

Mill and Carlyle on Reform

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Abstract

For students of Victorian intellectual history, the relationship between John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle can be seen as a microcosm of “the spirit of the age.” The early relationship between the two men was fruitful; Carlyle—having not yet written *Sartor Resartus* and struggling to find his place among the Victorian intelligentsia, thought that he recognized in Mill “a new Mystic,” one who “seemed to profess almost as plainly as modesty would allow that he had been converted by the Head of the Mystic School, to whom personally he testified heart-looking regard.”¹ Carlyle hoped to cultivate a young disciple in Mill; the young Mill was only too happy to learn from Carlyle, commenting later that he found in Carlyle “one of the channels through which I received the influences which enlarged my early narrow creed.”² As each man came into his own as a major thinker of the era—Carlyle with the publications of *Sartor Resartus* and the *French Revolution*, and Mill with the *Logic* and the *Principles of Political Economy*—the two men began to drift apart; Carlyle realized that Mill retained far too much of his father’s and Bentham’s utilitarianism, and Mill discovered that Carlyle’s sometimes radical talk was rooted in a deep admiration for the aristocracy. Mill himself felt compelled to clear the air with Carlyle, writing him a lengthy letter specifying his deepest disagreements with Carlyle. The relationship continued to sour such that by 1859, Carlyle, after reading a copy of *On Liberty*,

¹ Thomas to Jane Carlyle, 29 August and 4 September 1831, *Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* 5 (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1970), pp. 379 & 398.

² John Stuart Mill. *Autobiography*. *Collected Works* I (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 181.

reacted with “a torrent of anathema,”³ exclaiming “As if it were a sin to control, or coerce into better methods, human swine in any way.”⁴ Mill, for his part, argued late in life that only those whose thinking is still somewhat immature really could learn from reading Carlyle (though to be fair, Mill did confess that he continued to enjoy reading Carlyle’s best work.)⁵

Much has been written on Mill’s cold intellectualism versus Carlyle’s passionate spiritualism and about Mill’s empiricism and Carlyle’s mysticism; indeed, commentators often portray Mill and Carlyle as embodying the two major strands of Victorian thought, strands that are inherently at odds with one another. Such an approach downplays the many similarities between the two thinkers. Consider, for example, that Mill and Carlyle share a rather gloomy picture of the nature of the working classes, both regarding the common laborer as lazy, selfish, ignorant, and largely unable to govern himself effectively. Likewise, both men are elitists, arguing that those who display moral and mental superiority ought to have a weighted voice in the affairs of the nation. Despite these similarities in their fundamental commitments, Mill and Carlyle found themselves on opposite sides of most of the major political controversies of the middle and late Victorian age. That these men should have shared so much and still disagreed so completely owes, I will argue to their beliefs about human improvement.

Mill’s moral and political philosophy are driven by his belief in human improvement: his utilitarianism is biased toward those who seek the higher pleasures; his liberalism is defended by way of reference to the benefits of human genius; and his theory of government is driven by his belief that a government’s principle task is the improvement of its citizens. For Mill, improvement is accomplished through the benevolent but unpaternalistic guidance of the elite;

³ Henry Larkin. “Carlyle and Mrs. Carlyle: A Ten-Year Reminiscence.” *British Quarterly Review* 74 (July 1881), p. 39

⁴ Thomas Carlyle. *New Letters of Thomas Carlyle* II, p. 196.

⁵ Mill to William Thomas Thornton, 23 October 1869, *Collected Works* XVII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 1657.

these elite should be involved in society, but should guide by argument and by example. For Carlyle, on the other hand, the elite should play a more active role. "Captains of industry," those who have moral and intellectual greatness and who are ambitious enough to use their gifts to lead others are, for Carlyle, the true hope of the world. Such men should lead not by argument and example, but by seizing authority and forcing the lazy masses onto a better path. To put the contrast another way, Mill is fundamentally optimistic that all human beings, if given the proper guidance, can improve themselves; Carlyle's pessimism concerning human improvement leads him to argue that only a hero can drag the rest of humanity to a higher level.

The differences between Mill's optimism and Carlyle's pessimism are perhaps best captured by their respective positions on democracy. By 1866, Mill is firmly committed to extending the franchise to all adults, leading the charge for universal suffrage in Parliament, and arguing that granting to the working classes full representation in Parliament "is not only a valuable part of a scheme of Parliamentary Reform, but highly valuable even if nothing else were to follow."⁶ Carlyle, on the other hand, has by this time become completely opposed to democracy, authoring *Shooting Niagara* in early 1867. There Carlyle vehemently denounces democracy while pleading for the aristocracy to seize once more the reigns of government; indeed, for Carlyle, democracy violates what he thinks is a person's most fundamental right, namely, "the right of the ignorant man to be guided by the wiser, to be, gently or forcibly, held in the true course by him."⁷

In this essay, I'll compare and contrast Mill's optimism to Carlyle's pessimism.

democracy through the reigns of their commandments to humanity

conjunction Thomas Hare's proportional voting plan, a system designed to limit the influence of the working classes while extending the influence of the elite. Such a system allows Mill to support some form of self-determination for the working class even while protecting society from what he believed to be their dangerous influence. Mill's support for democracy tempered by proportional voting is grounded in his belief that such a system would ultimately have a great educative power for the working classes. I go on to argue that Carlyle, for all his concern for the average workingman, rejected Mill's belief in the educative power of democracy, favoring instead that the elite adopt an active paternalism for improving the working classes. Ultimately, I argue, it is this disagreement over the improvability of human beings that drives Mill and Carlyle to opposite sides of the reform debate of 1865-7.