Appendix I.
The Concepts of 'Perfectibility' and 'Progress' Examined.

§. Contemporary understanding of the concepts in relation to Mill's account of their meaning and content. The problems posed for contemporary theorists by the use of the concepts of 'perfectibility' and 'progress' require some examination in conjunction with Mill's understanding and use of the terms. Only if Mill is able to overcome the objections to the terms as valid descriptors of either existing conditions or of future goals can his naturalist theory continue to resist the criticism of its opponents. This appendix contains a brief account of the criticism of the use of 'perfection,' followed by Mill's clear and precise understanding of the concept and how it operates as a criterion of measurement for existing and future states of the individual agent. This pattern is repeated for the concept of progress and its relation by Mill to the achievement of commun ty-realization within a society.

§. The grounds for rejection of the concepts of perfection and progress. 'Perfection' and 'perfectibility' are widely used, often synonymously, as terms that may be applied and criticised in a broad sense.[1] In this they are similar to the employment

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[1] John Rawls' criticism of perfectioi ism, for example (*Theory of Justice*. Oxford 1972 pp.325-332) is a criticism of institutonalized perfectionism, which he refers to as 'political perfectionism'. There is,at the same time however, an implied acceptance of non-political perfectionism, particularly in his embrace of the Aristotelian Principle and the concept of life-choices. Rawls uses 'perfectionism' to depict what according to the examination following is better described as 'perfectibilism' Unraveling the conflation in his criticism reveals an opposition to the broad concept of per ection as understood and incorporated into policy by the state, and a support of a narrower, limited perfection achieveable by individual agents. Judith Shklar in *After Utopia; the Decline of Political Faith*. Princeton,1957 p.vii, objects that the notion that the perfecting of human beings is taking place is untenable. 'In the age of two world wars, totalitarian dictatorship, and mass murder, this faith can be regarded only as simple-minded, or even worse, a contemptible form of complacency.' Shklar's blanket rejection of perfection is rejected by the equally broad understanding of the term supported by Charles R. Beitz in 'Sovereignty and Morality in International Affairs' in David Held (ed.) *Political Theory Today* Cambridge, 1991 p247: 'Just as we see ourselves as striving to realize in our own lives various forms of individual perfection, so we can see our countries as striving for various forms of social or communal perfection.' Neither Shklar nor Beitz provide an account of what is perfection, and this has the effect of weakening the force of both claims. John Plamenatz's objection to the use of perfectionism as a concept in socio-political and ethical theory is more an objectior to the use of the concept as the expression of the inevitability of betterment. (See John Plamenatz, *Man and Society* Vol.2. London, 1963 p.430) He raises no objection to the terms as they are described below: only to their use as prognostic tools. At a different level, 'perfection' is frequently used as a rhetorical term with the intention only of bringing to mind a colour or temperature to support the writer's argument. As such, it can be either a device of approbative or pejorative intention. See e.g. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon 'Society without Government' p.161 and Michael Oakeshott 'The Enjoyment of Orderly and Peaceable Behaviour' p.379 in A. Arblaster and S. Lukes (eds.) *The Good Society* London:

and criticism of the term 'progress'(examined below). So they are in that their meanings, when closely examined, are found to be different in scope and application.[2] Separating out their meanings (not always recognized by users of the term, and leading in itself to a confused presentation of argument) will enable a clearer assessment of the way in which Mill used the term to be made.

The origin of the conflation of terms is a familiar one. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there developed alongside the concept of progress in society a resurgence of belief in the perfectibility of human beings.[3] The impetus for the reinvigorated belief

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Methuen 1971, for antagonistic uses of the term, both of which are unexplained and carry no substantive meaning.

[2] 'Perfectionism' and 'perfectibilism' are considered synonymous in the O.E.D. John Passmore, (John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man.* London, 1970.) notes a distinction between the terms made by Godwin (see below). The distinction between 'perfectedness' meaning without flaw or error, and incapable of further refinement, and 'perfectibility' meaning the capacity to achieve the greatest possible degree of perfectedness possible given the raw material to be perfected and in the circumstances that prevail, is an important distinction here. Perfection, the more abstract term, is found as a recurring thread of argument in much religious and speculative philosophy, but is rarely defined. The assumption of understanding of its meaning may lie behind the regular conflation of the terms. Perfectibility is noted by Plamenatz (Plamenatz *op.cit.* Vol.2. pp.441-443) as being a valid distinction, but is not separated by him from the concept of improvement. Such a separation is made by Mill (see below) and is significant for a comprehensive understanding of his account of perfectibility.

[3] The problem of conflation began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the lay development of an account of the perfecting of human beings which began from the religio/philosophic position of unlimited perfection. To dissolve the problem of unattainability theorists extended indefinitely the time-frame and argued for unlimited incremental perfecting. 'Nature has set no term to the perfection of the human faculties' wrote Condorcet, and this assertion was echoed by Richard Price, William Worthington, Herbert Spencer and others. (Condorcet quote from John Plamenatz *Mand and Society* London 1963 Vol.2. p.439. See also David Spadafora. *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth Century Britain.* New Haven, 1990 pp.248, 388-89.)

The vagueness of the Condorcettian position was recognized as diminishing its use as a concept in pragmatic philosophy by Godwin and Priestley, among others. However, Godwin wrote, 'the word seems sufficiently adapted to express the faculty of being continually made better and receiving perpetual improvement.'(William Godwin cited by Passmore *op.cit.* p.158. For Joseph Priestley's similar position see Spadafora *op.cit.* p.246.) By acknowledging absolute perfection as beyond the attainability of human beings but accepting the notion of indefinite incremental advances, Godwin and Priestley divorced human perfectibility from the absolute perfection of God, with its open-ended criteria, and thus rescued the concept for use in social and political theory. The notion that human beings may be *perfected,* as in improved, is defensible, they argued. Nonetheless, the inclination of some nineteenth century utopians to interpret the perfectibility of agents as 'endless progressive improvement, physical, intellectual, and moral, and of happiness without the possibility of retrogression or of assignable limit', left the concept even in its modified form open to criticism. (See e.g. Robert Owen. *The Book of the New Moral World.* London 1836 p.iv.) The entanglement of perfection and perfectibility continued. The unravelling of the problem was achieved by Kant.

The distinction between the open-ended (and consequently unrealizable) absolute perfection found in God and the Forms, and the limited (and as such practical) perfection possible in given circumstances was both recognized and clearly set out by Immanuel Kant. The principles of Kant's moral philosophy need no rehearsal here. What is important to note is that the

was once again an attempt to develop ı secular counter to the power and influence of organized religion.   It is in the Enlightenment embrace of the new sciences and technologies that the confusion originates.   The anticipation of progress in the sciences is logically incompatible with their being depicted as perfect, but in many cases this incompatibility was ignored.   So it came about that the same term was employed to characterize two different conditions.

This confusion was recognized at the time by theorists as widely separated as Godwin and Kant, but the distinction they made was often overlooked.   That distinction, between the notion of unlimited and limited perfection or between   the tenets of perfectionism and those of perfectibility, is the key to understanding Mill's use of the terms. Once it is ascertained what is meant by the term 'perfection,' and this meaning compared to the meaning of 'perfectible,' Mill's employment of the terms may be examined to determine its legitimacy and their degree of integration within his naturalist theory.

Those who define limitless perfection use the criteria of completeness, absence of flaw or blemish, freedom from all deficiency, and impeccability.   Perfection in this unlimited sense permeates the Christian account of the nature of God, and is the underlying principle of the Platonic Forms or Ideas.[4]   The demand for such perfection in man is

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categorical imperative of moral action is derived from the ideal of moral being, and for Kant, 'ideas are still further removed from objective reality than are categories.'   They are the repositories of perfection, and, he affirmed, that perfection 'is attainable by no possible empirical cognition.' (See Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*. London, 1991 p.334.)   As such it cannot be represented by one or a group of examples. (See Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Judgment*. Oxford, 1952 pp.69-70]   Kantian moral perfection is, by definition, beyond the achievement of any human being. (See A. D. Lindsay. *Kant*. Oxford, 1934 p.285.)

There is, however, a second account of perfection in Kant's work.   He also refers to the existence of 'practical perfection'. In such cases, where talent or skill can be developed to the fullest degree possible, there is the inherent possibility of achieving 'external objective finality'.   This is, according to Kant the concrete perfecting of an existential thing, and 'it consists in the completeness of anything after its kind.' (See Passmore, *op.cit.* p.17; Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. pp.69-70.)   It s clear that Kant ranks the perfection that is the object of reason above the perfection that is the possible result of existential action. There is nonetheless a difficulty in attempting to operate with two understandings of the term.   It is similar to the difficulty Mill encountered in his attempt to reconcile Benthamist quantitative pleasure or happiness with his own claim for qualitative differences between happinesses. How are the two to be balanced in existential circumstances, and, in theoretical terms, what is the criterion used to distinguish between them?   For the resurgence of this idea, see Spadafora, *op.cit.*, pp.12, 391; Raymond Duncan Gastil. *Progress: Critical Thinking About Historical Change*. Westport, Conn., pp.x-xi, 1-3; M H. Abrams *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York, 1971 pp.183-188, 260, 269-272.

4   At the concrete level it is used to evaluate axioms and some formulae of mathematics.   The difference between religious and moral argument and the great majority of mathematical discourse is that the term when used by the latter discipline is relatively free from dispute.

frequently found in the New Testament, but without any clear guidance for its achievement.[5] Nevertheless, the obvious intellectual problem contained within this account did not diminish its appeal both to religious hierarchies and their constituency.[6] So much was this the case that the impact of Darwinism on nineteenth century Christianity, while it increased the sophistication of this expectation, did so without alteration of the degree of guidance available for its achievement.[7] The understanding of perfection that emerged in in the wake of evolutionary theory was, rather, a reinforcement of the religious claim that it consisted in obedience.[8]

The difference between unlimited and limited perfection is that the latter use of the same criteria recognizes that they apply within the parameters of material, technological, and intellectual means available at a given time. The uncontroversial status of limited perfection, applicable to reasoning, process, and product in particular spheres of activity, is because of the acknowledgment of operating boundaries and their fluid nature. The concept of limited instrumental perfection (in purpose or function), and what Passmore terms 'technical perfection'(in skill or trade), bring us much closer to the pragmatics of social and political organization.[9] It is easy to see the value of the concept in terms of social theory, when it is hedged by the conditions that attach to the various discrete skills and trades, institutions and processes that comprise complex human interaction. Where this understanding of perfection becomes contentious is when it is employed as a prognostic device using the evidence of past advances in scientific and technological knowledge to suggest the possibility of infinite improvement in social and political organization.

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[5] See e.g. Matthew 5:48; John 14:12. This notion of perfection as complete, whole, and free from all deficiencies, together with the expectation that believers might achieve such perfection, is common to many religions.

[6] Theologians have recognized that the major difficulty for intellectual religious perfectionism is the absolute form in which it is often presented. It is a teleological process that has no possible end, at least within an individual's earthly lifespan. This eternal characteristic is valuable in the context of theology and of the appeal of religion, but presents a problem for a satisfactory intellectual defense of religious teaching. However, the Christian religion is an immensely rich complex of intellectual arguments that interact with articles of faith and practical dogma. It is interesting to note that within this complex there have been presented many alternatives, in degree at least, to the bald rejection of the perfecting of human beings. (see Passmore op.cit. pp.68-93)

[7] Ninian Smart 'Developments in Christianity in Western Europe' in The World's Religions Cambridge, 1992 pp.342-3.

[8] Obedientiary perfectionism, criticized by Rawls, may be seen as an instrumental sub-branch of religious perfectionism, operating at a non-intellectual level.

[9] Passmore op.cit. pp1-2

There is now apparent a distinction between the concepts of unlimited and limited perfection in terms of the operational extent of the criteria used to determine the existence of either state. Unlimited perfection is open-ended and without confines. Limited perfection, on the other hand, s the state of perfection possible within defined boundaries of cultivation and development. The recognition of this distinction has brought about a separation between the users of each type of perfection, with the first being referred to as 'perfectionists,' and their ideas on perfection being the tenets of perfectionism, and the second referred to as 'perfectibilists,' and their theory called 'perfectibilism.'

It will be recalled that Mill is presened here as operating simultaneously at both a narrow and a broad conceptual level. At the level of the individual agent, the cultivation and development of particular dispositions etc. takes place within a recognized set of parameters, demonsrated by Mill to comprise the original potential in the disposition etc, together with the circumstances, experiences, and environment of that agent. The achievement of te,os, and the greatest possible happiness, for the individual is therefore a finite endeavour with describable limits. In this sense, Mill was operating with a narrow concept of limited perfection. His use of the term is that of a perfectibilist.

§. **Mill and the concept of progress: objections to his use of the term recognized and deflected.** As well as being concerned to depict the achievement of *telos* for the particular agent via self-realization, Mill also operated at the broader conceptual level of the community. The melioration of the group or society also has parameters similar to those of the individual. It is the significance of these boundaries to development, which even though they may be considered fluid over indefinite periods of time change very slowly and erratically, that conditioned Mill's understanding of perfection in the individual and progress in the community. His goal was to develop social and political theory applicable to the circumstances and environment of his time and of the near future. At the same time, the socio-political system he developed had to be grounded on a base of permanent principles of action so that it might continue to operate in conditions of changed boundaries. To perform this pragmatic task necessitated the acceptance of an understanding of perfection-within-parameters as the immediate goal for the particular agent, whilst maintaining the broader goal of progress within the society.

It is in his use of progress as his criterion for the attainment of the *telos* of the community that Mill encounters resistance from contemporary thinkers.[10] The concept of progress in the history of ideas, is similar to that of perfectionism, in that it raises considerable debate in terms of the conditions necessary for support of the claim of its existence as an intellectual object, and the historical origin of those conditions.[11] The modern belief in progress came about, according to many observers, as a response to growing uncertainty concerning the afterlife. From the Enlightenment forward, the change of focus in speculative philosophy was accompanied by rapid advances in the material sciences, in economics, technology, and medicine, and resulted in a shift in emphasis from the community to the individual. This cumulative change in the basis of thought and action undercut the hold of Christianity over a newly mobile population, and signalled a radical change in the understanding of time and of death.[12] Progress, it has been argued, became a secularized version of the Christian belief in Providence,

[10] Its critics have concluded that the concept of progress in the nineteenth century is conspicuously lacking in intellectual content. It comprises of nothing more than a feeling of optimism that rests on the scientific advances of the age, and was used in large part as a reassurance and defence against the fear of the unknown. In the judgment of contemporary historians of ideas it is permissible to reject it completely as indicating merely a mind-set dependent upon the values of the holder, rather than a term with which either to describe the unfolding of circumstances or to develop a prognosis for society. It may be conservative, radical, religious, rational or any of their opposites, depending entirely on the user's subjective view of the good. It is, in short, a ter n with 'an ocean of possible meanings'. See W. Warren Wagar. *Good Tidings: The Belief in Progress from Darwin to Marcuse*. Bloomington, 1972. pp.3-4, 14.; Peter J. Bowler. *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past*. Oxford, 1989 pp.1-3.

[11] There are commentators who present evidence for the incorporation of the concept as originally found in the work of authors as venerable as Aristotle, Augustine, and the Joachimites, and who then trace the development of the idea through the work of Bacon, Pascal, Leibniz, and Kant to Condorcet's seminal work *L'Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*. See e.g. Robert Nisbet *History of the Idea of Progress* New York 1980 and Charles Van Doren *The Idea of Progress* New York 1967 for accounts of the development of the concept of progress presented in this fashion. John Plamenatz (*op.cit.*, Vol.1. p.409.) notes the Aristotelian concept of progress, with reservations. Others have noted the significance of the gradual shift from a belief in the guiding hand of Providence to a faith in human resourcefulness as the ground of progress. Beginning with Bossuet, and having as its intermediary developers such European thinkers as Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, Lessing and Herder, the gradualist understanding of the concept once again coalesces in the thought of Condorcet. See Immanuel Kant *On History* L.W. Beck (ed.), New York, 1963, and William T. Bluhm. *Ideologies and Attitudes: Modern Political Culture*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1974.

[12] See Christopher Lasch. *The True and Only Heaven*. New York, 1991 p.40: Gastil. *op.cit.* pp.1-3. 5; Spadafora. *op.cit.* p.9. According to one commentator, prior to the eighteenth century the generally-understood meaning of the word 'progress' was neutral. It simply meant 'going forward, or proceeding in any undertaking.' The broad meaning changed, post-Enlightenment, to the clearly meliorative one of 'motion forward in the sense of advancement or improvement. See Spadafora. *op.cit.* pp.6-7.

and it took the form of a faith in human possibility exhibited as a faith in history, 'or, what amounts to the same thing, a faith in progress.'[13]

It is important to note as a pointer to the examination of Mill's understanding of 'progress' that it is not a homogeneous concept. As belief in progress gained favour as an animating principle during the eighteenth century, and was entrenched as the controlling idea of the nineteenth, there developed within it several different and not necessarily compatible strands.[14] Material progress, that is the improvement of quantity, quality, and distribution of goods, was one strand. Intellectual progress was another.[15] The use of 'progress' was also adopted as an evaluative term by both pragmatic and romantic social commentators when considering the changes that were taking place in individuals and the human species.

There were, during Mill's life, two distinct approaches to the understanding of what it is that drives human beings to behave as they do, and these approaches alter considerably the meaning of the terms used to describe their ends and the attainment of them. The 'modern' nineteenth century approach was epitomised by the Benthamist utilitarians, wherein 'nature is grasped by taking it apart and analysing it into its basic constituents, somewhat as one might say that the nature of a watch is to be discovered

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[13] W. Warren Wagar, cited in Gastil *op.cit.* p.20. For similar views, see E. H. Carr. *What is History?* Harmondsworth 1964 p.119. Lasch *op.cit* p.40. The important debate between the followers of Karl Löwith (*The Meaning of History.* Chicago 1949) who support the thesis that the modern concept of progress is a straightforward secularization of the central Christian doctrine and therefore illegitimate, and those of Hans Blumenberg (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age.* Cambridge, Mass., 1983.) who reject the secularization thesis, is an important contribution to the understanding of the origin and meaning of the term 'progress'.

[14] Carr (*op.cit.* p.111) refers to the nineteenth century 'cult of Progress'. Roland N. Stromberg, *European Intellectual History Since 1789.* New York, 1968 p.111, takes the idea of Progress to be the substantial common denominator in all the 19th c. ideologies. It was, he writes, 'the Idea that the nineteenth century so generally bowed down to'.

[15] These form the basis of Condorcet's understanding of the term. Macaulay and others, from a different perspective, understood progress as an instrument of political doctrine. Concurrently, there was a strong belief that these strands of progress would inevitably be accompanied by, or bring about, moral progress. Hamilton's faith in progress as the instrument which, through advances in economics, would bring about improvements in human nature and an enlargement of happiness is the nineteenth century affirmation of Gibbon's 'pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race.'(Edward Gibbon. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* 4th Ed. London. 1906 Vol.4. p.169; Robert Hamilton. *The Progress of Society.* London. 1830 pp.12-13.) What was to become a complacent belief in inevitable progress continued throughout the nineteenth century despite the warnings of writers such as Charles Darwin who warned that 'there is no absolute tendency to progression, excepting from favourable circumstances.'(Charles Darwin quoted in Adam Phillips. *Winnicott.* London 1988, p.19.)

by examining the watchworks in deta l.'[16] From this perspective, reformers such as Bentham and James Mill could reject the conservative notion of the incorrigibility of flawed human nature, and, trusting in the power of reason, subscribe to the perfectibility of humankind. Human nature, they argued as a central claim of their joint theory, is infinitely malleable by education and experience, and may be improved both at the level of individuals and at the level of societies. The concept of progress - and the embedded understanding of a universal moral code - which is the result of such social engineering is physically mechanistic and eschews both imagination and feeling.

At the same time, and in opposition to the detached and unemotional position of the Benthamists, there developed a broad movement in thought which celebrated an idealist understanding of the self, acknowledged the power of the transcendental, and promoted the value of feelings and imagination.[17] Progress, in this context, was the heroic triumph of the individual over adverse circumstances and physical impediments. The theme, however, is largely a metaphor. Behind the Romanticist celebration of heroism there is a lucid awareness of the fragility, of the corruptibility, and of the flawed nature of human beings generally. In contrast to the cool and imperturbable belief in the clockwork predictability of human behaviour held by the Benthamists, the Romanticists saw human nature as a volatile organic process the development of which was impossible to anticipate.

Mill, it will be argued, attempted to synthesize the two approaches. He appreciated the expository value of the analytic approach to human nature taken by his father and Bentham, but was acutely aware that by employing such an approach in isolation, the conclusion they arrived at was unable to comprehend the intricacy of human nature, its development, and the influences upon it.[18] The moral code which was its product was

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[16]   Goethe and Schelling and other German philosophers, and their influence in English thought through Carlyle, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley, are central to the development of what came to be known as Romanticism. See Mulford Q. Sibley. *Nature and Civilization: Some Implications for Politics.* Itasca, Ill., 1977 pp.8-9. The echo of Hobbes' simile, found in *Leviathan,* is unintentionally ironic given Hobbes' views on the possibility of progress.

[17]   Romanticists' and metaphysical real sts' theory of progress was developed in opposition to Enlightenment philosophy. It was primarily a German intelllectual response and developed through Lessing, Herder, Fichte and Schelling, and their investment of a spiritual element into the concept of improvement. This is exemplified in G.F.W. Hegel's *Philosophy of History* which includes all change in civilization and society as elements of an inevitable progress toward the achievement of the Absolute. The manner in which progress is presented in this theory is so broad as to include every circumstance and event in history. As such, however, it loses all fruitfulness as a theory of change.

[18]   Mill, 'Bentham', *Works,* Vol. 10, p.92. The so-called defining moment of Mill's life - his encounter with Marmontel's memoirs, and his subsequent recovery from a period of nervous depression - may be understood to be the beginning of the reconciliation in his work between

both sterile and impractical. The philosophy of history developed by Comte and others was thus embraced and modified by Mill to incorporate the intervening variables of time, circumstances, and environment and then fused with the concept of empirical laws of behaviour to produce a complex account of how agents and the community do achieve some degree of realization and happiness, and more importantly how they might be assisted to increase that achevement. The result of this syncretic approach will be found below to be a complex but specific understanding of progress as a measure of the degree of attainment of the community *telos*.

The cumulative evidence presented in the foregoing chapters gives a clear signal that Mill's *telos* for both individual and species - that of survival and melioration- and his proposed method of attainment of that end via the cultivation and development of dispositions and capacities across the spectrum present in all human beings, will operate with a concept of progress in this syncretic sense. His use of the term, examined below, confirms the accuracy of the signal.

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these two approaches.

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