

THE MILL NEWS LETTER

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Since the publication of On Liberty, analyses, assessments, and attacks have come from all shades of the political spectrum. With the current interest in ideology, however, a new note has crept into discussions of Mill's liberalism. Patrick M. Boarman, for example, is happy with an unsophisticated and unsympathetic view, including such insights as the following: "In Mill's social mechanics, man is restricted to the alternatives of being either an egoist or a cog in the social machine." ("Is Freedom Absolute?" Modern Age, 10 [Winter, 1965-66], 14.) Joseph Hamburger, in his well-informed analysis of Mill's relation to the Philosophic Radicals in the 1830s (reviewed below), leans heavily on the ideological chord, to the detriment of Mill. But the fullest and most unpleasant attack has come from Maurice Cowling, whose Mill and Liberalism is a sustained polemic against dogmatic liberal intrusions into politics. In the leading article below, John C. Rees takes a close look at the reviewers' reactions to Mr. Cowling's book, with a further glance at what our reactions to those reactions should be.

In the second article, Adelaide Weinberg, whose Ph.D. dissertation at London was on Comte's influence on Mill's economics, lifts a corner of the curtain hiding the deliberations of the Political Economy Club. Dr. Weinberg's monograph, Theodor Gomperz and John Stuart Mill (Geneva: Droz, 1963), provides valuable material on Mill's personal and intellectual life; she has been working recently on another of Mill's young friends, John E. Cairnes, whose notebook provided the basis for the discussion below.

One can hardly admit that News Letters are places to make mistakes, but they are properly used to correct them. My thanks to those who have helped clear up some bibliographic puzzles, especially in the Anon. list; the corrections will be given in the next number. The response to the first number has been most gratifying; please keep the notes, queries, and suggestions coming, for the personal letter is the main input in the News Letter industry.

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THE REACTION TO COWLING ON MILL¹

John C. Rees

Mill's reputation as a champion of freedom has survived many criticisms directed at the particular arguments he advanced to justify and protect liberty. Critics like Joseph Parker who have pointed to the ambiguities in such phrases as "prevent harm to others" and "being a nuisance," and the possibility of their being used to control actions on a far wider scale than Mill himself intended, have never doubted that he was sincere in his aim to secure as large an area of freedom as possible for all individuals.² Nor does Professor Willmoore Kendall's claim that a society built on Mill's premises contains the seeds of intolerance, and that its establishment would involve such changes in human nature as to require "large-scale institutional coercion," rest on the assumption that Mill harboured totalitarian designs.³ Yet this is what Mr. Maurice Cowling assumes in his work on Mill and Liberalism,⁴ by far the most radical and unrelenting assault on Mill's doctrines since Fitzjames Stephen brought out his Liberty, Equality, Fraternity in 1873. The important difference between them, of course, is that whereas Stephen charged Mill with sacrificing too much authority for the sake of freedom, Cowling presents him as an authoritarian in disguise.

Mr. Cowling's daring assault on Mill's standing as the apostle of liberty has naturally attracted widespread attention and the generally hostile reaction to the book can largely be accounted for by the sheer novelty of his case and the fact that the assumptions on which it rests run strongly counter to current academic opinion, not to mention the irreverent and vehement language frequently employed against someone whose esteem still stands high among British intellectuals. Moreover, since some of the reviewers must already have been familiar with those elements in Mill's thought which might seem to have an affinity with totalitarian ideas, they could well have felt tempted to compensate for such concessions as they had to make to the not wholly implausible nature of Cowling's general thesis by putting especially heavy emphasis on any particular weaknesses they were able to find in his argument.

Cowling's thesis, in brief, is that Mill sought to aid the supersession of Christianity by offering a different type of religion to take its place, a religion based on the authority of social science and the principle of utility, to be propagated and sustained by an intellectual élite whose opinions and standards would constitute the orthodoxy of a society integrated through its acceptance of the new gospel. In this scheme liberty was valued not on its own account but as an instrument for achieving a consensus of rational minds around the beliefs and norms of the higher intellects. Liberty was therefore not Mill's central value; his main concern was rather to produce a homogeneity of outlook among enlightened beings subscribing rationally to a creed dispensed by a dominant body of superior persons, a creed the essential outlines of which were formulated in his Logic and Utilitarianism.

Against Mill's plan Cowling contends that no proposals for social change can be justified by philosophic reason. Out of all the possible courses of action a politician can choose philosophy cannot show that one is more rational than another. Philosophy cannot and has no business to prescribe for social ills, still less to construct utopias. Academic reasoning must confine itself to analysis and explanation and the fact that it has usurped other functions is largely attributable to the influence of Mill whose attitudes have dominated the British intellectual scene to this day. In his earlier book, The Nature and Limits of Political Science,⁵ Cowling sets out to document the extent to which contemporary political science in Britain has exceeded its jurisdiction. In the second book, on Mill, he seeks to lay bare the source of confusion and by exposing the grandiose pretensions of this respected figure to help set political science on its true path.

From a slightly different angle this is how Cowling's general critique looks to one of the most sympathetic reviewers: "Liberalism considers society to be composed of a multitude of individuals in pursuit of happiness. Since these individuals are similar and similarly rational, politics can but be the rational devising of means to bring about a harmony of satisfied desires. All institutions must be subjected to the test of Reason, and the scientific study of human nature must precede and guide the activity of politicians. Social science becomes the queen of the sciences, and society is to be ruled by an enlightened clerisy dedicated to the pursuit of Truth. This, as Mr. Cowling decisively shows, is the millenium of the religion of humanity to which Mill sought to persuade his readers."⁶ This religion, the reviewer goes on to say, has become the dominant one. Its weakness, he claims, is to be measured by its utter failure to envisage the possibility of a phenomenon like Auschwitz, "for which it is totally unable to account and which, when Mill was rejoicing in looking forward, was but three quarters of a century away."

Quite apart from rejecting the assumptions from which he criticizes Mill or dealing with the criticisms themselves, a number of the reviewers have taken exception to Cowling's manner of argument, or the lack of it. There was a similar reaction to his first book which came out some months earlier. Maurice Cranston remarks that, although Cowling sets out deliberately to deflate Mill's reputation, "his language is altogether too intemperate to have any such effect" (The Listener, 2 Jan., 1964), and Alan Ryan in the correspondence in the New Statesman arising out of the review published in the journal by Richard Wollheim refers to the book as "a mixture of scrappy quotation, personal abuse and unargued assertion" (New Statesman, 3 Jan., 1964). Noël Annan (The Observer, 8 Dec., 1963), Gertrude Himmelfarb (The New York Review, 20 Feb., 1964) and Roland Hall (The Philosophical Quarterly, Jan., 1965) make similar complaints. And Professor D. H. Monro (Australasian Journal of Philosophy, May, 1964), in a lengthy review of Cowling's two books, claims that "in Cowling even more than in Oakeshott, the premises are never clearly stated nor the argument spelled out. Instead of argument one gets, as a rule, confident, scornful assertion."

In a few cases the specific charge of misusing quotations is made. Thus Gertrude Himmelfarb points to a passage (p. 12) where Cowling

declares that "Mill's central concern" is the establishment of an intellectual élite with an ascendancy similar to that once exercised by priests, supporting his contention with a quotation from the Autobiography which is made to appear as Mill's own statement; but the extract is in fact part of a description of Mill's attitude to Comte's views and to them, argues Himmelfarb, Mill gives only qualified consent. Moreover the rest of the passage, she continues, is a passionate attack on Comte's authoritarian schemes which are referred to by Mill as "a monumental warning" of what happens when men lose sight of the value of liberty.⁷ And Roland Hall contends that "we are constantly left with the wrong impression," citing among others an example from pp. 77-8. Here we find a long extract from Utilitarianism designed to show that Mill urged the teaching of utilitarian morality as a religion, but Cowling fails to include the crucial words at the end of the paragraph: "the danger is, not that" the power of the idea of service to humanity when taught as a religion "should be insufficient, but that it should be so excessive as to interfere unduly with human freedom and individuality."⁸

A major assumption in both of Cowling's books is that "explanation" is the proper province of the academic, of the philosopher as well as the political scientist. In a letter to the New Statesman (10 Jan., 1964), following the review by Wollheim already referred to, he declares: "detachment from political commitment...is necessary if academic activity is to be conducted.... Explanation is the only thing an academic person should, qua academic, be concerned with...." As K. R. Minogue puts it (Philosophy, Oct., 1964), "Mr. Cowling seeks to criticise the powerful movement in English academic life which leads dons to disguise their prejudices in 'the explanatory language of philosophy'.... He argues that the liberal tradition has corrupted philosophy by confusing the explanatory and normative functions in academic work. The Nature and Limits of Political Science states this theme generally; its successor concentrates on Mill as a source and patron of these confusions." From Cowling's standpoint, therefore, as Steven Lukes observes (New Society, 26 Dec., 1963), "the trouble with Mill and with 'improving liberalism' in general is that they want to change things and, worse still, to do so by the aid of reason.... Mr. Cowling objects that Mill's rationalism and 'commitment to a self-conscious' ethic is 'arbitrary,' as arbitrary, in fact, as a commitment to dogmatic religion or intuitionism--simply a particular dogma among others." But, protests Lukes, "this is absurd and self-refuting scepticism and makes nonsense of the notion of 'arbitrariness.'" It leads Mr. Cowling to this odd conclusion, in connection with Mill's views on toleration: "If no practical orthodoxy has a monopoly of Truth, the assertion that Truth ought not to be imposed is a practical assertion which has no monopoly of Truth either." Part of the reason for Cowling's hostility to the contemporary British writers he chooses to attack is, according to D. H. Monro, that he is "prepared to take quite seriously the prevalent modern view that social theory should be morally neutral." For this and other reasons he is concerned to argue that "Mill's liberalism is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of morality" and to deny "that there is any sense in which Mill's moral preferences (for benevolence or altruism or aesthetic and

intellectual pursuits) are more rational than their alternatives." "In Cowling, then," maintains Munro, "we have an extreme ethical subjectivism, and an insistence that moral judgments are not the concern of academics as academics.... We have also a strong reaction against the values of the Enlightenment (the belief in tolerance and rationality and understanding, in critical self-examination and the suspension of judgment where the evidence is not conclusive) and a reversion to Burke's view that prejudice and tradition are safer guides than reason." The problem that Cowling is really posing, continues Munro, is an important and pressing one and, although he does not usually raise it in an explicit manner, it is one that confronts liberalism with a serious dilemma. "The liberal programme of persuasion by rational argument (as against coercion)," says Munro, "does depend on the assumption that what is to be taught does somehow stand to reason. If this is a mistake, and no one set of moral principles is any more or less reasonable than any other, then there does seem to be a confusion at the heart of liberalism." Munro asks whether there may not be a way out of this dilemma and goes on to consider "two traditional ways in which the men of the Enlightenment tried to meet it."

Cowling supports his interpretation of Mill with much quotation, but it is one of Richard Wollheim's objections to his case that it rests, among other things, on the "assumption (which is unfounded) that what Mill ever believed in once he always believed in" (New Statesman, 13 Dec., 1963). Gertrude Himmelfarb also protests at "the annihilation of time, place and context, as if every utterance of Mill was discrete, autonomous, and immutable."⁹ "The best criticism of Mr. Cowling," she argues, "is provided by Mill himself--the whole of Mill, not the bits and pieces put together by this or that commentator." What Cowling neglects, urges Cranston, is the complexity of Mill's thought, for if he had argued, as did Gertrude Himmelfarb in her recent introduction to Mill's Essays on Politics and Culture "that there were two Mills, one the liberal and the other 'anything but a perfect liberal,' then I think Mr. Cowling might have had a good case for the view." Instead he commits the error of maintaining that "there was only one Mill and that totally illiberal" (The Listener, 9 Jan., 1964).

Cranston, like several other reviewers, is quite ready to admit "that there was always a slender streak of the authoritarian in Mill" but he refuses to follow Cowling in seeing as evidence for Mill's authoritarianism his espousal of "the religion of humanity" and the new science of sociology. "Mill got both these nostrums from Comte," says Cranston, "but he was quick to see that Comte's development of them was 'the most contrary to human liberty of any now taught or professed.'" This much of Cowling's thesis is true, writes Noël Annan, namely that "Mill had a tyrannical streak in him and his correspondence with Harriet Taylor shows that he did not live up to his own standards of open-mindedness, [but] the rest seems to me to be almost wholly false." "If Mr. Cowling," continues Annan, "could show that Mill envisaged the possibility that truth, and hence progress, could be achieved through the suppression of freedom of expression by intellectuals, his thesis would be proved. But Mill continually spoke as if this were impossible.... [F]reedom was built into Mill's theory of social behaviour. The theory rested on the belief that the progress

of society depended on discovering new truths and if, as Mill held, it can be shown that new truths emerge only through free discussion, then freedom is built into the system."

The element of truth in Cowling's argument, concedes Steven Lukes, is that "despite all the emphasis on the need for diversity and despite the justly remembered defences of the individual's right to go his own way, Mill did have a basic philosophy of history and a view of human nature and the ideal society, which is not, one would imagine, altogether acceptable to the more empiricist and tentative liberals of our own day. He did subscribe to Coleridge's views about the authority of the clerisy, a sort of reconstructed peerage-cum-clergy, and to the general positivist notion of a secular, rational religion of humanity, to supply social consensus on a scientific foundation." But Lukes goes on to point out that Mill "dissented from Comte's 'practical system,' in which 'philosophers were to be organized into a kind of corporate hierarchy,' accusing Comte of aiming at 'a despotism of society over the individual.'" And K. R. Minogue accepts Cowling's claim that Mill's work was religious in intent--"a well-documented argument"--but says that Cowling's mistake "lies in assuming that the 'instrumental means' Mill espoused are uniquely determined by his ends. But they are not. Men with similar utopias might have selected (and some have selected) far more repressive means to attaining them. The choice of liberty as an instrument tells us as much about Mill's character as do the daydreams which he was foolishly tempted to set up as 'ultimate ends.'" Similarly John Day insists that although "Mill may on Mr. Cowling's standards be dogmatic in demanding that moral discourse should be rational...the accusation of illiberality fails when directed against Mill's social policy. Whether Mill favours liberty for its own sake or not, he specifically advocates the toleration of all opinions, right or wrong. Furthermore, although Mill aims at moral consensus, he values individuality and desires variety within that consensus. Mr. Cowling thinks that Mill is trying to impose uniformity on men by demanding they seek higher happiness, but in fact he emphasises the desirability of each pursuing this end in his own way." (Philosophical Books, May, 1964.)

To Cowling's charge that Mill's version of Utilitarianism was in fact a religion, the anonymous reviewer in The Economist (8 Feb., 1964) replies that "this is to confuse religion as a supposed divine revelation with beliefs about social value and purpose where man is taken as the measure of all. In the former case argument is simply irrelevant; in the latter it is relevant but never conclusive." And as for the claim that Mill valued liberty only because it seemed likely to promote an altruistic and high-minded society, the Economist reviewer agrees that Mill believed in such a connection "and might well have been disappointed in the cultural fruits of modern mass education." He goes on: "As a natural signatory of Pilkington reports, he may fairly be regarded as a cultural paternalist. But the supposed conflict of values here is not an absolute one, since any society has its 'opinion leaders'--whether these be the traditional Christian clergy, the intellectualised 'clerisy' preferred by Mill, or the commercially inspired moulders of modern mass taste. Mill is entitled to his cultural preferences, so long as he does not elevate them into

repressive dogmas. Possibly he does so on occasion, but it is difficult from reading him to conclude that he placed upon liberty a purely instrumental value. Liberty was crucial to his conception of the evolution of the good society, and Mr. Cowling denies the obvious only through giving a too exclusive meaning to liberty."

"General utility for Mill," says Cowling, "means...maximization, not of any happiness, but of the higher happiness, the freedom of men to engage in rational pursuit of disinterestedness and truth" (p. 101), and in another passage: "domination by the higher minds, far from being, in Mill's view, hostile to the principle of utility, is essential to it" (p. 36). Cowling thus gives an authoritarian emphasis to the Utilitarianism to which Roland Hall takes exception, for, he contends, if "this need for domination is correctly ascribed to Mill, it is trivial, because Mill apparently looks forward to a time when everyone is sufficiently educated to seek truth for himself." Does not Mill say that "an amount of mental culture sufficient to give an intelligent interest in these objects of contemplation" is to be "the inheritance of every one born in a civilized country"? (Utilitarianism, chap. ii.) The principle of "self-protection" set out in On Liberty, Cowling also maintains, is restrictive in function and intent; "so far from being an attempt to free men from the imposition of all doctrine [On Liberty] is an attempt to free them from customary, habitual, conventional doctrine" (p. 104). And since, according to Cowling, the idea of individuality for Mill "includes less than all the ends to which men might want to move, then the principle of individuality is designed to detract from human freedom, not to maximize it" (p. 98). Moreover, argues Cowling, the appearance Mill's principle has of purporting to protect private spheres of liberty (i.e. the area of self-regarding activity) is seriously misleading, since the interest the principle is intended to safeguard is not a man's interest "in a vulgar selfish sense: a man's interest is his interest as a progressive being--a progressive being with an obligation to be concerned for the well-being of society as a whole" (pp. 98-9). This interpretation of Mill, remarks D. H. Monro, "would, of course, wipe out the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding actions altogether." And, so maintains Noël Annan, it ignores Mill's emphatic refusal to envisage punishment for the so-called "self-regarding deficiencies." Mill believed, says Annan, that "although men ought to do certain things, and although society is worse when they do not do them, nevertheless society must put up with these imperfections. For if it tries to make men accountable for their self-regarding actions it will destroy something that is even more valuable--namely, freedom of conscience and action."

Monro draws attention to the way Cowling at one point charges Mill with "moral indoctrination," a term which if fairly used would support his general thesis. In the particular passage mentioned by Monro the term is applied to Mill's plan for university education. "General Culture for Mill," says Cowling, "does not mean learning to be cultivated in the accomplishments of the society in which an undergraduate is growing up (with a view to improving cultivation in the future). General Culture means, on the contrary, critical reflection and mental doubt, sceptical scrutiny of existing habits.... It means following

the argument whithersoever it leads us; it means subjecting all conduct to critical scrutiny... It means, in short, moral indoctrination--and moral indoctrination of a kind which would lead to acceptance of liberal utilitarianism" (pp. 116-7). Monro comments: "Here Cowling does seem to be turning the familiar (and surely important and salutary?) distinction between indoctrination and education on its head. One usually thinks of following the argument wherever it leads, subjecting all assumptions to critical scrutiny, and so on, as precisely the opposite of indoctrination. What one does think of as indoctrination is the uncritical acceptance of the current mores: this one gathers (though he does not make it entirely clear) is what Cowling would approve of. When Cowling goes on to say: 'Indoctrination, it is necessary to say, is not the business of a University. Universities leave their mark on undergraduates, but they have no obligation to leave a rationalistic one' (p. 117) one feels tempted to retort that, if 'rationalistic' implies mastery of the accepted techniques of argument and of critical enquiry generally, a willingness to apply them, and a reluctance to lead 'the unexamined life,' that is just what universities do exist to impart."

A number of the problems Cowling deals with in his two books have long been the subject of philosophical enquiry and, in recent decades, have been intensively analysed. In so far as the books have been reviewed by academic philosophers the common reaction has been highly critical. More than one reviewer feels justified in remarking on Cowling's rashness in entering a field where, it is claimed, his analytical equipment is sadly deficient and his knowledge very slight. Thus Professor Wollheim in a review of The Nature and Limits of Political Science: "The rigorous distinction between explanation and persuasion which provides the main theme...and which for Mr. Cowling serves totally to dissociate practical political principles from either history on the one hand or political philosophy on the other, both of which are explanatory subjects, marks his book down as belonging to a more positivistic phase than that in which most philosophers now find themselves. Of course this is no criticism: indeed, there is no time like the present for a good restatement of the views of the recent past. Unfortunately Mr. Cowling's philosophical naivety unfits him for this task and the polar terms around which his thesis is constructed are insufficiently clear or precise to sustain the weight he wishes to impose upon them." (New Statesman, 9 Aug., 1963.) Alasdair MacIntyre, reviewing the same work in The Guardian (28 June, 1963), notes that Cowling "attacks all writers on politics who reach normative conclusions" and remarks that "with the large literature which discusses this very problem," the relation between factual knowledge and norms, "he exhibits little acquaintance." And Noël Annan, though not to be counted among professional philosophers, makes the same kind of point when he asks, "What is one to make of a critic...who seems to be ignorant of the analysis by philosophers in the past 15 years of 'commitment'..., and who suggests that the majority of intellectuals adhere to the letter of Mill's utilitarianism?"¹⁰

Roland Hall is severely critical of Cowling. "After careful examination," he declares, "I cannot see that the book is of any value.... I have criticized it at length and unsympathetically, because it is

dangerous, pretentious and unpleasant." He is especially scornful of Cowling's claim to have assessed "the validity of Mill's views about questions of...perennial philosophical interest" particularly in view of Cowling's neglect, or ignorance, of the discussion of Mill's Utilitarianism since Urmson's important article, "The Interpretation of the Moral Philosophy of J. S. Mill," appeared in the Philosophical Quarterly in 1953. Hall's complaint arises from Cowling's assertion that Mill's doctrine is "erosive of existing moral habits. It assumes that conscientious decisions will usually be decisions contrary to existing practice, and that conscientious decision can be made only by self-conscious reference to 'rational' principle" (p. 157). Hall's point is that this flies flat in the face of Mill's own clear words in chapter ii of the Utilitarianism in a passage designed to meet the objection "that there is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness." Mill's reply to the objection is that human societies have come to learn by long experience what sorts of actions are, and are not, conducive to happiness; and although the rules of morality are capable of improvement it would be absurd to ignore them and "endeavour to test each individual action directly by the first principle,"¹¹ i.e. the principle of utility. It is on passages such as this that Urmson relies for his contention that in Mill's view "a particular action is justified as being right by showing that it is in accord with some moral rule. It is shown to be wrong by showing that it transgresses some moral rule" and that "a moral rule is shown to be correct by showing that the recognition of that rule promotes the ultimate end" (p. 35). And it is of this interpretation of Mill's doctrine that Hall claims Cowling to be unaware.

Of the twenty-one reviews of Cowling's book which I have seen the great majority either reject outright or dissent in important respects from his account and criticism of Mill. But the book has not been without its admirers. John Raymond in the Sunday Times (17 Nov., 1963) writes not a hostile word. On the contrary, he thinks Cowling's "scathing presentation of Mill's thought has the merit of great originality,...[A] sturdy sense of the realities behind language permeates his philosophical and political attitudes, and his sharp invigilation of liberalism in all its decencies as well as its pretensions must surely act as a stimulant to those defending the orthodox liberal positions." But the writer who shows most sympathy for Cowling's general approach and his picture of Mill is Elie Kedourie. Of The Nature and Limits of Political Science (a "spirited and authoritative essay") he says: "The great point which Mr. Cowling seeks to expound in his book is that politics, so much of it 'irrelevance, inadvertence, ambition,' is within the realm of practice, while the study of it lies within the realm of explanation, in which the only victories are those achieved over the opaque and the obscure and the only mastery attained is that of the understanding" (The Spectator, 28 June, 1963). "If explanation is so uncertain," he asks, "and conclusions so much a matter of dispute, how can the scholar without abusing and denaturing his scholarly authority prescribe, so to speak ex cathedra, for action or inaction, for reform or conservation?" Like Cowling, he insists that it is a mistake "to think that the conclusions of scholarship have power to

guide practice....[T]he thinker cannot be the doer....[A]cademics are not there to supply Kameralwissenschaft to the rulers of a hire-purchasing, property-mortgaging democracy. The use of the study of politics is that of any other academic discipline." The book, as Kedourie sees it, is "a challenge, a defence, and illustration of the legitimate purposes of political study." And he joins Cowling in repudiating Mill's vision of politics. "If we speak of politics as the pursuit of 'ideals,' the 'solution' of 'problems,' then," he declares, "we become unable to show politics for what it is--namely, a practical activity which is the domain of character, habit, accident, ambition and illusion....[T]he Liberal prescription for the practice of politics, which is to submit everything to the test of Reason, can be disconcerting in its consequences. Reason by itself can determine to no specific action, and a rational society will as likely be hellish as paradisaical: de Sade's Justine, Frankenstein, 1984 are the rigorous constructs of Reason, equally so with the fantasies of Mill and Spencer."(The Spectator, 9 Oct., 1964.)

If it is true, as the majority of his critics allege, that Cowling has exaggerated the implications of Mill's attachment to the idea of a clerisy, that he has distorted the intention of On Liberty and that he has even read a sinister meaning into Mill's plea for a "religion of humanity," does it follow that the book has no value at all? I think not, for one of the great problems confronting students of Mill is how much weight to place on each of the several elements in his thought. We certainly do not all agree on how important this or that aspect of Mill's doctrines was to him, and if Cowling seems to have transgressed the limits of conventional commentary on Mill has he not thereby challenged us to offer a coherent alternative to his own interpretation? Clearly there can be no single authoritative and final version of Mill, any more than there can be of Plato or Hobbes or Marx. The novelty of Cowling's picture could pave the way to a greater appreciation of the intricate and fluid structure of Mill's philosophy and ought to persuade us to follow the development of his thought in order to acquire a better view of the balance and relationship of its components at the different stages of his life. There is a well-known passage in the Autobiography which would amply justify such a task. "If I am asked," wrote Mill of the period following the "crisis in [his] mental history," "what system of political philosophy I substituted for that which, as a philosophy, I had abandoned, I answer, no system: only a conviction that the true system was something much more complex and many-sided than I had previously had any idea of...."¹²

NOTES:

¹I have been greatly helped in the locating and assembling of the reviews on which this survey is based by Mr. Geraint Williams, a graduate student in the department of Politics at University College, Swansea.

²John Stuart Mill on Liberty (London, 1865), 4-6, 17.

³"The 'Open Society' and its Fallacies," American Political Science Review, 54 (1960), 972-9.

⁴Cambridge University Press, 1963.

⁵Cambridge University Press, 1963.

⁶Elie Kedourie in The Spectator, 9 Oct., 1964.

⁷Autobiography (Columbia edition), 148-9.

⁸Utilitarianism (Everyman edition), 31.

⁹Jack Stillinger makes this point too in the American Historical Review (July, 1964), 1127.

¹⁰See also Alan Ryan's claim that Cowling shows no awareness of important recent work in the philosophy of history and in the methodology of the social studies (The Cambridge Review, 7 March, 1964, 337).

¹¹Utilitarianism, 22. Alan Ryan also touches on this question in The Cambridge Review.

¹²Columbia edition, 113.

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A MEETING OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY CLUB

ON 7 May, 1857.

FROM JOHN ELLIOT CAIRNES' NOTEBOOK.

Adelaide Weinberg

Little is known of the debates conducted by members of the Political Economy Club in the last century. The historian's chief guide are the published minutes--a bare register of dates and names, of "queries without answers."¹ A description of a meeting which allows us a glimpse into the Club's illustrious privacy must therefore be regarded as a matter of some importance.

On 7 May, 1857 John Stuart Mill had brought before the Club the question: "By what laws are Retail Prices and Profits determined?"² A record of the debate has been preserved in John Elliot Cairnes' papers,³ and a vivid account of the meeting is contained in a letter to Cairnes' brother-in-law William Nesbitt.

The meeting was attended by about ninety members and visitors.⁴ Among those present were the venerable founder-member of the Club Thomas Tooke and its secretary W. Newmarch; J. G. Hubbard, Chairman of the meeting; Thomson Hankey, Robert Lowe, and two of Mill's early associates in the London Debating Society, C. P. Villiers and Lord Belper.⁵ Cairnes, recently appointed to the Whately Chair of Political Economy at Trinity College, Dublin, must have belonged to the contingent of honorary professorial members.⁶ The lasting impression which the meeting left on him may be seen in his treatment of retail trading in his Leading Principles of Political Economy. But it was memorable also in a very personal sense--Mill had taken his arm as they walked down Pall Mall together on their way home!⁷

Cairnes had "never heard a question better discussed. Mill spoke like a 'leaf' from the 'Principles.'" Lord Belper (I am not sure that I spell the name right) followed on the opposition very well. Low [sic] spoke very well, & explained himself with remarkable happiness.

The whole discussion was carried on in the best conversational style-- There was no attempt at fine language--everything was directly to the point."⁸

Seated between Hubbard and the "almost fatherly" Tooke, and himself taking part in the debate, he was not a little pleased with himself. In his more modest role of unofficial reporter he shows that quality of discernment for which he became so noted. Thus even in this brief account (quoted in full in my discussion below) some of the important characteristics of the retail trade come out very clearly, and their relevance is by no means confined to the historical situation in which they were discussed.

Taking the points in the order in which they occur, we find at the commencement Mill's doctrine that the "excessive" employment of capital in the distributive trades is detrimental to the interests of the consumer: "Question opened by Mill. Adverted first to the distinction between capital employed in production & capital employed in distribution--distribution limited by production, consequently the less capital employed in distribution the better; on the other hand the more employed in production the better, since even if commodities be produced in excess of effective demand, additional wealth is nevertheless created by which some consumers will benefit."

According to Mill, the agency of the "distributing Class" is "supplementary to that of the Producing Class."⁹ The price of the produce is the "source" from which the distributor is remunerated for his exertion and abstinence in the "business of distribution." An excessive supply of retailing capacity tends in the first instance to diminish the distributive share of all classes.¹⁰ But further, it has no tendency to lower prices and profit margins. For the remunerative price in retail distribution--as Mill is at pains to establish at a later stage of his Principles--is not left to be determined by the unimpeded action of competition. He obviously lacked Adam Smith's sanguine belief that the welfare of the consuming public is taken care of in that way. In fact, his argument is aimed at the imperfect organisation of the retail trade which, even if allowance be made for competitive encroachment upon customary barriers, still provides for the support of an unwarrantably large number of distributors and guarantees them a "share of the whole produce of land and labour" which "continues exorbitant."¹¹

In the debate Belper led the opposition: "[Note He was controverted by Lord Belper--on the ground that the object of all production is to bring the article to the consumer--a piece of cloth sold in a retail shop is the result of the labour of a great variety of persons each of whom contributes to the result--the rearer of the sheep, the shearer, the wool carder, the spinner, the weaver, the wholesale cloth merchant, the retailer;--if capital be invested in any of these processes in excess (ie out of proportion to that invested in the others) a loss results, but this is as true of one stage of the series as of the other.]"

The objection that misapplication of capital in any of the intermediate stages before a commodity reaches the retailer is wasteful, while indeed valid, seems to miss Mill's point, which is concerned with imperfect competition rather than miscalculation as the cause of

the excess.

Mill's next step was to dismiss from the theory of the retail trade the concept of a perfect market in which there cannot exist at any given time more than one price for each homogeneous commodity: "Mill was of opinion that the assumption that there are never two prices in the same market is not true of the retail trade--that, under precisely similar conditions the same article is sold permanently at different prices. The only explanation he offered of the anomaly was that people engaged in the retail trade rather as labourers than as capitalists, and that competition operates as it does in the learned professions, not so much in lowering prices as in dividing custom. Whereas, when joint stock companies engage as capitalists in the retail market, competition operates in the usual way in equalizing prices."

It will be remembered that Mill, not implausibly under the influence of Comte's doctrine of the "consensus,"¹² was the first to stress the importance of customary prices, profits, professional fees and so forth, and to draw attention to the modifications which their existence imposed on the conclusions of economic analysis arrived at under the assumption that a "maximum of competition"¹³ prevailed. His main thesis that the absence of price uniformity was due to custom, tempered by some consideration of "equity or justice"¹⁴ combined with inelasticity of demand, was challenged by the participants in the debate: "The fact of the disparity of prices, the other conditions being the same, was generally questioned. Lord Belper maintained that, when retail prices varied, it was owing to special circumstances which *mutatis mutandis* operate equally in the wholesale trade. This situation by giving a monopoly may enable the retailer to command a higher price. [Note the difference in this case wd go to the ground landlord.]"

Since Cairnes omits to state how Belper substantiated his claim, conjecture, guided by the appended note, may suggest some such case as Marshall's¹⁵ in which a high-rental location confines business to a few sellers who are thus in a position to charge higher prices, the gains however, accruing to the landlord in the form of rent. Belper (supposing this is what he had in mind) thus refuses to allow for the region lying between pure competition and effective monopoly, and firmly adheres to the classical dichotomy elsewhere maintained by Mill.¹⁶ He raised two further points: "2nd Better attendance in the shop will induce the consumer to pay a higher price in consideration of it. But the principal circumstance which he relied on for explaining the difference in retail price as existed in Regent Str., eg, and in St. Giles's was the different rates at which capital is turned. In St. Giles's the customers of retailers are of the poorer sort, & require but small variety in the goods which they purchase: in Regent Str., on the contrary a lady of fashion expects to find a large assortment of goods from which to select. The consequence is that the capitalist in St. Giles's turns his capital much more rapidly than the capitalist in Regent Street, & can therefore, consistently with getting average profits, sell articles at a lower price."

The first of these arguments seems to be intended to show that the conditions attached to the sale of an article in some way differentiate it from similar goods, and that therefore the assumption of a

perfectly homogeneous commodity the price of which varies in different shops cannot be maintained. As in the first illustration Belper may assume a monopoly, in this case limited to the provision of a particular service for which the seller is in a position to charge the price which the consumer (having no close substitute to suit him) is willing to pay. Or else he may simply suggest that the difference in price is fully accounted for by the extra cost involved in providing the "attendance" which, while slightly altering the conditions of sale, does not impair the supposition of a perfect market.

The second argument correctly states the relation of variety of goods offered to turnover,¹⁷ but appears to suggest that prices would be uniform if each trader's share in the market were made up of equal proportions of rich and poor without regard to their individual preferences, the vagaries, inertia, and ignorance, which to Mill are the peculiar features of consumer demand.¹⁸

The debate moved on to consider the bearing of adulteration practices on price deviations: "Several other speakers disputed the fact, & attributed the mistake on the subject to the fact that things different in quality were sold under the same name by being diluted, adulterated etc." But these circumstances hardly justify the inference that a competitive price adjustment is fully operative. In fact, selling an adulterated product may be as consistent with price uniformity as with heterogeneity, indicating in either case that the market itself is not perfect.

At this stage Lowe came to Mill's support, and the debate took a new and decisive turn: "Mr. Low agreed with Mill as to the fact and explained it by the circumstance that between wholesale dealers the bargains were equal, both having equal knowledge on the subject; whereas between the retailer and his customer the bargain was between one who had knowledge & one who had not; it was a game played by an expert with one practically unskilled-- [Note he might have added that the larger scale on which wholesale dealings were carried on rendered each transaction one of greater importance, so that it was always worth while to ascertain the price from other dealers.]"¹⁹

Mill in the Principles offers a similar, but more specified, basis of distinction: while "purchases for private use," guided by a variety of "feelings," are not "always made on business principles," buying and selling in the wholesale markets is "a matter of business; in which buyers take pains to know and generally do know, the lowest price at which an article of a given quality can be obtained."²⁰

Lowe resolves the problem of retailing into one major criterion-- the antithesis of knowledge and ignorance. His novel formulation commended itself to Cairnes. Yet Lowe neglects the personal element which links buyer and seller and thus actively supports the latter's position in the "unequal bargain." The final contribution to the debate is concerned with this latter aspect.

The awareness on the part of the consumer of his own inexpertness is seen to cause the delay in the competitive adjustment of prices which is here denoted as the principle of "friction." "Tooke remarked that the remarks had hitherto been directed to what was known as 'chance custom,' as distinguished from 'custom by connexion.' It was

in the latter form that the great bulk of retail dealings were carried on. People conscious of their own inability to judge the quality of retail articles, generally dealt in the same shop, as long as they were well treated. It might happen therefore that for a considerable time one man might pay more than his neighbour--however when he found out it was so, he wd leave the shop where the price was exorbitant, which wd lose his custom. He held that the same laws operated in the retail as in the wholesale trade, but the friction was greater in the latter.--differ. in credit was mentioned as a circumstance affecting retail prices."²¹

Tooke's observations come close to Marshall's: "A retail dealer when once he has established a good connection has always had a partial and limited monopoly. If he has used it ill, he has lost it sooner or later."²² Yet Tooke is far from regarding the impediments he notes as being monopolistic. The assumption of a competitive market, in his opinion, is still relevant to the theory of retailing, if, as in the case described, too large a deviation from the average ruling price will involve the loss of custom and in consequence, it may be presumed, a movement towards it.²³ Friction is no feature peculiar to the retail trades; it is rather the intensity of resistance the equilibrating process encounters from the disposition of individuals, which produces the impression that retail prices are governed by principles different in nature from those which determine wholesale prices.

Tooke's argument proved acceptable to Cairnes, but so did Lowe's, and, together, they survived with some slight shift of emphasis in the Leading Principles. The fundamental fact about the retail trade is the "excessive friction" in the working of competition. Combined with the seller's advantage of "expert" knowledge in the "game of exchange" with the ignorant buyer, it causes a state of high and widely differing prices for similar goods and produces a permanent waste of resources, which, for one reason or another, are constantly drawn into the market.²⁴

NOTES:

¹Political Economy Club, Centenary Volume, 1821-1920 (London, 1921), 336.

²Political Economy Club, Minutes of Proceedings 1821-1882, IV (London, 1882), 193.

³Unpublished Notebook, "Notes, Miscellaneous Pol. Ec.," ff. 23-24. Notebook begins September 20, 1856. Ms. 8984, National Library of Ireland.

⁴Cairnes to Nesbitt, 9 May, 1857, M 372, Mill-Taylor Collection, Vol. XLIX, British Library of Political and Economic Science.

⁵Ibid., and Political Economy Club, Minutes of Proceedings, 193.

⁶See Cairnes' letter to Nesbitt, cited above. As Galway Professor of Jurisprudence and Political Economy he again became eligible for honorary membership in 1862, his election being sponsored by JSM, Blake, and Newmarch. See JSM's letter to Cairnes, 20 January, 1862, Mill-Taylor Collection, Vol. LVI A.

⁷"You wd suppose from his manner that I was conferring the compliment upon him." Letter to Nesbitt cited above.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Principles of Political Economy, in Collected Works (University of Toronto Press, 1965), II, 40.

¹⁰Only in the sixth edition (1865) did Mill introduce the argument as advanced above, when dealing with the results to be anticipated from the cooperative movement. "Distributors differ from producers in this, that when producers increase, even though in any given department of industry they may be too numerous, they actually produce more; but the multiplication of distributors does not make more distribution to be done, more wealth to be distributed; it does but divide the same work among a greater number of persons, seldom even cheapening the process." Principles, III, 791.

¹¹Ibid., II, 410. The argument recurs in J. E. Cairnes, Some Leading Principles of Political Economy, Newly Expounded (Macmillan, 1874), 115. It has been noted as origin of the "excess capacity" concept. See, e.g., E. H. Chamberlin, The Theory of Monopolistic Competition (Harvard University Press, 1948), 106n; N. Kaldor, Essays on Value and Distribution (Free Press, 1960), 63.

¹²See Auguste Comte, Cours de Philosophie Positive (Paris, 1839), IV, 335-6. See also A. Marshall, Principles of Economics, ed. C. W. Guillebaud (Macmillan, 1961), 823n-824n.

¹³Principles, II, 244.

¹⁴Ibid., 243.

¹⁵See Marshall, Principles, 452.

¹⁶"They forget that wherever competition is not, monopoly is...." Principles, III, 794.

¹⁷See Marshall, Principles, 616.

¹⁸Principles, III, 460.

¹⁹Cf. Memorials of Alfred Marshall, ed. A. C. Pigou (Macmillan, 1925), 353: "For a business customer will scrutinize the charge for each individual thing;...since a small percentage on the things which he buys may affect his net profits by a large percentage."

²⁰Principles, III, 460.

²¹As to the influence of credit on retail prices, the best account in contemporary literature is probably contained in H. Fawcett, Manual of Political Economy (Macmillan, 1863), chap. x.

²²Memorials of Alfred Marshall, 353.

²³Cf. H. Smith, Retail Distribution (Oxford University Press, 1948), 22.

²⁴Leading Principles, 112-15.

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Recent Publications.

Miyoshi, Masao. "Mill and Pauline: The Myth and Some Facts," Victorian Studies, 11 (Dec., 1965), 154-63. The argument, based on the fullest account yet given of Mill's marginal comments in the Victoria and Albert copy of Pauline, is that Browning did not change the course of his poetic career as a result of JSM's criticism, and that the criticism was not wholly unpleasant to Browning.

Schneewind, Jerome B. "Moral Problems and Moral Philosophy in the Victorian Period," Supplement to Victorian Studies, 9 (1965), 29-46.

Stigler, George. "The Nature and Role of Originality in Scientific Progress," in his Essays in the History of Economics. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, 1-15. (Reprinted from Economica, n.s. 22 [1955], 293-302.) Discussion of six important contributions by JSM to economic thought, usually overlooked as original because JSM didn't trumpet forth his originality.

Forthcoming Works.

Alexander, Edward. "Dickens, Mill, and Utilitarianism," Nineteenth-Century Fiction.

Work in Progress.

Spitz, David. A book on Mill's theory of Liberty, being an enlarged and revised version of "Freedom and Individuality: Mill's Liberty in Retrospect," in C. J. Friedrich, ed., Liberty (New York: Atherton Press, 1962), pp. 176-226.

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Dr. Eileen Curran of Colby College and the Wellesley Index has located two previously unknown Mill items in a short-lived periodical, The Guide, edited by Henry Cole. The first, in the issue for 29 Apr., 1837, under the heading "Commercial & Housekeeper's Guide," is a brief comment on the improved British confidence in the American commercial houses. The second, in the issue for 18 June, 1837, under the heading "Literature," is a lengthy pre-publication excerpt from Mill's review of Carlyle's French Revolution, which appeared in the July number of the London and Westminster Review. The items are identified by Cole in the file copy, Victoria and Albert Museum.

Queries: J. B. Schneewind (Political Science, Pittsburg) would like information about the volume of sales of Mill's works. (There is some information, so far as I know uncollected, in the correspondence with Longmans and Parker, mostly in the London School of Economics.) There are two requests for copies of Ruth Borchard's Four Dialogues of Plato.

A Toronto student reports in a recent supplemental examination that "Mill was a product of the intense industrial activity of the 19th Century." Did Malthus overlook something?

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The New Edition of Bentham.

In 1959, on the initiative of University College, London, a Committee was set up to sponsor a definitive and comprehensive edition of the writings of Jeremy Bentham. Work began at once on the editing of Bentham's extensive correspondence, and two volumes of letters (to 1780), edited by T. L. S. Sprigge of the University of Sussex, are now in the press and will be published later this year. A third volume of letters, edited by I. R. Christie of University College, London, is in active preparation. Planning of the thirty or more volumes which will finally be required began effectively in 1961 with the appointment as General Editor of J. H. Burns, Reader in the History of Political Thought at University College. Work is currently in progress on two

volumes of Bentham's basic early works on jurisprudence and legal philosophy, edited by H. L. A. Hart of University College, Oxford, and on a two-volume edition by J. H. Burns (working on foundations laid by C. W. Everett of Columbia University) of the Constitutional Code. Preliminary plans have been made for three volumes on penology and criminal law to be edited by L. Radzinowicz of Cambridge University.

The aim throughout will be to provide critical texts of authentic Bentham material to replace the curious mixture of editorial recensions, translations, abridgements, and original Bentham which makes up the 11-volume Works published under the superintendence of John Bowring between 1838 and 1843. All Bentham's published works (including those excluded on one ground or another by Bowring) will be included. Extensive additions from the unpublished manuscripts will be incorporated. To publish in its entirety the immense, repetitive and often chaotic mass of Bentham papers at University College, London, is neither practicable nor desirable, but in this edition, it is hoped, that material will for the first time be systematically used to establish authentic texts. The other major collection of Bentham papers, in the British Museum, will be similarly used and will provide a large part of the comprehensive presentation of Bentham's correspondence. Every effort is also being made to locate other manuscript material: the Dumont papers in Geneva form an obvious third source, and enquiries in the United States have already yielded a substantial number of letters and other items.

The Committee (now under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins) would welcome further information about Bentham material and about work in progress which may have a bearing upon the preparation of the edition. Communications should be addressed to Dr. J. H. Burns, Department of History, University College, Gower Street, London W.C.1, England.

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Review.

Intellectuals in Politics: John Stuart Mill and the Philosophic Radicals. By Joseph Hamburger. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965. Pp. xii, 308. \$7.50.

This absorbing book, broadly based on copious unpublished as well as published materials, is the fullest study so far of a fascinating episode in British political history. It is an episode full of problems, and there is unlikely to be universal agreement with all Professor Hamburger's solutions. It may be, for instance, that in his legitimate insistence that the Philosophic Radicals were much more directly indebted to James Mill than to Bentham he leans rather too far. His readers would scarcely realise, from these pages alone, how deeply Bentham was preoccupied, in the last fifteen years of his life, with the contrast between the "ruling few" and the "subject many," and with the problem of corruption.

More serious, because more central to the book's theme, are doubts as to Professor Hamburger's account of John Stuart Mill's relationship

with the Philosophic Radicals. That this was a complex and ambiguous relationship goes without saying. What does need saying is that Professor Hamburger has perhaps done less than justice to the complexity and the ambiguity. Thus, in his view, Mill was largely alienated from political radicalism between 1829 and 1833, but had returned to that allegiance by 1835; and from then until 1839 remained a dedicated Philosophic Radical, harder to disillusion than many of his fellows. On all this, other views are possible, as may best be illustrated, in a brief review, from the period 1829-33.

No one can doubt that, in those years, the impact of new ideas, following the 1826 "mental crisis," was shaking Mill's radicalism. But Professor Hamburger scarcely establishes his contention that there was a corresponding retreat in most of what Mill called his "practical views" on current politics. Mill's enthusiasm for the French Revolution of 1830 hardly shows through this analysis. Again, we are told (85), that Mill "stood aside when his father and all his friends eagerly took part in the extraparliamentary politics that accompanied the passing of the Reform Bill," but are not sufficiently reminded of the warm terms in which he refers to the "irresistible strength of a unanimous people" (to Sterling, 24 May, 1832; Earlier Letters, 100) or to the Political Unions (to Sterling, 20-22 Oct., 1831, and to d'Eichthal and Duveyrier, 30 May, 1832; ibid., 77, 108). Again, it is entirely proper to point to Mill's articles on "Pledges" in 1832 as evidence for a divergence from orthodox radicalism. But to argue (98) that by 1835 Mill had "reverted to the orthodox Radical position that justified pledges" is to ignore the point that Mill in 1835 was merely repeating (and even in part quoting) what he had said in 1832: that pledges, in principle undesirable, might be essential in an imperfect representative system. And when Professor Hamburger argues (86ff.) that Mill's important articles of 1835 in the London Review deploy a novel reconciliation between popular representation and government by an intellectual aristocracy, he seems to overlook the extent to which the substance of this argument, including the crucial parallel between legislation and medicine, was present already in the articles on "Pledges."

To disagree on such points is only to argue that the last word has not been said on some important and difficult questions. For the book as a whole there must be gratitude from all who are concerned with the history and analysis of Benthamite Utilitarianism.

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Royden Harrison's Before the Socialists: Studies in Labour and Politics, 1861-81 contains some interesting side-lights on Mill and the working classes (a subject on which Peter Jackson of Hull is working). Lord Chilston, in his W. H. Smith, has less than one would like on the elections of 1865 and 1868, when Smith first was defeated by, and then defeated, JSM; there is room for a study of these campaigns. (Both books published by Routledge and Kegan Paul and the University of Toronto Press, 1965.)

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Collected Edition of Mill's Works: unfortunate circumstances have delayed publication of Volumes IV and V, Essays on Economics and Society. They will now appear early in 1967, with an introduction by Lord Robbins. The table of contents for the next volume, Essays on Ethics and Society (Vol. XI), is given below. Volumes VI and VII will include a full collated text of the System of Logic, with previously unpublished material from the early draft, and from Mill's lecture notes on logic at Montpellier and the little Traité de logique which is based on those notes. Further lists of contents will be given in subsequent numbers of this News Letter.

Essays on Ethics and Society:

"Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy"
"Blakey's History of Moral Science"
"Professor Sedgwick's Discourse"
"Bentham"
"Coleridge"

"Whewell's Moral Philosophy"
"Utilitarianism"
Auguste Comte and Positivism
Three Essays on Religion