical Toryism be much served by a theory under which the Royal Society might claim a part of the Church property with as much right as the bench of bishops, if science could be better promoted by endowing that body as the French Institute is endowed? a theory by which the State, in the conscientious exercise of its judgment, having decided that the Church of England does not fulfil the object for which the nationality was intended, might transfer its endowments to any other ecclesiastical body, or to any other body not ecclesiastical, which it thought to be more competent to fulfil those objects; might establish any other sect—or all sects, or no sect at all—if it should think that in the divided condition of religious opinion in this country the State can no longer with advantage attempt the complete religious instruction of its people, but must for the present

content itself with providing secular instruction and any religious teaching that all can take part in, leaving each sect to apply to its own communion that which they all agree in considering as the keystone of the arch? I believe this to be the true state of affairs in Great Britain at the present time. I am far from thinking it other than a serious evil. I entirely admit that if someone is fit to be a teacher, his view of religion will be intimately connected with his view of all the greatest things that he has to teach. Unless the teachers who give instruction on those other subjects are at liberty also to enter freely on religion, the scheme of education will be somewhat fragmentary and incoherent. But the State at present has only the option of such an imperfect scheme, or of entrusting the whole business to perhaps the most unfit body for the exclusive charge of it that could be found among persons of any intellectual attainments, namely, the established clergy as at present trained and composed. Such a body would have no chance of being selected as the exclusive administrators of the nationalty [see Glossary] on any basis except that of divine right, which is the basis openly accepted by the only other school of Conservative philosophy that is trying to raise its head in this country—that of the new Oxford theologians.

Coleridge's merit in this matter seems to me to consist in two things. **(1)** By setting in a clear light •what a national church establishment ought to be, and •what by the very fact of its existence it must be held to claim to be, he has pronounced the severest satire on •what in fact it is. There is indeed some difference between •Coleridge's church, in which the schoolmaster forms the first step in the hierarchy 'who, in due time and under condition of a faithful performance of his arduous duties, should succeed to the pastorate', and •the Church of England such as we now see. But to say *the Church* and mean only *the clergy* 'constituted the first and fundamental apostasy', Coleridge

thought. He and the thoughts that have come from him have done more than Dissenters and Radicals could have done in thrice the time to make the Church ashamed of the evil of its ways and to produce that movement of improvement from within, which has begun where it ought to begin, at the Universities and among the younger clergy, and which must proceed in step with the assault carried on from without if this sect-ridden country is ever to be really taught.

**(2)** I honour Coleridge for having rescued from the discredit in which the corruptions of the English Church had involved everything connected with it, and for having vindicated against Bentham and Adam Smith and the whole 18th century, the principle of an endowed class, for the cultivation of learning and for diffusing its results among the community. That such a class is likely to be behind the progress of knowledge instead of ahead of it is an induction [see Glossary] erroneously inferred from the peculiar circumstances of the last two centuries, in contradiction to all the rest of modern history. Though we have seen much of the abuses of endowments, we have not seen what this country might become through a proper administration of them, as I trust we shall not see what it would be without them. On this subject I am entirely at one with Coleridge, and with the other great defender of endowed establishments, Dr. Chalmers; and I regard the definitive establishment of this fundamental principle as one of the permanent benefits that political science owes to the Conservative philosophers.

### Coleridge on the constitution

Coleridge's theory of the Constitution is as worthy of notice as his theory of the Church. He declares that he never could elicit one ray of common sense from the Delolme and Blackstone doctrine of the balance of the three powers,

any more than he could from the balance of trade. But he does hold that there is an Idea of the Constitution, of which he says: ‘•Because our whole history, from Alfred onwards, demonstrates the continued influence of such an idea or ultimate aim in the minds of our forefathers, in their characters and functions as public men, both in what they resisted and what they claimed; in the institutions and forms of polity that they established and with regard to the ones against which they more or less successfully contended; •because the result has been a progressive—though not always a direct or fair—advance in the gradual realisation of the idea; and •because it is actually though not adequately represented in a corresponding system of means really existing; we are entitled to speak of the idea itself as actually existing, i.e. as a principle existing in the only way a principle can exist—in the minds and consciences of the persons whose duties it prescribes and whose rights it determines.’ This fundamental idea ‘is at the same time the final criterion by which all particular schemes of government must tried; for only here can we find the great constructive principles of our representative system—the only standard by which we can ascertain

- what are excrescences, symptoms of fever, and marks of degeneration,
- what are native growths, or changes naturally attendant on the progressive development of the original germ, symptoms of immaturity perhaps but not of disease, and
- what are changes in the growth due to qualities of the soil and surrounding elements, qualities that are defective or faulty but cannot be remedied, or only very slowly.’

Of these principles he gives the following account: ‘It is the chief of many blessings derived from the insular character

and circumstances of our country that our social institutions have formed themselves out of *our* needs and interests; that long and fierce as the birth-struggle and growing pains have been, the antagonist powers have been of our own system, and have been allowed to work out their final balance with less disturbance from external forces than was possible in the Continental States. . . . Now, in every country of civilised men—i.e. every country acknowledging the rights of property, and by means of determined boundaries and common laws united into one people or nation—the two antagonist powers or opposite interests of the State, containing all other State interests, are those of **permanence** and of **progression**.’

The interest of permanence, or the Conservative interest, he considers to be naturally connected with the land and with landed property. This doctrine, which I think is false as a universal principle, is true of England and of all countries where landed property is accumulated in large masses. He says: ‘On the other hand, •the progression of a State in the arts and comforts of life, in the diffusion of the information and knowledge useful or necessary for all, in short, •all advances in civilisation and the rights and privileges of citizens, are especially connected with and derived from four classes—the mercantile, the manufacturing, the distributive, and the professional. I will designate these four classes by the name Personal Interest, as the exponent of all movable and personal possessions—including skill and acquired knowledge (the moral and intellectual stock in trade of the professional man and the artist—as well as the raw materials and the means of elaborating, transporting, and distributing them.’

The interest of **permanence**, then, is provided for by a parliamentary representation of the landed proprietors; that of **progression** by a representation of personal property and of intellectual acquirement; and while one branch of

the Legislature, the Peerage, is essentially given over to the former, he considers it a part of the general theory *and* of the actual English constitution that the representatives of the latter should form 'the clear and effective majority of the Lower House'; or if not, that at least the added influence of public opinion should enable them to exercise an effective preponderance there. That 'the very weight intended for the effective counterpoise of the great landholders' has 'in the course of events been shifted into the opposite scale'; that the members for the towns 'now constitute a large proportion of the political power and influence of the very class of men whose personal greed and whose partial views of the landed interest at large they were meant to keep in check'—these things he acknowledges, and only suggests a doubt whether roads, canals, machinery, the press, and other influences favourable to the popular side do not constitute an equivalent force to make up for the deficiency.

How much better Coleridge is as a Parliamentary Reformer than Lord John Russell or any Whig who stickles for maintaining this unconstitutional omnipotence of the landed interest! If these became the principles of Tories, we should not wait long for further reform, even in our organic institutions. It is true that Coleridge disapproved of the Reform Bill, or rather of the principle or no-principle on which it was supported. He saw in it (as we may surmise) the dangers of a change amounting almost to a revolution, without any real tendency to remove the defects in the machine that alone could justify such an extensive change. And all parties seem to be now agreed that this is nearly a true view of the matter. The Reform Bill was not calculated to improve significantly the general composition of the Legislature. The good it has done, which is considerable, consists chiefly in this: being such a great change, it has weakened the superstitious feeling against great changes.

Any good contrary to the selfish interest of the dominant class is still only to be achieved through a long and arduous struggle; but big improvements that do not threaten that class's social importance or its income are no longer resisted, as they once were, just because of their size—because of the very benefit that they promised. Witness the speedy passing of the Poor Law Amendment and the Penny Postage Acts.

Meanwhile, though Coleridge's theory is a mere beginning, not amounting to the first lines of a political philosophy, has the age produced any other theory of government that can stand a comparison with it as to its first principles? Consider for example the Benthamic theory. The principle of this may be said to be that

since the general interest is the object of government, a complete control over the government ought to be given to those whose interest is identical with the general interest.

The authors and propounders of this theory were men of extraordinary intellectual powers, and most of what they meant by it is true and important. But considered as the foundation of a science, it would be hard to find among theories produced by philosophers one less like a philosophical theory, or in the works of analytical minds anything more entirely unanalytical. What can a philosopher make of such complex notions as 'interest' and 'general interest' without breaking them down into the elements of which they are composed? If by men's 'interest' is meant what would appear such to a calculating bystander, judging what would be good for a man during his whole life and taking little or no account of the gratification of his present passions, his pride, his envy, his vanity, his cupidity, his love of pleasure, his love of ease, it may be questioned whether the interest of an aristocracy, and still more that of a monarch, would not be as accordant with the general 'interest' in *this* sense as

that of either the middle or the poorer classes; and if men's interest, on this understanding of it, usually governed their conduct, absolute monarchy would probably be the best form of government. But since men usually do what they like, often being perfectly aware that it is not for their ultimate interest, still more often that it is not for the interest of their posterity—and when they do believe that the object they are seeking is permanently good for them, almost always overrating its value—it is necessary to consider not who are they whose *permanent interest* but who are they whose *immediate interests and habitual feelings* are likely to square best with the goal we seek to achieve. And as that goal (the general good) is a very complex state of things, comprising as its component elements many requisites that are not of the same nature or attainable by the same means, political philosophy must begin by a classification of these elements, in order to distinguish •those that go naturally together (so that the provision made for one will suffice for the rest) from •those that are ordinarily in a state of antagonism, or at least of separation, and require to be provided for separately. When this preliminary classification had been done, things in a perfect government would be so organised that corresponding to •each of the great interests of society there would be •a branch or integral part of the governing body so constituted that—in the view of philosophers and also in its own view—its strongest interests involved maintaining that one of the ends of society that it is intended to be the guardian of. This, I say, is the thing to be aimed at, the ideal of perfection in a political constitution. Not that any more than a limited approach to it could possibly be made in practice. A government must be composed out of the elements already existing in society, and the distribution of power in the constitution cannot vary much or long from the distribution of it in society itself. But wherever the circumstances of society allow any

choice, wherever wisdom and planning are at all available, this, I conceive, is the principle of guidance; and whatever anywhere exists is imperfect and a failure just so far as it recedes from this.

Such a philosophy of government, I need hardly say, is in its infancy: the first step to it, the classification of the needs of society, has not been made. Bentham in his *Principles of Civil Law* has given a specimen, very useful for many other purposes but not available (or intended to be so) as a basis for a theory of representation. For that particular purpose I have seen nothing comparable as far as it goes, despite its obvious insufficiency, to Coleridge's division of the interests of society into the two opposing interests of Permanence and Progression. The Continental philosophers have arrived at the same division by a different path; and this is probably about as far as the science of political institutions has yet reached.

### Coleridge's views on government

In the details of Coleridge's political opinions there is much good, and much that is questionable, or worse. In political economy, especially, he writes like an arrant driveller, and it would have been well for his reputation if he had never meddled with the subject. But this department of knowledge can now take care of itself. On other points we meet with far-reaching remarks, and a tone of general feeling sufficient to make a Tory's hair stand on end. Thus, in the work from which I have most quoted, he calls the State policy of the last half-century 'a Cyclops with one eye, and that in the back of the head'—its measures 'either a series of anachronisms, or a truckling to events instead of the science that should command them'. He styles the great Commonwealthsmen 'the stars of that narrow interspace of blue sky between the



black clouds of the reigns of Charles I and Charles II.' The *Literary Remains* are full of disparaging remarks on many of the heroes of Toryism and Church-of-Englandism. . . . As a specimen of his practical views, I have mentioned his recommendation that the parochial clergy should begin by being schoolmasters. He urges 'a different division and subdivision of the kingdom' instead of 'the present barbarism, which forms a much bigger obstacle to the improvement of the country than men are generally aware'. But I must confine myself to instances in which he has helped to bring forward great principles, either implied in the old English opinions and institutions or at least opposed to the new tendencies.

For example, he is at issue with the *let alone* doctrine, or the theory that governments can do no better than to do nothing; a doctrine generated by the manifest selfishness and incompetence of modern European governments, but of which as a general theory we may now be permitted to say that one half of it is true and the other half false. All who are on a level with their age now readily admit that government ought not to *forbid* men to publish their opinions, pursue their employments, or buy and sell their goods, in whatever place or manner they think the most advantageous. Beyond suppressing force and fraud, governments can seldom try to chain up the free agency of individuals without doing more harm than good. But does it follow from this that government cannot exercise a free agency of its own?—that it cannot beneficially employ its powers, its means of information, and its pecuniary resources (far greater than those of any other association or of any individual) in promoting the public welfare by a thousand means that individuals would never think of, would not have sufficient motives to attempt or sufficient powers to accomplish? To take just one example: a State ought to be considered as a great benefit society, or

mutual insurance company, for helping (under the necessary regulations for preventing abuse) the large proportion of its members who cannot help themselves.

Coleridge says:

'Let us suppose that the negative ends of a State are already attained—namely, its own safety by means of its own strength, and the protection of person and property for all its members—there will then remain its positive goals: **(1)** To make the means of subsistence easier for each individual, **(2)** To give each of its members the hope of bettering his own condition or that of his children. **(3)** The development of those faculties that are essential to his humanity, i.e. to his rational and moral being.'

In regard to the first two goals, he of course does not mean that they can be accomplished merely by making laws to that effect; or that—as is maintained by wild doctrines now afloat—it is the fault of the government if not everyone has enough to eat and drink. He means that government can do something directly, and very much indirectly, to promote even the physical comfort of the people; and that if, besides making a proper use of its own powers it would exert itself to teach the people what is in theirs, poverty would soon disappear from the face of the earth.

Perhaps, however, Coleridge's greatest service to politics in his capacity of a Conservative philosopher, though its fruits are mostly yet to come, is in reviving the idea of a *trust inherent in landed property*. The land—the gift of nature, everyone's source of subsistence, the foundation of everything that influences our physical well-being—cannot be considered a subject of property [see Glossary], in the same absolute sense in which men are regarded as owners of that in which no-one has any interest but themselves—that which they have actually called into existence by their own bodily

exertion. As Coleridge points out, such a notion [i.e. the notion that land can be *owned*] is an entirely modern one:

'The very idea of individual or private *property*, in our present meaning of the term and according to the current notion of the right to it, was originally confined to movable things; and the more movable, the more qualified to count as property.'

By the early institutions of Europe, property in land was a public function, created for certain public purposes and held on condition of their fulfilment; and I predict that it will again come to be considered in that way, with modifications suited to modern society. In the present age, when everything is called in question, and when the basis for private property itself needs to be defended against plausible and persuasive sophisms, one may easily see the danger of mixing up what is not really tenable with what is—and see the impossibility of giving to an individual an absolute right to unrestricted control—a *jus utendi et abutendi* [= a right to use or waste]—over an unlimited quantity of the mere raw material of the globe, to which every other person could originally make out as good a *natural* title as himself. It will certainly not be much longer tolerated that agriculture should be carried on (as Coleridge puts it) on the same principles as those of trade:

- that a gentleman should regard his estate as a merchant his cargo, or a shopkeeper his stock,
- that he should be allowed to deal with it as if it existed only to yield rent to him, not food to those whose hands till it, and
- should have a right—one possessing all the sacredness of property—to turn them out by hundreds and make them perish on the high road, as has been done before now by Irish landlords.

It will soon be thought that a system of property in land that has brought things to this pass has existed long enough.

I will not be suspected (I hope) of recommending a general confiscation of landed possessions, or of depriving anyone without compensation of anything the law gives him. But I say that •when the State allows anyone to exercise ownership over more land than suffices to provide, through his own labour, a living for himself and his family, it gives him *power over other human beings*—power affecting them in their most vital interests—and that •no notion of private property can block the State's inherent right to require that the power it has so given shall not be abused. I say also that by giving the person this direct power over so large a portion of the community, the State necessarily gives him indirect power over all the rest; and it is the duty of the State to place this too under proper control. Further, the tenure of land, the various rights connected with it, and the system on which its cultivation is carried on, are points of the utmost importance to the economic *and* the moral well-being of the whole community. And the State fails in one of its highest obligations unless it attends to these matters—unless it exercises its whole power to ensure that the manner in which land is held, how (and how much) it is divided, and every other peculiarity that influences the mode of its cultivation, shall be the most favourable possible for making the best use of the land; for drawing the greatest benefit from its productive resources, for securing the happiest existence to those employed on it, and for setting the greatest number of workers free to employ their labour for the benefit of the community in other ways. I believe that before long these opinions will become universal throughout Europe. And I gratefully acknowledge that the first among us who has given the sanction of philosophy to so great a reform in the popular and current notions is a Conservative philosopher.

### Coleridge on morality and religion

Of Coleridge as a moral and religious philosopher (the role he presents most prominently in his main works) there is no room here for me to speak more than generally, nor would it be expedient for me to do so. On both subjects, few men have ever combined so much earnestness with so little narrowness and such an unsectarian spirit. He says:

‘By the lines we have drawn in order to exclude the conceptions of others, we have imprisoned our own. I have found that most sects are right in a good part of what they affirm, but not so much in what they deny.  
[That sentence is translated from Coleridge’s French.]

That almost all sects in philosophy and in religion are right in the positive part of their tenets, though commonly wrong in the negative, is a doctrine he professes as strongly as does the eclectic school in France. He holds almost all errors to be ‘truths misunderstood’, ‘half-truths taken as the whole’, though more rather than less dangerous on that account. Both the theory and practice of enlightened tolerance in matters of opinion might be exhibited in extracts from his writings more copiously than in those of any other writer I know; though there are a few (a mere *few*) exceptions to his own practice of it. In the theory of ethics, he contends against the doctrine of general consequences, and holds that *for man* ‘to obey the simple unconditional commandment of avoiding any act that implies a self-contradiction’—so to act as to ‘be able, without involving any contradiction, to will that the maxim of your conduct should be the law of all intelligent beings—is the one universal and sufficient principle and guide of morality.’ Yet even a utilitarian can have little complaint against a philosopher who lays it down that ‘the outward object of virtue’ is ‘the greatest producible sum of happiness of all men’, and that ‘happiness in its

proper sense is but the continuity and sum-total of the pleasure that is allotted or happens to a man.’

But his greatest aim was to bring Religion into harmony with Philosophy. He laboured incessantly to establish that ‘the Christian faith—in which’, he says, ‘I include every article of belief and doctrine professed by the first reformers in common’—is not only divine truth but also ‘the perfection of Human Intelligence’.

According to him, philosophy can •prove everything that Christianity has revealed, though there is much that it could never have •discovered; human reason, once strengthened by Christianity, can evolve all the Christian doctrines from its own sources. Moreover, ‘if unbelief is not to overspread England as well as France’, the Scripture and every passage in it must be submitted to this test; because ‘the compatibility of a document with the conclusions of self-evident reason, and with the laws of conscience, is a requirement for its being regarded as having been revealed by God’; and this, he says, is not a philosophical novelty but a principle ‘clearly laid down both by Moses and St. Paul’. He thus goes quite as far as the Unitarians in making man’s reason and moral feelings a test of revelation; but differs *toto coelo* from them in their rejection of its mysteries, which he regards as the highest philosophic truths. He jeers at ‘the Christian to whom, after a long profession of Christianity, the mysteries remain as much mysteries as before’.

These opinions are not likely to be popular in the religious world, and Coleridge knew it: ‘I quite calculate’, said he once, ‘on my being some day held in worse repute by many Christians than the “Unitarians” and even “Unbelievers”’. This must be suffered by everyone who loves the truth for its own sake beyond all other things.’ For my part, I am not bound to defend him; and I must admit that in his attempt to arrive at theology by way of philosophy I see

much straining, and most often (it appears to me) total failure. The question, however, is not whether Coleridge's attempts are successful, but whether it is desirable that such attempts should be made. Whatever some religious people may think, philosophy will and must go on, always trying to understand whatever can be made understandable; and, whatever some philosophers may think, there is little prospect at present that philosophy will replace religion, or that any philosophy will be speedily accepted in this country unless it is thought not only to be consistent with Christianity but even to provide support to it. What is the use, then, of treating with contempt the idea of a religious philosophy? Religious philosophies are among the things to be looked for, and our main hope ought to be that they will fulfil the conditions of a *philosophy*—the very foremost of which is unrestricted freedom of thought. No philosophy is possible where fear of consequences is a stronger force than love of truth; where speculation is paralysed, either by •the belief that conclusions honestly arrived at will be punished (by a just and good Being) with eternal damnation, or by •seeing in every text of Scripture a foregone conclusion with which the results of inquiry must be made to square, at any expense of sophistry and self-deception.

Coleridge's mind was perfectly free from both these withering influences that have often made the acutest intellects exhibit specimens of obliquity and imbecility [= 'dishonesty and incompetence'] in their theological speculations that have made them the pity of subsequent generations. Faith—the faith that is placed among religious duties—was in his view a state of the will and of the affections, not of the understanding. According to him, heresy, in 'the literal sense and scriptural import of the word', is 'wilful error, or belief originating in some perversion of the **will**'; he says, therefore, that there may be orthodox heretics, since indifference to truth may

as well be shown on the right side of the question as on the wrong; and he denounces in strong language the contrary doctrine of the 'pseudo-Athanasius', who 'interprets Catholic faith by belief', an act of the **understanding** alone. The 'true Lutheran doctrine', he says, is that 'truth as a mere conviction of the understanding will not save, nor will error condemn. To love truth sincerely is spiritually to have truth; and an error becomes a personal error not by its aberration from logic or history but so far as its causes are in the heart or can be traced back to some previous unchristian wish or habit.' 'The unmistakable passions of a factionary and a schismatic, the ostentatious display, the ambitious and dishonest arts of a sect-founder, must be added to the false doctrine before the heresy makes the man a heretic.'

Coleridge took of the authority of the Scriptures as a preservative against the other error, so fatal to the unshackled exercise of reason on the greatest questions. He drew the strongest distinction between •the inspiration that he acknowledged in the various writers and •a dictation by the Almighty of every word they wrote. He again and again asserts that 'the notion of the absolute truth and divinity of every syllable of the text of the Old and New Testament as we have it' is

- unsupported by the Scripture itself, is
- one of those superstitions in which 'there is a heart of unbelief', and is
- 'if possible, still more extravagant' than the doctrine of Papal infallibility;

and he declares that the very same arguments are used for both doctrines. God, he believes, informed the minds of the writers with the truths he meant to reveal, and left the rest to their human faculties. He pleaded most earnestly, says his nephew and editor, for this liberty of criticism with respect to the Scriptures, as

‘the only middle path of safety and peace between •a godless disregard of the unique and transcendent character of the Bible, taken generally, and •the scheme of interpretation. . . .that wildly arrays our faith in opposition to our reason, and teaches the sacrifice of the latter to the former. He threw up his hands in dismay at the language of some of our modern divines on this point, as if. . . .the Father of lights could require from the only one of his creatures whom he had endowed with reason the sacrifice of fools! Of the aweless doctrine that God might, if he had so pleased, have •given to man a religion that human intelligence would not find to be rational, and •demanded faith in it, Coleridge’s whole middle and later life was one deep and solemn denial.’

He bewails ‘bibliolatry’ as the pervading error of modern Protestant divinity, and the great stumbling-block of Christianity, and exclaims, ‘O might I live long enough to utter all my meditations on this most concerning point, in what sense the Bible may be called the word of God, and how and under what conditions the unity of the Spirit can be seen through the letter, which, read as the letter merely, is the word of some pious but fallible and imperfect man.’ It is known that he did live to write down these meditations; and it is devoutly to be hoped that such important speculations will one day be given to the world.

Theological discussion is beyond my province, and it is not for me here to judge these opinions of Coleridge; but it is clear enough that they are not the opinions of a bigot, or of someone whom Liberals might fear will illiberalise the minds of the rising generation of Tories and High Churchmen. I think they should rather fear him as being vastly *too* liberal! And yet now—when the most orthodox divines. . . .find it necessary •to explain away the obvious sense of the whole first

chapter of Genesis or, failing that, •to consent to disbelieve it provisionally in the hope that there may yet be discovered a sense in which it can be believed—one would think the time gone by for expecting to learn from the Bible what it never could have been intended to communicate, and to find in all its statements a literal truth neither necessary nor conducive to what the book itself says are the goals of revelation. Such at least was Coleridge’s opinion; and whatever influence such an opinion may have over Conservatives, it cannot do other than make them less bigots and better philosophers.

### Conclusion

But I must close this long essay—long in itself though short in its relation to its subject and to the multitude of topics involved in it. I do not claim to have given a sufficient account of Coleridge; but I hope I have proved to some who were not before aware of it that in him and in the school to which he belongs there is something that they would do well to know more about. I may have done something to show that a Tory philosopher cannot be wholly a Tory, but must often be a better Liberal than Liberals themselves; while he is the natural means of rescuing from oblivion truths that Tories have forgotten and the prevailing schools of Liberalism never knew.

And even if a Conservative philosophy were an absurdity, it is well calculated to drive out a hundred absurdities worse than itself. Let no-one think that it is *nothing* to accustom people to give a reason for their opinion, however untenable the opinion, however insufficient the reason. A person accustomed to submit his •fundamental tenets to the test of reason will be more open to the dictates of reason on every •other point. Not from him shall we have to apprehend the owl-like dread of light, the drudge-like aversion to change,

that were the characteristics of the old unreasoning race of bigots. A man accustomed to contemplate the fair side of Toryism (the side that every attempt at a philosophy of it must bring to view), and to defend the existing system by the display of its capabilities as an engine of public good—such a man, when he comes to administer the system, will be more anxious than another person to make something of those capacities, to bring the fact a little nearer to plausible theory. ‘Lord, enlighten thou our enemies’ should be the prayer of every true Reformer; sharpen their wits, give acuteness to their perceptions, and consecutiveness and clearness to their reasoning powers. We are in danger from their folly, not from their wisdom; what fills us with apprehension is not their strength but their weakness.

For myself, I am not so blinded by my particular opinions as to be ignorant that in this and in every other country of Europe the great mass of the owners of large property, and of all the classes intimately connected with the owners

of large property, are and must be expected to be in the main Conservative. To suppose that such a mighty body can be without immense influence in the commonwealth, or to lay plans for making great spiritual or temporal changes in which they are left out of the question, would be the height of absurdity. Let those who desire such changes ask themselves if they are content that these classes should be permanently banded against them; and what progress they expect to make, or by what means, unless a process of preparation goes on in the minds of these very classes—not •by the impracticable method of converting them from Conservatives into Liberals, but •by their being led to adopt one liberal opinion after another, as a part of Conservatism itself. The first step towards this is to inspire them with a desire to systematise and rationalise their own actual creed; and the feeblest attempt to do this has an intrinsic value; far more, then, one that has so much moral goodness and true insight in it as does the philosophy of Coleridge.