



Translated from the French and edited
by Oscar A. Haac

the correspondence of
John Stuart Mill
and
Auguste Comte

With a foreword by Oscar A. Haac
and an introduction by
Angèle Kremer-Marietti



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To Gunilla

*A correspondence from which, we dare
hope, the future of humanity... will derive
some benefit.*

—Mill, 12 August 1842

*Our ideas converge spontaneously in all
essential points of the new philosophy....
This seems a very special confirmation of its
fundamental truth and of its intrinsic capacity
to bring the majority of modern thinkers
sooner or later into its fold.*

—Comte, 8 April 1842

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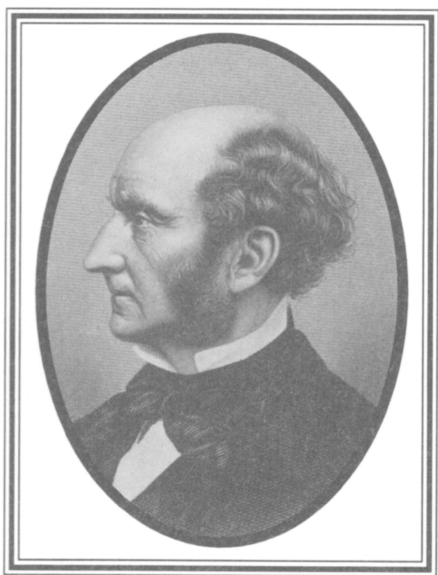
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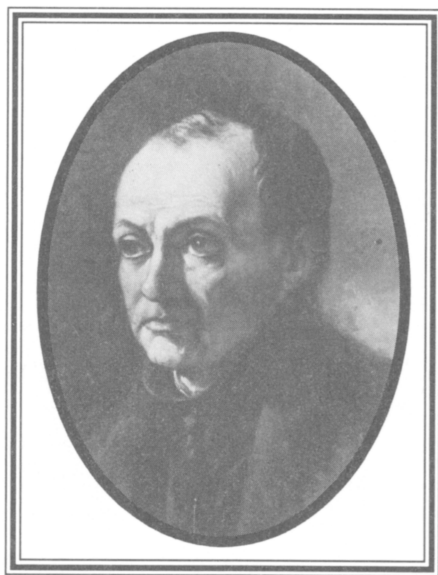
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O.A.H.
A.K.-M.



John Stuart Mill



Auguste Comte

A Foreword to the Correspondence

Oscar A. Haac

“A more interesting *commercium epistolicum* has never been given to the world.”¹ We readily agree with this view of the London positivist, Dr. Bridges, regarding the eighty-nine letters exchanged between John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte during the years 1841 through 1847. We are privileged, indeed, to be able to follow two leading philosophers as they discuss the social, political, philosophic and scientific issues of the day, interpreted from the opposing traditions of British empiricism and French systematic speculation. The two men have much in common, for both are intent on formulating the science of man and society.

Their letters are here translated for the first time into English. Mill addressed his elder colleague in French. He was fluent in French since, at the age of fourteen, he spent a year in southern France (1820–21) as the guest of Samuel Bentham,² (the brother of Jeremy, a friend of his father’s), with whose work young John was already familiar and whose manuscripts he was soon to edit.

John Stuart Mill was a precocious boy,³ and that is the way acquaintances remembered him in Montpellier when Auguste Comte contacted them years later. Under the exceptional tutelage of his father, the young man had already absorbed Latin and Greek and gained extensive knowledge of philosophy and economics. But the one-sided intellectual upbringing had set him apart and was largely responsible for a mental breakdown when he was twenty. The father, James Mill, a philosophical radical and agnostic, is best remembered by his *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, the *Elements of Political Economy*, and a *History of British India*. His son had worshiped him, but John’s gradual self-liberation from his father’s overwhelming influence was a traumatic experience.

By 1841, when John Stuart Mill wrote his first letter to Comte, he had admired his work for many years.⁴ He had read a number of Comte's early essays and three volumes of the *Cours de philosophie positive*, even while he was composing a major work of his own, *A System of Logic*.⁵ This is how he later describes the discovery of Auguste Comte in his *Autobiography*:

I had long been an ardent admirer of Comte's writings [and] had fully agreed with him when he maintained that the mass of mankind, including even their rulers...must...accept most of their opinions on political and social matters, as they do on physical...from the authority of those who have bestowed more study on those subjects.... And there was nothing in his Treatise that I admired more than his remarkable exposition of the benefits which the nations of modern Europe have historically derived from the separation, during the middle ages, of temporal and spiritual power.⁶

After the excesses of the French Revolution⁷ and the despotism of Napoleon, they feel the need for reconstruction but resist attempts to return to the Ancien Régime, to the Restoration or to the Holy Alliance shaped by Metternich. They call for a radical reappraisal of social doctrine, aware of the Industrial Revolution and of the role of the "masses," Saint-Simon's "industrials." Comte calls them the "most numerous class" of workers.

Both men consider the French Revolution a turning point of history. As early as 1822, in what he likes to call his fundamental essay, "l'opuscule fondamental," Comte speaks of the "negative" *philosophes* as "the direct cause for the fall of the Ancien Régime,"⁸ which must now be replaced by "positive" thought: the destruction of the Revolution is to be followed by the constructive force of Positivism and science.

Comte feels like the son of the Revolution, even while he rejects its aftermath. Mill sympathizes and agrees that philosophers must help governments realize their moral responsibilities.⁹ They both stand ready to help transcend the "negative" age. As Coleridge puts it, the "positive" age brings with it the "criticism of criticism." As believers in progress, Comte and Mill oppose the hierarchy of the church as much as the Enlightenment, Condillac and Voltaire. They are looking forward to the positive age when philosophers of different backgrounds, such as they, can reach agreement and arrive at "definitive" solutions, as Comte calls them.

They welcome their meeting of minds: Mill admires the experience of his elder colleague; Comte finds in Mill a much needed window on

current thought; for his practice of "cerebral hygiene," his refusal to read books or periodicals until he completes his great treatise, the *Cours de philosophie positive*, steeps him in work and isolation.

Rapidly a warm friendship grows between them which transcends the realm of ideas. They plan to meet and, while the hoped for encounter was not to materialize, they broach intimate subjects rarely mentioned in their printed work. They speak with utter frankness about their respective mental crises and their hopes and fears, especially during the early phase of their correspondence.

This endows their letters with special importance. Here we can find candid appraisals of those who support their philosophy of the future and of those opposed to its progress. Comte becomes personally acquainted with friends of Mill's like George Henry Lewes and John and Sarah Austin; he will be aided by George Grote, Sir William Molesworth and Raikes Curry; and he comes to appreciate Thomas Carlyle, Alexander Bain and many others. Mill, on the other hand, shares in the philosophic and scientific animosities at the Ecole Polytechnique, the harsh opposition to Comte by François Arago and colleagues like Liouville and Sturm, and hears about the limited support of a "liberal" journalist like Armand Marrast.

Much debated issues come alive in the correspondence, including the physiology of Franz Joseph Gall, which assigns specific functions to distinct parts of the brain.¹⁰ We read about the scientific contributions of Blainville, who taught the principles of Gall, the work of Balard, Sir John Herschel and so many others.

* * *

To understand the fate of the friendship between Mill and Comte, we must turn to Harriet Taylor, who is not even mentioned in the letters. Mill met her around 1830. She was, at the time, the intelligent, charming, wife of John Taylor.¹¹ They assured the husband that they would forego physical intimacy which, as they put it, "encourages in the one sex pompous selfishness and in the other petulant servility; and it debased society to the level of a farmyard."¹² So, while Harriet met with Mill, the husband attended to business affairs or spent time at the club. They worried only about being discrete and, as we shall see, turned against anyone suspected of "gossip." It is astounding that they never seemed to think of how it affected John Taylor. They lived this kind of a ménage à trois until the husband's death in 1849. In 1851 they married; the relationship may not have been consummated. Intellectually they

were very close: Harriet must be considered the coauthor of Mill's works.¹³

When, in 1843, his correspondence with Comte turned to the position of women, Mill began making copies of his letters; he bound them in a volume with Comte's replies (Letter 44) for Harriet's benefit. When she read them her convictions as a strong feminist led her to reject Comte outright. She considered Mill all too kind, his friendship unworthy. Here is a rare comment of hers of 1843–44:¹⁴

These [letters] have greatly surprised and also disappointed me, & also they have pleased me, all this only regarding your part in them. Comte is what I expected—the usual partial and prejudiced view of a subject which he has little considered & on which it is probable that he is in the same state that Mr. Fox is about religion.¹⁵ If the truth is on the side I defend I imagine C. would rather not see it. Comte is essentially *French*, in the sense in which we think French mind less admirable than English—Anti-Catholic—Anti-Cosmopolite.

I am surprised in your letters to find your opinion undetermined where I had thought it made up—I am disappointed at a tone more than half-apologetic with which you state your opinions & I am charmed with the exceeding nicety elegance & fineness of your last letter [42]. Do not think that I wish you had said more on the subject, I only wish that what was said was in the tone of conviction, not of suggestion.

This dry sort of man is not a worthy coadjutor & scarcely a worthy opponent, with your gift of intellect of conscience & of impartiality is it probable, or is there any ground for supposing, that there exists any man more competent to judge that question than you are?

You are in advance of your age in culture of the intellectual faculties, you would be the most remarkable man of your age if you had no other claim to be so than your perfect impartiality and your fixed love of justice. These are the two qualities of different orders which I believe to be the rarest & most difficult to human nature...¹⁶

I now & then find a generous defect in your mind or yr method—such is your liability to take an over large *measure* of people—sauf having to draw in afterwards—a proceeding more needful than pleasant.

An indisposition of Harriet's explains why the philosophers never met; she seems to have dissuaded Mill in the last minute (see Letters 36 and 37). Let us note the striking episode of 1846, when John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor travel down the Rhine, then across France to Paris, while Auguste Comte worries about what has become of Mill.¹⁷ Packe remarks that Harriet "came to scorn almost every man whom Mill had ever liked."¹⁸ Her interventions were dramatic. After her marriage to Mill, he practically broke with his mother and family.

* * *

The essential shift in Mill's attitude toward Comte occurred in 1845, at the midpoint of the correspondence, a year after Mill was transformed from an admiring disciple into Comte's patron, for the latter lost half of his sources of income and was about to lose the rest. Compared with his self-appointed role as the herald of the positive age, Comte's precarious position at the *Ecole Polytechnique* marked a stark contrast. In spite of his outstanding qualifications, he was never offered a regular professorship. His position as an examiner for admissions at testing centers in Paris and in the provinces was subject to annual renewal by a faculty senate, the "Polytechnic Council," which now threatened his livelihood. Comte also held two subsidiary positions, one as a tutor at the Ecole, the other in a small private establishment, but they depended on the appointment which was being terminated.

Established at the end of the French Revolution to prepare engineers, primarily for the military, the Ecole depended on the minister of war, but its commandant, always a general, was bound to let the council determine appointments. Comte had antagonized many of his colleagues by his philosophical stance, which provoked hostile reactions from the orthodox.¹⁹ He considered tenure his due. When he was rejected by the council, he shouted plunder, deprivation and "spoliation in iniquity," but to no avail.

When Comte found himself in danger, Mill did not hesitate to offer his own funds; he soon succeeded in getting three wealthy friends to support Comte for a year. It is important to note that differences of opinion did not affect Mill's readiness to help in 1844. Comte's intransigence in advancing the natural superiority of men over women shocked Mill, but he did not fail to support his friend.

This changed in 1845. Comte had done nothing to find other income: he had not resumed private tutoring; he was not ready to write articles for English journals, as Mill had suggested; and he would later decline to board and tutor a young Englishman Mill sent to him. Comte judged his philosophic enterprise to be too important for this. He developed a complete theory of grant support, well before it became the practice; he was convinced society should enable its great thinkers to accomplish their tasks. Therefore, he asked that British aid continue. It is remarkable how exactly Comte knew how many years there remained for him to write the *Système de philosophie positive* and later work.

Convinced that Comte should support himself, Mill was shocked and disappointed. He had become affluent. Having risen in the hierarchy of the East India Company, he believed in self-reliance as the base of individual liberty. He did not feel that his wealthy friends, Grote and Molesworth, were obligated to continue their subsidy. It was a parting of the ways. The debate with Sir John Herschel (Letter 76 and notes) also contributed. We have already described Mill's disaffection in 1846: he passed through Paris with Harriet Taylor without contacting Comte.

Meanwhile, unable to propitiate his conservative colleagues, Comte lost his appointments one by one. He would have been destitute had Emile Littré not organized a subscription among his disciples, which permitted him to complete his work.²⁰

* * *

In the exchanges between Mill and Comte we find a significant difference: Mill emphasizes the tentative nature of his findings, as if he were constantly looking for change and new discoveries, while Comte stresses the continuity of his work. Let us cite two characteristic examples.

In 1854, Comte appends four early essays to the last volume of his *Système de politique positive*, above all one of 1822 which originally bore the same title as the new work²¹ and to which he refers as his "opuscule fondamental." Realizing that the *Système* adds the new dimension of the affections to his philosophy, he redefines social statics so as to meet Mill's strictures.²² He is anxious to show the fundamental continuity in what appeared, to Mill, to be a second philosophy. Comte is proud that his definitions of "psycho-physiologie" and "économie politique" stem from the early essay.

Mill, on the other hand, goes to great lengths to defend economics and psychology. Since Comte feels that these fields have not reached the stage of "positive" sciences, Mill claims to agree but insists on the need for "ethology," the new "science of the formation of character." The *Logic* devotes two chapters to it;²³ Mill even planned a separate treatise on the subject. As for economics, he wrote the *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) to bring Adam Smith up to date. He contradicts Comte at every turn, even when he pretends to share his views.

In the last book (VI) of the *Logic*, which, as he says, was the one he rewrote under Comte's influence, we find notable tributes and quotations of which Comte took cognizance, but there are an equal number of assertions that conflict with Comte's doctrine. We are not referring to

traditional religious views, which Mill allowed to subsist in order to avoid shocking English readers; we refer above all to the two chapters on ethology and to "Of Liberty and Necessity," Mill's proclamation of independence from the doctrine that had "weighed like an incubus" on his existence—the idea that men "were formed by agencies beyond their control."²⁴ The *Logic* goes on to celebrate free will and to conclude: "We may be free, and yet have reason to be perfectly certain of what use we shall make of our freedom."²⁵

This does not keep Mill from accepting Comte's laws of historical development, such as the three ages of man's history, but he believes that social statics (the conditions of society and liberty) are affected by social dynamics and are subject to change, an idea which does not suit Comte. In addition, Mill makes a vigorous argument in favor of psychology and "moral science," qualifying Comte's term "sociology" as a "convenient barbarism,"²⁶ and it becomes clear that Mill is at least as anxious to preserve his independence as to acknowledge his debt to Comte.

He certainly hopes to extend the range and number of "positive" sciences. Chapter 3 of Book VI suggests "that there is, or may be, a science of human nature," even if its laws are less well established than those of astronomy; we may come to know them better in the future, as is already the case with Whewell's "Tidology" (theory of the tides). Mill devotes two chapters to "the laws of the mind" and asks bluntly: "Is there [not] a science of Psychology?"²⁷ He admits that the laws of "moral science" are less precise than those of the exact sciences; they are laws nonetheless, "those of mental phenomena; of the various feelings or states of consciousness of sentient beings." Here Mill tackles realms Comte omitted from the *Cours* and was to consider in a very different manner in the *Système de politique positive* and in later writings dealing with religion and the affections.

Our philosophers evolve but show very different attitudes: Mill adopts a progressive stance along with an deferential humility, calling his findings tentative; Comte calls them "definitive." Comte is a system builder. Mill adopts the colors of a chameleon; Comte sees himself as a constructionist.

* * *

Their differences are compounded by their affections. It must be said that their relations with women were most unusual. Here we must supplement what the letters tell us. As stated, Mill is ready to flout convention

with Harriet but strenuously objects to "gossip." Comte's relations are equally unusual. He marries Caroline Massin in 1825, who may have been a prostitute.²⁸ Unlike Harriet, she is no coauthor, but she serves as the model for much of what Comte says about women. They did not find happiness; by 1841, they find each other utterly incompatible. Comte permits her to leave him in 1842, but only after he has completed the *Cours* so that the departure will not interrupt his work. He provides for her generously thereafter, allocating half his income, even in the days of financial distress, without regard to his personal comfort. Comte holds marriage to be indissoluble; he always acts on his principles.

Caroline's later social life and her affection for Emile Littré upsets Comte, but his only reaction is to assume himself Littré's function of collecting the money from subscribers; he continues to give her about half the sum received. In the process, the group of disciples is split in two, but Comte's concept of the role of woman remains unaffected.

His attitude toward Caroline is as extraordinary as that toward Clotilde de Vaux, who represents the extreme opposite. When they meet in 1844, he finds the kind of (platonic) attachment he has never known, although his letters to her are monuments of abstract and cumbersome style. Her husband has abandoned her (he is in prison); but once again Comte's belief in indissoluble marriage militates against his happiness. He counsels Clotilde to remain married to her husband. She dies of consumption in 1846. Comte continues to write her annual reports of his activities, which are included in the *Correspondance générale*. Later he makes her the patron saint of his new religion: I have seen a large poster announcing her return for a memorial service.

Comte's institution of an organized religion, dedicated to human affections and to honoring Clotilde de Vaux, deeply shocks Mill. After Comte dies in 1857, Mill's comments become even more critical, though his original admiration resurfaces periodically. Mill continues to recognize his debt to Comte, especially for the historical conception of sociology, the three ages of humankind and also for the "inverse deductive method... applicable to the complicated subjects of history and statistics."²⁹ Meanwhile, he deplores that a philosopher of genius should come to propose a hierarchy of priests. In his most negative appraisal, entitled *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865), Mill asks whether one must weep or laugh in the face of such "decadence" of intellect.³⁰

Mill abhors the cult of Clotilde de Vaux (X:331), and this precipitates many other doubts. When Comte calls the earth "le grand Fétiche," Mill

accuses him of a return to fetishism (X:264). Comte's motto: "vivre pour autrui" appears less as a plea for altruism than as an abridgment of liberty (X:335). Mill now mocks Comte's "cerebral hygiene." He seems to take back compliments he has paid Comte in his *Logic*. He finds Comte incapable of inductive reasoning (X:292-94). He is hypercritical until, near the end, Mill adds a few characteristic tributes: he ranks Comte with Descartes and Leibniz and recognizes his "extraordinary power of concatenation" (X:368). *On Liberty* warns: The *Système de politique positive* "aims at establishing (though by moral more than by legal appliances) a despotism of society over the individual surpassing anything contemplated in the political ideal of the most rigid disciplinarian among the ancient philosophers."³¹ The *Autobiography* calls it: "the completest system of spiritual and temporal despotism which ever emanated from a human brain, unless possibly that of Ignatius Loyola."³²

The cult proposed by Comte offends the very core of Mill's sensibility: his ideal of liberty. He looks upon it as a "residue" of Comte's Catholicism. On the other hand, he shared Comte's ideal of Humanity, a close substitute for God, and both accord considerable importance to the affections. Rousseau's "raison du coeur," was on the rise and affected their thoughts. They were no atheists, as can be seen in Comte's plea for a religion and in Mill's late essays. It was the ritual of Comte's religion that repelled Mill.

Here we touch on the essential need for independence—the cult of liberty, which animates Mill quite apart from the animosities, the urgings of Harriet Taylor and other circumstances we have discussed. It establishes a significant pattern in Mill's intellectual development, a fundamental motive for his actions.

His initial enthusiasm for Comte seems almost limitless; he speaks like a dedicated disciple. There are, as we have seen, other good reasons for Mill's shift to an attitude of doubt, especially concerning the role of women, psychology and economics. But the ideal of proving himself as an independent thinker is fundamental in his rapport with Comte, and we find parallels in other key relationships, most notably with his father, who dominated his education to the point where Mill admits that he became backward and slow to assert himself.³³

Another notable example is Mill's initial enthusiasm and subsequent withdrawal from Jeremy Bentham and utilitarianism. First he wholeheartedly adopted it; later he criticized it as a simplistic philosophy of self-interest which takes pleasure and happiness to be the supreme good.

Mill comes to demand a “higher” and more “moral” kind of utilitarianism. Dissatisfied with Bentham’s “method” and “doctrine” (= observations), he explains: “We think utility, or happiness, much too complex and indefinite an end to be sought except through the medium of various secondary ends.”³⁴ Mill has outgrown Bentham’s analysis and is trying to balance his indebtedness with his own discoveries, just as in the case of Comte. He apologizes that a friend like William Molesworth is a mere Benthamite.

This is why Mill composes his essay on Coleridge (1840) as the companion piece to that on Bentham (1838).³⁵ He is not simply abandoning utilitarianism and substituting an “appreciation” of the “Germano-Coleridgean doctrine,” nor does Mill’s shift mean he is forsaking his liberal stance to adopt the conservative views of Coleridge. Mill welcomes Coleridge as an ally against the “negative” spirit of the Enlightenment³⁶ and cites with glee statements by Coleridge apt to scandalize complacent churchmen and the orthodox. Mill uses Coleridge to erase his overenthusiasm for Bentham.³⁷

His relationship with Sarah Austin, born Taylor (1793–1867),³⁸ wife of his friend John Austin (1790–1859), the noted legal scholar, provides another significant parallel to Mill’s turn from enthusiasm to hostility. Sarah was a brilliant young woman, thirteen years his senior, who taught Mill German when he was fifteen and became his close confidante. In their long and active correspondence, he addressed her as “Mütterlein.” She had a notable circle of friends, including Thomas Carlyle, whom she introduced to Mill. During her years in Germany (1826–28) with her husband she became a well-known translator of novels but also of the first important book (by Falk) on Goethe and of Ranke. In the 1830s, the Austins and Mill were neighbors at Regent’s Park in London. Sarah and John discussed Goethe among other topics. They maintained their correspondence as friends during the long years when the Austins resided on the continent, often in Paris, where Mill introduced them to Auguste Comte (1844). The Austins liked Comte greatly. Mill had to defend Sarah against Comte’s initial reaction: no, she was no bluestocking, but rather “truly superior” (Letter 44).

In 1848, the Austins left the continent. John felt threatened by the uprising; he even wrote an open letter to the *Times*, which upset Mill, who saluted the Revolution as a liberation. He told Sarah of his distress at John Austin’s views, while Sarah asked Mill for sympathy in the hope

that he might humor her husband. The political differences caused tensions, and the Austins moved to Surrey, where Harriet maintains a distance—she does not care to live near them at Walton.

It is a striking contrast to the 1830s, when Mill was their neighbor at Regent's Park and Sarah was one of the first to know about Mill's relationship with Harriet, who now feels maligned in society and accuses Sarah of being indiscrete. This leads to the breaking of all relations.³⁹ Mill rejected the tutelage of "little mother," with Harriet's displeasure a contributing cause. Harriet's death in 1858 changed nothing. When John Austin died the following year, Mill sent condolences to Sarah's granddaughter, with whom she lived, without a word for her. Mrs. Ross later noted: "I saw that the evidently intentional slight cut her to the heart."⁴⁰

The offensive letter showed a marked parallel to the last one that Mill wrote to Comte. The path of their friendship began with Mill as a self-professed disciple, continued with his partial declaration of independence in the *Logic* (1843), but also with the financial support extended by Mill and his friends in the hour of need (1844); it ended with the rejection of positivist religion. In this course, Mill's last letter of 1847 adds insult to injury: by rejecting the claims of the unemployed in Ireland, Mill once again refused Comte's demand for continued support. That is the way Comte understood it. He did not respond. Only he regretted that he could never convince Mill to accept the religion of Humanity.

The acrimony of Mill's last letter recalls those to his mother and family after his marriage. It was the doing of Harriet Taylor who, in her way, supported his drive for liberty, but at the cost of the separation from friends and society.

The letters of Comte and Mill are a precious exchange between two major philosophers who pride themselves on their independence. They have much in common, even as Mill emphasizes individual liberty and Comte social solidarity. Their contention lends interest; their arguments call for our sympathy, just as do Comte's battles at the Ecole Polytechnique, where he remains excluded in a recent history of that institution.⁴¹

Their letters tell of a remarkable encounter of British empiricism with French rationalism, as Mill distances himself from Bentham as Comte from Descartes. They jointly oppose the ruling (metaphysical) ideals but search for broad general principles that might unify European phi-

losophy. They dream of a commonwealth of Western nations where the libertarian tradition of England and that of the French revolution might merge. They are elitist like Carlyle, but also show popular leanings.

Their letters are a sounding board, a source that must be studied if we are to understand the social anthropology of Comte and Mill's purpose to safeguard liberty. They aspire to a common philosophy until obstacles intervene. The correspondence reveals their personalities during the critical years when their friendship grew and waned, but left its mark.

Oscar A. Haac

Notes

1. *The Positivist Review* VII, no. 77 of May 1, 1899; reprinted in: J. H. Bridges, *The Correspondence of Mill and Comte*, p. 89-104.
2. See the journal and notebook describing Mill's *Boyhood Visit in France*, ed. Anna Jean Mill. University of Toronto Press, 1960.
3. His IQ has been estimated at 200; cf. Bruce Mazlish, *James and John Stuart Mill*. New Brunswick, N.J., 1988.
4. Mill met and corresponded with the Saint-Simonian, Gustave d'Eichthal. See his long letter of 1829.
5. *The Logic* (1843), reprinted in vols. 7 and 8 of the *Collected Works* (1974), quotes the first three volumes of the *Cours* (of 1830, 1835, 1838) and includes one long passage from vol. IV (1839): see *Collected Works* 8:1186-89.
6. *Collected Works* I:219-20.
7. Comte, deeply marked by 1789, finds parallels in England: without the execution of Charles I, Louis XVI would not have been beheaded, while Mill notes in the essay on Coleridge that England is less given to violence. Both men look toward the creation of a new society as did Saint-Simon. After the "destructive" years of the French Revolution, they look forward to "constructive" progress. Comte had been secretary to Saint-Simon; Mill received texts by Comte from Gustave d'Eichthal.
8. *Opusculé fondamental*, 15th paragraph.
9. Comte came to expect that governments would ask philosophers to help them preserve their authority and to counter the inroads of the masses. Indeed, he came to feel like one of Plato's statesmen-philosophers, ready to guide the State and tame the "proletariat." Mill remained reluctant to transgress on individual liberty, especially in later years when, in *Positive Polity*, Comte proposed a hierarchy of positivist priests to guide the State.
10. Gall's phrenology was so widely discussed, that Pierre Leroux, in exile in Jersey in 1853, entitled his lectures: *Course in Phrenology*, which dealt mostly with the history of religion. The lectures derived their title from a contradicting Michelet's concept of the spirit of the Celts. Phrenology attracted everyone's attention.
11. F. A. Hayek. *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor* (New York, 1951), featuring important letters and documents, and Michael St. John Packe. *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (London, 1954), which remains the outstanding account of Mill's life. See also Josephine Kamm, *John Stuart Mill in Love*. London, 1977, an excellent popular account of Mill and his friends. Harriet Taylor is no relative of Sarah Austin, born Taylor.

12. Packe, p. 319.
13. Packe, p. 319-20.
14. See Hayek, p. 114-15.
15. William Johnson Fox, editor of *The Monthly Reporter*, the official British Unitarian organ before 1832, when more conservative members lost confidence in it. Mill was to become a contributor. It was at Fox's table that he met Harriet Taylor. Cf. Semmel, *John Stuart Mill*, p. 41-43. Fox held unconventional views; his idea of religion displeases her.
16. We omit Harriet's speculations on human weakness and on the effects "on mental powers of hereditary servitude."
17. "John Stuart Mill had a vacation of two months this year [1846] during which he had taken with Mrs. Taylor a tour of about six weeks to the Rhine and northern France." *The Earlier Letters*, p. 702, cf. letter 85. They avoided not only Comte but all acquaintances and were horrified when news of their passage reached England.
18. Packe, p. 338.
19. Comte alienated colleagues and administrators, especially Arago. Our correspondence documents his losing battle at the Ecole Polytechnique. He called his opponents "negative, metaphysical, unscientific," their researches "irrational." Comte applied this term even to Descartes and his "I think, therefore I am", also to Gall's attempt to relate special skills to specific areas in the brain, because they concentrated on the individual and were not society oriented.
When they disagreed on the status of women, Comte told Mill that their differences were due to his youth, inexperience and insufficient scientific training. Comte lived for his principles with a sense of mission; he called his own solutions "definitive, positive" and "final:" he never realized how much he offended.
20. The year before Comte's death, the contributions of 73 disciples ("le subside positiviste") amounted to 8246 Francs.
21. It reappeared in 1824 as *Plan des travaux scientifiques nécessaires pour réorganiser la société*.
22. Statics concern the nature and order of society, its structure and milieu as opposed to its development. Even though lesson 50 of the *Cours* broaches the subject, Comte does not develop social statics until volume two of the *Système de politique positive* (1852). Mill stressed in particular that the social milieu needed to be studied before their disagreement concerning the capacities and status of women could be resolved.
23. Bk. VI, chs. 4-5.
24. *Letters*, pp. 252-53 and Mazlish, p. 227.
25. *Logic*, 2: 837.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 895. Mill refers to the mixed Greek and Latin origin of the term.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 845, 849.
28. Mary Pickering (see bibliography) doubts that Caroline had been a prostitute.
29. *Autobiography* in *Collected Works* I:219. Mill is speaking of the method of first looking at experience, that is at the outcome of historical development, and then connecting it "with the principles of human nature by *a priori* reasoning, which reasonings are thus a real verification." See *Logic*, bk. VI, ch. 9, par. 1.
30. In *Collected Works*, X,263-368, especially 367. Our text gives further references in parentheses. Cf. Robert Scharff who shows how Mill misjudges Comte on interior observation.
31. *On Liberty* (1859), ch. 1.
32. *Autobiography*, p. 149.

33. See Bruce Mazlish. *James and John Stuart Mill*, p. 377 and *passim*.
34. *Collected Works X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, p. 110–11, and the introduction by F.E.L. Priestley, p. xxvi.
35. The two important essays were published in the *Westminster Review* in 1838 and 1840; they are conceived as companion pieces, to honor two “seminal thinkers” of modern philosophy. They are reprinted in the *Collected Works X*.
36. *Ibid.*, p. xxix.
37. Unlike modern critics, Mill is not concerned with the poetic aesthetics of Coleridge.
38. Packe, p. 322–23, Hayek, p. 88–89.
39. Carlyle suffered the same fate; he could only speculate about at the time of Mill’s death about the distance that came between them: he had told about the passage in France of Harriet and John in 1846 and the trust had been betrayed. Packe, p. 324; Hayek, p. 89.
40. Letter written “early in 1860” by Mill, see *The Later Letters* in *Collected Works XIV–XV*: 2,658 note 5; cf. 671, 674, 822, 1142 with comments by Henry Reeve, Sarah’s intermediary. Mill’s animosity reflects that of Harriet Taylor who felt that ladies of society, like Sarah, were looking down on her. Bitter comments on Sarah were finally omitted from the *Autobiography*. See the edition by J. Stillinger. Urbana, 1961, p. 147–48. On Sarah and Germany, see Lotte and Joseph Hamburger, *Contemplating Adultery*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991, with her correspondence with Hermann von Pückler Muskau.
41. Ambroise Fourcy. *Histoire de l’Ecole Polytechnique*. Paris: Belin, 1987. Comte is not mentioned in the text; the biographical appendix briefly notes his employment, but not the work or fate of this most famous faculty member!

Introduction Comte and Mill The Philosophical Encounter

Angèle Kremer-Marietti

On November 8, 1841, when John Stuart Mill (1806–1872) first wrote to Auguste Comte (1798–1857), he introduced himself as a devoted disciple with such humility, that Comte replied: “Your scrupulous modesty had led you, Sir, to overemphasize the influence of my work on your philosophical development.”¹ A close friendship and sincere affection rapidly grew between the two. Then issues arose that affected their relations, and in 1847 they terminated their correspondence. But evidence of how close their relations had been is apparent when Comte laments in 1857, the year of his death, that he had been unable to win John Stuart Mill’s approval of his “Religion of Humanity.”

Mill and Positivism

Mill received a rigorous intellectual education from his father, James Mill (1773–1836), a Scottish philosopher who wrote for the *Edinburgh Review* between 1808 and 1813. In 1819 James Mill authored an important work entitled *History of India*. He was also an economist and a friend and associate of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). Bentham’s brother invited John Stuart Mill to spend a year in France when he was fourteen, which included six months in Montpellier in the winter of 1820–21. John Mill learned French rapidly and developed a keen interest in French thought. (Comte’s acquaintance, Dr. Roméo Pouzin, knew Mill when he was quite young and recognized his superior intelligence.)

At fourteen, John Stuart Mill had already read Jeremy Bentham’s works and felt “transformed” by them. They corresponded and, in 1825,

Mill edited Bentham's *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*. Not long after, Mill became aware of Auguste Comte and Positivism. He met Comte's disciple, Gustave d'Eichthal,² who sent him the short *Système de politique positive*.³ Mill read it in 1828 and, by 1837, the first two volumes of the *Cours*.⁴ He discovered that he shared numerous ideas with Comte: they were both opposed to metaphysics and theology; they both sought to organize human knowledge by creating a systematic philosophy; and they hoped to reform society.

Thus, when Mill addressed his first letter to Comte, he could speak of his great philosophic debt and of his enthusiasm for the first volumes of the *Cours* where he found, "the essential doctrine for modern times." He salutes Positivism as a bulwark against skepticism and as the philosophy which will carry on the great traditions of the past, those of the medieval church, of the absolute state of the seventeenth century and of the French Revolution. Mill welcomes Positivism as the legitimate heir to the great philosophic movements of the past, a faith for the present and an inspiration for the future. Just as Rationalism had replaced religious beliefs that had become dated and meaningless, so Positivism was to take over from the "negative" and "critical" spirit of the Enlightenment.

Mill could identify with Positivism all the more easily as he had grown up without any Christian commitment. He felt that here was the doctrine for the new age. He foresaw its success especially among scientists, a group broadly conceived to include philosophers like Comte and himself, but not among contemporary politicians for whom he held little hope. Both men believed in religious tolerance but hailed Positivism as the path to intellectual and philosophical renewal.

While Mill and Comte Agreed

The publication of the sixth and last volume of the *Cours* in 1842 is an important event in the correspondence between the two men. Comte was now ready to create the "Positive Committee of Western Nations," to coordinate the efforts of scientists, "establish...spiritual power" separate from temporal power and prepare for the "positive" renewal of the leading nations toward *unity, continuity and solidarity*—a plan Comte had envisioned as early as 1826.⁵

Volume six completed twelve years of intensive work; it was a comprehensive survey of human knowledge. It was the culmination of

Comte's first philosophic endeavor; the second was to center on *Positive Polity* and the Religion of Humanity. In the *Cours*, Comte had formulated his grand law of social evolution by defining the three ages of humankind: the theological, the metaphysical (critical) and the positive (scientific). To the basic sciences he had surveyed—mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology—the last volume of the *Cours* had added a sixth, the supreme science of sociology, the crown of human knowledge.⁶ Comte proclaimed the epistemological need for sociology as a social, historical and political science. He considered his own historical and systematic classification of “positive sciences” to be far superior in defining a hierarchy of human knowledge to earlier attempts made by Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and d'Alembert (1717–1783), which had centered around human faculties such as memory, reason and imagination.

Thus, in 1842, the mutual agreement between Mill and Comte was broad enough for Mill to honestly say, even before reading volume six, that he was ready to join Comte's Positive Committee of Western Nations. Mill stood ready to support the philosophic rebirth envisaged by Comte, an association of social elites that would sponsor a new morality and stand ready to stem what they considered the decline of the West, caused by the rule of negative, metaphysical (critical) philosophy. The group of “positive” nations was called upon to combat such “subversive utopias.”

Comte and Mill were warning Western Europe of great perils when they adopted the spirit of the motto Comte was to publicize in 1847: “Order and Progress.” The great nations of the West were to initiate a new European revolution which would be quite unlike the disruption of 1789 or 1793. Comte saw the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment as critics of church and religion whose “critical metaphysics” brought about the French Revolution. Their “negative” role, though necessary, was destructive. Positivism, by contrast, was to be reconstructive. Mill and Comte were looking forward to the “positive” period of reorganization, to the salutary and much needed substitution of Positivism for theology and metaphysics.⁷ Positive science, based on observation and applied by pragmatic methods, would enable positivist philosophers to anticipate the needs of society; better still, the positive science of sociology gave philosophers the right and the duty to act in the political sphere. Indeed, they were obliged to intervene in European affairs so that moral

and social renewal, guided by Positivism and inspired by sociology, could create the “scientific” philosophy of the future. In solidarity, England and France were to join in a radical reorganization of Europe.

To Mill, this was close to an apocalyptic vision, heralding the impending triumph of Positivism. He was willing to go along with Comte, sincerely convinced that a true, social philosophy was the solid foundation for moral regeneration. The motto, “a Revolution in Western Europe,” looks forward to the radical transformation Comte and Mill were trying to accomplish. Meanwhile, Mill was convinced that the concept of God would yield to the idea of Humanity (Letter 21).

For a time, both men expected that their philosophic sympathies would cause their views to coincide, first on basic issues and later on secondary questions. They believed that the expanding harmony of the French and the English spirit would propel the hoped-for reorganization of Europe. Both men looked forward to an active commitment. It was in such expectation of agreement that Comte, in his “thinker’s solitude,” lonely also because his wife had left him, welcomed the bond with Mill. He was looking forward to sharing ideas in fraternal solidarity. They felt like fellow citizens of Western Europe.⁸ Their philosophic steps were to take precedence over political considerations, for these were to be solved *after* spiritual reorganization, which in turn required further temporal measures.

At this “epistemological point of agreement” Comte and Mill found that their accord depended more on “method” than on “doctrine;” in other words, it depended more on philosophical principle than on any body of data in particular sciences. For Comte, general principles of method mattered more than scientific data of doctrine, though the two were inseparable. Mill agreed and, in his *Logic*, emphasized inductive demonstration. Both believed that positive philosophy could not be separate from the body of observations to which it applied.

Comte was a generalist. As he considered his social and intellectual surroundings, he focused on principles equally applicable to astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, sociology and moral speculation. He looked on anthropology, the basic science of society, as the ultimate product of “western history,” as stated in his *Discours sur l’esprit positif* of 1844. Mill, meanwhile, had published *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* (1843), which placed the emphasis on the study of human nature (psychology) and character (ethology).⁹

Thus both Mill and Comte looked upon social anthropology (sociology) as the principal achievement of the scientific traditions of England,

France, Germany, Italy, and the smaller neighboring nations; for positive science depended above all on the cooperative effort of "the West," on common endeavors and reforms along essential lines. These are defined by Comte to include:

1. a synthesis of knowledge serving a common purpose, to relate man to the world, subject to object;
2. a common body of positive knowledge, the sciences being viewed from a social perspective; altruism replaces egoism, as individuals serve other individuals, not society as such;
3. the realization that history is a continuum and solidarity a social fact; nation states must unite in the common goal of positive polity, conceived so as to improve modern society.

These ideals stem in part from the Scottish school of philosophy discussed by Comte (Letters 24, 58); both he and Mill owed it a significant debt. Comte had taken much from David Hume (1711–1776), Adam Smith (1723–1790) and Adam Ferguson (1723–1816). In lesson 45 of the *Cours*, these philosophers are said to stand very close to Positivism; they are empiricists who adopt the ideal of sympathy which links man's "interest" to "altruism" and establishes an essential social bond.

Comte's idea of society has much in common with Ferguson's,¹⁰ for Ferguson was interested in the history of civil society and, contrary to Rousseau, saw self-interest as the basis of our social conscience. This theory can be found in his *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (1772). In Comte as in Ferguson, altruism does not spring spontaneously from human nature; it may, in fact, derive from self-interest. Comte speaks of *egoism* as opposed to *altruism* but also as a preparation for it. This is the way in which Comte felt that the Scottish school, including Ferguson, had made their great contribution, Descartes's *cogito* seeming all too individualistic to serve as the starting point for modern philosophy.¹¹ It may be astonishing to find Comte calling Descartes "irrational" for not being oriented toward society, but for Comte, rationalism must be neither theological nor metaphysical in the traditional sense. Ferguson, on the other hand, and his Scottish colleagues, had better understood man's "supposed egoism" and subordinated it to the essential social reality. The Scottish philosophers, Comte felt, had grasped the import of society as such, and this conception was also at the root of John Stuart Mill's theory of general happiness. In short, Comte believed, as did Ferguson, that individual (self-)interest merges with the interest of the group.

As for Hume, Comte read especially his *History of England* (1754) and was as suspicious of causality in nature as Hume was himself. However, he did not share Hume's skepticism and preferred a kind of "scientific legalism." In Comte's epistemology the notion of law replaces the notion of cause.

Scottish philosophy did bring Comte and Mill together, although Comte seems to seek out the Scottish philosophers of a more distant past. One exception to this was Adam Smith, whose ideas separated Mill from Comte rather than bringing them together. Comte cited Smith's early *Philosophical Essays*, especially the *Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages*¹² on the age of theology. He also mentions Smith's *History of Astronomy* on fetishes in his own *Considérations philosophiques sur les sciences et les savants* (1825),¹³ but he neglected Smith's economic theory presented in the famous *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). Comte read it and retained the idea of the division of labor. He applied it not to industry, but to intellectual enterprises as a way of deriving theory from practice and of separating them. Indeed, he was not speaking about the advantages of specialization: he was opposed to undue specialization in intellectual activities. Mill, on the contrary, used the *Wealth of Nations* as the model for his *Principles of Political Economy*.

The Correspondence Evolves

As we read the letters of Comte and Mill, we see their harmony giving way to a number of fundamental disagreements in the areas of psychology, economics and, above all, in the appraisal of the social role of women. In each case Comte expected his young colleague to accept his views as those of his elder, the voice of experience, while Mill questioned Comte's analysis, not only on the basis of his personal convictions but on those of his fiancée, Harriet Taylor. Gradually their exchanges became less forthright, even hostile; we find Mill's ambivalence in the portrait he draws in *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865).

Psychology

Although they did not stand far from each other, psychology found Mill and Comte divided; both were searching for a positive view based

on the latest findings of biology and physiology, but their reactions differed. Comte had been strongly attracted by Gall (1758–1828) and his phrenology, and for a while, considered Gall to be the founder of psychophysiology. In Lesson 45 of the *Cours*, he describes Gall as the “creator” of a new science,¹⁴ while in the first volume of Comte’s *Politique positive*, Gall is reduced to the status of a “precursor” of Comte’s own Brain Chart.

Actually Comte had never fully agreed with Gall; he called Gall’s analysis “irrational” since it studied the individual without reference to his milieu and to the influence of society. Among other determinants, Gall had studied the dominant influence of the organism on the brain, but he had left out the social environment, ignoring the influence of education, the social context.¹⁵ Gall had limited his study of the brain to anatomy and physiology, outside of the concerns of sociology, whereas Comte was convinced that sociology must “regenerate” biology. In the *Discourse on the positive spirit*, Comte spelled out this requirement. Comte’s new “rationalism” had to be “social” or “sociological.” “Sociality” is said to be the precondition of the scientific state. Mill, on the other hand, rejected Gall almost entirely (Letters 9 and 11). Mill gave him credit only for the idea that animal instincts and mental functions were related to specific areas of the brain. Mill’s reaction was negative, while Comte’s friends, Broussais (1772–1838) and Blainville (1777–1850), held Gall in the highest esteem.

Comte derived his psychophysiology from Gall’s phrenology, without, however, going as far as Broussais, who adopted it with enthusiasm and taught it in his courses at the medical school.¹⁶ Comte’s famous *Brain Chart* describes the psycho-physiological base of sense experience, of man’s affective and intellectual aptitudes. The Chart becomes the necessary base for analyzing social statics. With ethics as the seventh in his hierarchy of sciences, Comte provides the “universal synthesis,” which enables man to understand how the *individual* reacts to social and biological factors.

As Comte explains in Lessons 1 and 45 of the *Cours*, he rejects the kind of introspection or “interior observation” dear to Mill. In Lesson 1 he is arguing against the metaphysical method. According to the criteria of positive science, interior observation is of no scientific value. Then in Lesson 45, directing himself once more against the metaphysicians and against German philosophy in particular, he explains that the unity of

the self is a false concept. He is searching for a science of the mind relating psychic phenomena to the brain and to the nervous system.

In 1841, Mill writes to Comte that, like him, he is looking for a "positivist psychology which would certainly be neither that of Condillac, nor that of Cousin, nor even that of the Scottish school" (Letter 3). Later on Mill, thinking of the argument Comte proposed in Lesson 1, that is of the impossibility of observing the observer,¹⁷ Mill contradicts Comte: Mill believes that by means of "interior observation" we do have direct knowledge of the mind. For him, psychology leads to ethology. Mill argues that "there is a direct connection between Comte's sexist misuse of anatomy and physiology and his rejection of psychology."¹⁸ Such will still be their arguments when they come to discuss the status of women.

Let us conclude that Mill's appraisal of Gall is more reserved, more negative than that of Comte, whose major critique appears when he proposes to integrate the physical sciences into sociology. Mill, on the other hand, insists that a full appreciation of psychology is called for. Mill considers psychology a science, while for Comte it does not deserve to be included among the positive sciences, either as an independent or as a basic one.

Economics

We now turn to another major issue that caused Mill to abandon Comte. The analysis of political economy was as important for Mill as it had been for his father, while Comte, though not entirely opposed, did not rank it as a positive science. He did discuss political economy in his *Considérations sur le pouvoir spirituel* (1826), later in lesson 47 of the *Cours*, and in *Positive Polity*, volume II, ch. 2, which includes "positive economics." However, Comte disliked the limited principles of contemporary economists. Their research did not concern society as a whole and was too particularized; so he called them "metaphysical" and "irrational," not yet scientific. In Comte's eyes, economics was still based *a priori* on absolute principles, rather than on the observation of interrelated social phenomena that would lead to a realistic view of society. He felt justified, therefore, in omitting economics from his list of basic, positive sciences.

Mill's orientation was very different. He shared Comte's reservations concerning current practice; like Comte, he regretted that the historical method was little used and that metaphysical assumptions precluded

“positive” results. Economics seemed to Comte insufficient and transient in nature, while Mill was deeply interested in the field and planned to write several studies of it. The first of these, *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), was composed while he was corresponding with Comte, and was written directly after *A System of Logic* (1843).

The two philosophers debated one epistemological issue in particular: “scientific prediction.” Mill believed future developments could be anticipated, that economic forecasting could yield accurate results based on practical skill and careful observation. Comte denied this, though he conceded that forecasts would succeed once they fitted the “positive” conceptions: the symmetry of explanation and prediction. As he put it: “From science comes foresight, from foresight action” (*science, d’où prévoyance; prévoyance, d’où action*).

Actually their differences in opinion produced constructive results: Comte made Mill aware of the transitory nature of the data currently available.¹⁹ Mill was willing to proceed and made every effort to apply positive methods to economic matter. As his model in economics, he chose Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, whereas Comte was basically indebted to Jean-Baptiste Say,²⁰ although Comte came to criticize him also.

On April 3, 1844, (Letter 46) Mill explains how the general principle of production differs from what he calls “principles of exchange and wealth.”²¹ None of these explanations alter Comte’s negative stance (Letter 49). He insists that Mill’s data apply insufficiently to the overall structure of society, to the social order in social statics, and to historical and social progress in social dynamics. As their debate unfolds, it becomes apparent that neither the technique of “prediction” nor the “principles” on which it is based mean exactly the same thing to both men.

Comte cites his motto from the *Cours*: “Progress is the extension of Order,” to indicate that social dynamics depends on statics and that, therefore, the principles of economics must simultaneously inform on both. Comte wants economics to be an exact social science and finds that it does not meet this requirement. For Comte there exists no true positive science of economics; he is thereby rejecting research that is very important to Mill.

The Status of Women: Social Statics Threatens Their Synergy

In their debates on psychology and economics, there remained points of contact between Comte and Mill, but as they turned to the social

position of women even their common estimate, that the insufficiency of social statics stood in their way, was of little avail. The subject arose at a moment of heartfelt friendship. Comte and Mill were satisfied with the favorable course of their correspondence. Mill was busy composing *A System of Logic* and was eager to receive the last volume of the *Cours*. In October, 1842, when he finally read it, he enthusiastically expressed the great interest it aroused (Letter 19). Mill even liked the "Personal Preface," which, he had feared, might be offensive for being too frank (it was!), but he was pleased to find it written in the same tone as the remainder of the work. In December of the same year, after a second and more attentive reading, Mill was astounded that the positive spirit had been so fully realized (Letter 21). When he learned that Comte was not reappointed as an examiner at the Ecole Polytechnique and that he had lost a good part of his income, Mill offered to use every penny at his disposal to come to his aid (Letter 20 of 15 June 1843).

At this high point of their solidarity, the argument concerning the status of women intervened, for in that same letter Mill emphasized several points of divergence concerning marriage and property. He argued that social evolution would bring appreciable changes. He had raised the problem of divorce once before (Letter 17 of 10 September 1842), saying that he could not understand why one sex should be subordinate to the other. Comte countered that marriage was "indissoluble" and later even added his theory of "eternal widowhood." Mill vigorously rejected them both. Still, they remained optimistic about their relationship. They prized their philosophic "synergy"; expected it to overcome disagreements and eventually to extend to all essential concepts, as it already had on some issues (such as the separation of spiritual power from the temporal). Yet, on the intellectual and social capacities of women they could not agree at all.

Why, then, their debate on social statics? Because it considered not only the structure of society but also the anatomical and physiological make-up of men and women while for Mill, social dynamics suggested that opportunities of education and training could affect women's social position.²² Though Comte granted the importance of the milieu, he was convinced that women could not transcend their natural limitations, anatomically and physiologically determined. Social dynamics studied changes in history but these, Comte believed, could not greatly affect the "natural" constitution of men and women, each with their own in-

nate capacities; he assumed that historical changes occur only along lines of their given, natural and permanent constitution. The two sides to the debate were clear: Comte believed that women could not acquire capacities equal to those of men, while Mill must be regarded as a leading feminist: to Harriet Taylor's essay, "The Enfranchisement of Women" (1851), Mill added *The Subjection of Women* (1861, 1869) and he campaigned for women's suffrage as a member of Parliament in 1867.²³

Comte derived his definitions of social statics and dynamics in good part from the zoologist, Blainville, considered to be a worthy successor of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829). Blainville had introduced into biology the concept of a dynamic state—that is the "dynamic" activity of the organism as distinguished from its "static" structure. Comte found a parallel distinction in the work of the mathematician Lagrange (1736–1813), who used "dynamics" to designate motion in mechanics and "statics" for states of equilibrium. Comte admitted that he first considered developing statics without biological implications. He added them later by viewing biology anew through sociology.

The problem was that Comte was defining a constitutional (static) inferiority of women, not subject to education or historical (dynamic) change, quite unaware that he was hurting Mill's deeply held convictions. He simply invoked biological determinants to justify the social subordination of women and expected his younger colleague to recognize his view.

The Debate Concerning Women Intensifies

Mill objected that Comte's principles were insufficiently established to be "positive"; affection between men and women was in no way furthered by a master-slave relationship; true love and reciprocal sympathy could not thrive under inequality! Mill clearly espoused the modern position. He suggested interviews with the women themselves, especially those who were living in a state of open rebellion. Comte replied by referring back to "the natural hierarchy of sexes" (Letter 33). This time, Mill did not answer. Comte had to write a second letter, more than a month after the previous exchange.

Upon receiving this letter, Mill took up the discussion where they had left off, reasoning along lines of common sense and empirical observation: Even suppose, he replied, that women were closer to childhood

than were men—how do we know that children are inferior to men solely because their brain is insufficiently developed, and not by their lack of training? For Mill, even if the brain of women were smaller than the brain of men and, therefore, according to certain physiologists, less suited for scientific study, the fact remained that women had never received the proper education to pursue advanced studies. In addition, their household chores neither prepared them for quiet meditation, nor gave them time to meditate. Even men who lacked the necessary education, available only to persons in the upper strata of society, could not make up for what they missed in childhood.

Mill mentioned that women possessed general capacities while men knew only the specialty for which they were being trained. Above all, he questioned that the “affections” were typically feminine and in women replaced what Comte and others called “male intelligence.” Mill saw weaknesses in both sexes. Egoism in its pure form, he said, was most common in men.

All the while Mill pleaded a lack of exact knowledge in these matters; his affected tone of humility is the opposite of Comte’s determined affirmations. Mill admitted that he was arguing from everyday observation, but pursuing the inductive reasoning he knew well. His strength was a healthy skepticism. He rightly emphasized the neglect of women’s education. Above all, he noted that women were human beings and cleverly emphasized the milieu, which Comte otherwise considered so important. In fact, did Comte not speak of the harmony between the organism and the milieu as a *determining aspect* of life?²⁴ In Comte’s thought, the concordance (*l’harmonie*) between milieu and organism found its parallel in the *consensus* of the organs within the organism.²⁵

This is why Mill introduced Ethology, “the science of the formation of character,” into his *System of Logic*.²⁶ Ethology was to study the variations in the universal human type, called forth by different living conditions; nationality and femininity were Mill’s examples of these variations. Unfortunately, Comte did not recognize that Ethology fitted perfectly into his notion of organism and milieu. They were approaching no consensus.

In his letter of early October, 1843, Comte finally noted “a serious difference of opinion” between them (Letter 36). It was all a matter of biology as much as of sociology. He therefore returned to his comparison between women and children, calling women ill-formed children,

and added that his conception of domestic life was "definitive," empirically drawn from an experience of over twenty years. He became blunt, spoke of women's "inborn inferiority," of their being unfit for abstraction and intellectual concentration; he accused them of being unable to overcome passion, of yielding to feelings. Personal observations, he claimed, had brought him to notice in women "a very insufficient ability to generalize relationships, to make consistent deductions, also to give reason precedence over passion" (Letter 36). This is what we might call the 'tacit general theory of anti-feminism of all times.'

Comte concluded that education and training cannot alter the basic inferiority of women or lead to a change in their social status and capacities. Comte refused to even discuss the merits or potential of an appropriate education; he also refused to consider the influence of the milieu. This is an astounding stance to take for "the creator of sociology."

For Comte, the primary function of women remained what it had been traditionally: that of motherhood, of bringing up the children in the family. Nevertheless, he assigned them what he considered an important social mission, a role complementary to the masculine in the "domestic order": they are the auxiliaries of the (masculine) spiritual forces and intervene (in male action) as (feminine) forces of moderation. There is a fundamental contradiction in the fact that those who tend to be carried along by passion (women), are to restrain the passion of those (men) who reason better than they! Comte added that the position of women as auxiliaries made them the guardians of universal morality. In judging men and women, he considered social functions, not rights.

Here Comte is in perfect agreement with Aristotle. In *Politics*, men are first in the family and in society, for women are unable to direct and command. Therefore, Comte demanded that they be protected and "nourished." Comte, indeed, supported his wife from whom he had separated for his entire life and even beyond (by his written will)—all this to escape anarchy!

Mill compared the subservience of women to that of the slaves and serfs. He found significant parallels between the subjection of women and the institution of slavery. He even tried to explain why the emancipation of women occurred so long after that of the serfs. Arguing like Aristotle in book I of his *Politics*, Comte simply rejected Mill's comparison between women and slaves.

In his anti-feminism, Comte was not alone: the avowed successors of Aristotle, the medical anthropologists of his day and the physiologists (including Gall) all approved of male dominance, while the zoologists showed that female supremacy among animals was limited to ants and bees. Comte adduced from the superb colors of the male peacock and the subdued grey of the female, that a rigid hierarchy was natural for living beings and that man must rule the family as well as society.²⁷

Mill did not concede the argument. He felt that Comte based his points on indeterminate experiences of daily life and on insufficient data, carelessly selected (Letter 40). He accused Comte of affirming with great assurance, conclusions based on data that were far from verified. Further, Mill disliked being treated as one ignorant of animal life and of the physiology of the brain (Letter 83). Did Comte not accept Gall's conclusions, knowing full well that they were most doubtful? How could Gall's localized functions of the brain serve to prove that women were inferior? Mill suggested that women be allowed to follow their vocations and not be subject to a theoretical judgment of their aptitudes (Letter 40): the whole "problem of women," he felt, must be studied anew in all of its complexity.²⁸

The correspondence breaks off in 1847. In his *Autobiography* Mill describes how he first slowed the rate of his letters and of how Comte refused to answer his last of May 17, 1847. He did so with good reason, for Mill had sent a sarcastic account of the unemployed in Ireland. He was thinking back to Comte's request for financial support from his wealthy friends, implying that he should have returned to private tutoring, just as the Irish were asking for support when they should be seeking employment. This comparison with recipients of public welfare must have hurt Comte deeply. He was a proud man. Not long before he had told Mill that one must not beg for relief in the face of injustice; one must conquer it! At times Comte spoke as the heir of the French Revolution.

The Correspondence Breaks Off; The Controversy Continues

In later writings, such as Comte's *Positive Polity* (1851–54) and Mill's *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865), also in his posthumous *Autobiography*, we find the sequel of the issues debated in the correspondence. Their arguments center on Comte's theory of the affections, on social

statics, especially with respect to the status of women, and on positive religion.

The Affections and Comte's Brain Chart

The essential new element in *Positive Polity* is the theory of the affections, which is to balance the emphasis on scientific thought in the *Cours*. The affections are the philosophical ground of Comte's new Religion of Humanity. We can appreciate their importance in the Brain Chart in volume one.

Comte sketched the psychosociological functions as early as July, 1839, in his "preliminary considerations on social statics," of Lesson 50 of the *Cours*. Sociability is described as the "mortar" of social conditions. Comte's love for Clotilde de Vaux and her premature death on April 5, 1846, confirmed this position. The Brain Chart was conceived in 1847 and further elaborated for *Positive Polity* I (1851). The Brain Chart concerns social statics and the individual but also the collectivity; this is why it implies social dynamics. Human industry reconciles opposing directions and progresses beyond them—beyond military ambition for conquest, characteristic of the theological age, and beyond the defensive military maneuvers of the metaphysical age. The Brain Chart deals with the essence of the particular stages of human development.

A few comments are in order:

1. Some of Comte's terms become clear if we compare them with note "O" or "XV" of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*: the instinct for self preservation is like Rousseau's love of self (*amour de soi*); the perfecting instinct and ambition equal Rousseau's self-esteem (*amour-propre*); egoism includes all of these.
2. The listings under "altruism" are based on Comte's conviction that egoism is transmuted into altruism by the social instinct.
3. The emphasis on the affections reflects Comte's new appreciation of the feminine forces of humankind, but they are in no way restricted to women; this is evident in the listings of "military aspects" or "goodness." The appearance of "motherhood" without reference to "fatherhood" reflects his conception of domestic life which remains essentially unchanged. The distinctions between "veneration" and "attachment" places Comte's love for Clotilde de Vaux in a category by itself, beyond the scope of ordinary love. Clotilde is the patron saint of his Religion of Humanity.

Brain Chart²⁹

HUMANITY: TO LIVE FOR OTHERS

Principles

Ten Affective Forces

Egoism: Seven Personal Affective Functions:

Five functions of interest:

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|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Instinct of self-preservation | (1) The need for nutrition. |
| | (2) Sexual desire. |
| | (3) Motherhood. |
| Perfecting instinct, destructive | (4) Military instinct. |
| constructive | (5) Industry instinct. |

Two functions of ambition:

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|--------|----------------------------|
| Pride | (6) The need to dominate. |
| Vanity | (7) The need for approval. |

Altruism: Three Social Affective Functions:

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|-------------|-----------------|
| Individual | (8) Attachment. |
| | (9) Veneration. |
| Generalized | (10) Goodness. |

Means

Five Intellectual Functions

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|----------------------|---|
| Conception, passive: | (11) Concrete or synthetic thought. |
| | (12) Abstract or analytic thought. |
| Conception, active: | (13) Inductive or generalizing thought. |
| | (14) Deductive or systematic thought. |
| Expression: | (15) Mimicry, oral or written: communication. |

Results

Three Practical Qualities

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|----------------|--------------------|
| Activity: | (16) Courage. |
| | (17) Prudence. |
| Determination: | (18) Perseverance. |
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