

JOHN STUART MILL'S "MENTAL CRISIS":  
ADLERIAN INTERPRETATION

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Individual Psychology, the psychology of Alfred Adler, with its concepts of the unitary, goal-directed, creative self and the ultimate importance of social interest, can be a useful tool in the analysis of autobiography. When an individual decides to write the history of his own life, he is obliged to sift through the totality of his conscious experience and to pick out what he considers to be the most significant physical and psychological events. The pattern which emerges from his report should provide the reader with a more or less clear picture of the autobiographer's style of life, i.e., his opinions, his goals, and the methods he uses to strive toward (or to reconcile himself with) these goals.

This should hold true even of an autobiography written for an obviously polemical purpose, such as Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, assuming that the author is sincere in reporting what he believes to be true. In a real sense, the life of every individual is an argument for his particular goals and life style. This is true because each individual lives not in isolation but within the social community and he must justify his personal goal of superiority with that of the common welfare. (See 3, Ch. 2.)

This paper is concerned with the "mental crisis" in the *Autobiography* of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), as seen in the light of Adler's Individual Psychology.

MILL'S ACCOUNT OF THE "CRISIS"

Before moving on, it should be pointed out here that Mill's account of the mental crisis may not be a strictly accurate historical account. Stillinger reports that Mill actually had "several such attacks of morbid despondency" though only one is recorded in the *Autobiography* (10, pp. vii-xiv). Also, Cumming maintains that Mill, for histrionic purposes, rearranged in the 1850's the early events of his career (7). This paper does not attempt to deny the possibility that

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Mill rearranged the events in question to some extent. Cumming's case is convincingly presented. However, there is no doubt that Mill did experience a change of attitude, and the important consideration here is precisely how Mill *interpreted* that change.

Mill's interpretation is important to an understanding of his self-concept. As environmental factors are important to the individual only so far as he continually interprets and interacts with them, the individual's memories of past events are important to him only as he creatively interprets them and integrates them into a unified viewpoint. We will look, then, at the fundamental change in the pattern of his life as reported by Mill, and we will see that he, in the resolution of his crisis, underwent what can best be termed a development of social interest. He was able to gain partial insight into the basic problem at the root of his lethargic, hopeless state of mind, later identified by him with the "grief with a pang" of Coleridge's "Dejection," and strive to correct it.

### *Onset and Description*

According to Mill, he awoke "as from a dream" during the autumn of 1826 at the age of twenty in a dull state of nerves, "unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement" (10, p. 81). It is possible that he was suffering from overwork and fatigue (6, p. 38). It was also at this time that he first found himself with a significant degree of independence from his domineering father. His annual salary from the East India Office had been increased to £ 100 in May of that year, and an increased financial independence had perhaps opened the door to new emotional and intellectual freedom from his father as well. (14, pp. 80-81). This must have been a disconcerting process because his father had always been an emotional prop for him, as we will see, and, rather than directly facing the problem of his new-found independence at once, he took recourse in a depression.

He turned to self-analysis in the following often-quoted passage:

In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down (10, p. 81).

Mill blamed his state of mind on his education and narrow life-philosophy which he had acquired. As is well known, James Mill

(1773-1836) personally oversaw the education of his son, immersing him in classical literature—one recalls the astonishing fact that Mill was reading Greek by the age of three—before the age of five and thereafter guiding him through a large body of historical, economical, rhetorical, and logical writings, always emphasizing the importance of analytical thought. As Durham points out, the father and Jeremy Bentham “sought a successor to continue their Utilitarian propaganda and deliberately set about making the younger Mill that successor” (8, pp. 369-370). This was done in a calculating, almost ruthless manner.

At any rate, Mill’s upbringing had not allowed for the importance of the emotions, and no one became more aware of that than Mill himself. He had been firmly grounded in the doctrine of association and the “habitual exercise of the power of analysis,” but he came to discover that the “reward and punishment” technique of education, when not aided by an affective appeal, produces associations “somewhat artificial and casual.” “The habit of analysis has a tendency to wear away the feelings: as indeed it has when no other mental habit is cultivated, and the analysing spirit remains without its natural complements and correctives” (10, p. 83).

Although Mill was “not incapable of any of my usual occupations,” he went about them “mechanically, by the mere force of habit” during the winter of 1826-1827 and “frequently asked myself, if I could, or if I was bound to go on living, when life must be passed in this manner” (10, p. 85). Clearly his state of depression was a severe one, if we accept his description.

### *Turning Point*

After this “hopeless” state had persisted for approximately half a year, Mill had an experience which became the turning point in his striving to find a purpose in living. He writes:

I was reading, accidentally, Marmontel’s *Memoires*, and came to the passage which relates his father’s death, the distressed position of the family, and the sudden inspiration by which he, then a mere boy, felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them—would supply the place of all they had lost. A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment, my burden grew lighter (10, p. 85).

So, Mill, the Logic Machine, was finally able to experience empathy for a fellow human being. It seemed to him now that he possessed “some of the material out of which all worth or character, and all capacity for happiness, are made” (10, p. 85).

He had to turn to literature or some other secondary source to find the essential emotional identification he needed because he lacked the personal ties which would have doubtless fulfilled this need much better. Paradoxically, Mill, who worked for the betterment of all mankind, became aware of a self-centeredness in his personal life. The sad fact is that he had no friends whom he truly loved. As he says of his crisis: "If I had loved anyone sufficiently to make confiding my griefs a necessity, I should not have been in the condition I was" (10, p. 81).

After this turning point, Mill was able to find some enjoyment again in "the ordinary incidents of life" and in "exerting myself for my opinions, and for the public good." Though he had several relapses of melancholy, he was never so miserable again. And from this time on, his outlook toward life was changed in two basic ways. For one, he developed an "anti-selfconsciousness theory" similar, he later found out, to that of Thomas Carlyle in his essay, "Characteristics," and his *Sartor Resartus*. Mill now thought that only those are happy "who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end." For another, "the cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed" (10, p. 86).

He eagerly turned to the arts as a source of the cultivation, especially to poetry, and, in particular, to the poetry of Wordsworth. In Wordsworth, "I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasures, which could be shared in by all human beings" (10, p. 89). Also, as is well known, he came to recognize some validity in the Coleridgean organic theory of the mind, and though he never fully rejected Bentham's brand of Utilitarianism, he altered it by finding a place for "the internal culture of the individual" (10, p. 86). Mill not only developed a degree of appreciation for poetry, but actually strove to develop the power of imagination within himself, although he did not, as Robson has pointed out, "make the mistake of confusing his own powers with those of a poet" (15, p. 28).

It had become obvious to Mill in the course of his personal troubles that "deep emotions" are an essential part of the experience of the human race. He achieved an integration and a sense of identity with the common goals of humanity (8, p. 377). Earlier he had attempted

to connect abstract theory with a way of life (15, p. 26). But he was unsuccessful because he, like his father and Bentham, had ignored the relationship between personal emotions and ethical theory.

The utilitarianism of Bentham continued to influence Mill after this "crisis," but the naive acceptance of it was gone forever. He rejected, from this time forward, the "pleasure principle" as the guiding force in men's lives. The human mind, he realized, is far too complex to be adequately described by such a simple-minded theory. The principle of utility, however, remained important. In *On Liberty*, for example, individual freedom is good, not *a priori*, because it is an end in itself, but because it is *useful* for the progress of mankind. Actually, this position is similar to Adler's "social usefulness," whereby "the most sensible estimate of the value of any activity is its helpfulness to all mankind" (2, p. 78).

#### ADLERIAN INTERPRETATION

Let us examine further why this important development in Mill's thought should have been accompanied by such severe depression. Adler saw that an individual's mode of thinking and of acting is a function of preconceptions of himself, other individuals, the world and the goal he is striving for (whether or not he is aware of it). When we describe these preconceptions, we understand his life style. The life style is usually established by the age of five (4, p. xviii), so the earliest childhood memories of the individual are important. From the beginning, the child's interpretation of the conditions of his life are those of a unique individual.

#### *Striving for Intellectual Achievement, and Inferiority Feelings*

Early childhood memories in the *Autobiography* focus almost exclusively on Mill's education under the guidance of his father, which was well under way before the age of five. His first lessons were in Greek, and "my earliest recollection on the subject, is that of committing to memory what my father termed Vocables, being lists of common Greek words, with their significance in English, which he wrote out for me on cards" sometime after the age of three (10, p. 5). Mill subsequently drew up long lists of works in the classics and sciences which his father specified that he read. His pleasures, too, were spin-offs from his studies: "During this part of my childhood [from eight to twelve years] one of my greatest amusements was experimental science" (10, p. 12).

His father drilled him unmercifully, and the child's constant goal was to please him. Although there was undoubtedly a great deal of intellectual curiosity in the boy, the father's chief teaching aid was fear: "Mine was not an education of love but of fear" (11, p. 66). The boy was afraid to give him the wrong answer or to suffer a lapse of memory. On the other hand, the father took extensive time to help his son prepare his Greek lessons before the boy learned enough Latin to use a Greek and Latin lexicon. "This incessant interruption he, one of the most impatient of men, submitted to" (10, p. 6). Thus James Mill was willing to make personal sacrifices in order to better educate his son.

The stern, unsmiling father was never lavish in his praise for good work but harsh in his criticism for bad. Perhaps one consequence was that Mill, one of the most learned men of his time, was usually very modest about his achievements. He claimed that he was of only average ability and that his precociousness was solely due to his father's efforts. Pleasing his father was for him synonymous with intellectual achievement, but his father was not often pleased.

Also, Mill had serious feelings of inferiority in "the common affairs of every day life." He refers to "ungainliness," "awkwardness," and "a thoroughly ineffective and bungling manner" which caused him much embarrassment (11, pp. 178-182). He also lists imperfect articulation as a deficiency. He saw himself as weak and ineffectual, while his father was strong and capable.

#### *Identification with an Idealized Person*

One important consequence of his private tutelage was that the young Mill grew up outside the influence of his peer group. Not only were his lessons private but they occupied most of his waking hours. No time was reserved for social interaction with other children. The one all-important relationship was with his father. He rarely mentions his mother in the *Autobiography* and does not seem to have had a great deal of affection or respect for her. "For her remonstrances I never had the slightest regard" (11, p. 56). He was the eldest child but never seems to have been in a position of competition with the others.

The relationship with the father, then, was not only dominant, but almost exclusive in importance. It would not be surprising to see such a child lean on the powerful parent and seek a relationship with another strong person later on in life.

This is what happened in the case of Mill: he was to focus his admiration on Harriet Taylor. Mill met this young wife of a prosperous merchant in 1831, when he was twenty-five. Mr. Taylor was indulgent of their friendship. However, their relationship scandalized London society, even though it was a "platonick" one, based largely on collaborations on intellectual projects (14, p. 318). They were married in 1851, two years after the death of her husband. She died suddenly in 1858, and Mill was obsessed with her memory until his own death in 1873, as is evident from references to her in the *Autobiography*.

Harriet Taylor took the place of Mill's father, at least in the sense of providing a source of strength and stability to support him. Adler found that persons who isolate themselves from others often compensate for a feeling of inadequacy by cherishing an exalted, unrealistic ideal (1, p. 245). For Mill, this ideal took shape first in James Mill, then in Harriet Taylor, both of whom were almost godlike figures to him.

Mill's method of showing affection for those who were close to him was, predictably enough, that of praising them for their intellectual achievements. His father was important to him as a person, so he consistently overrated him as an historian and a seminal mind in the fields of political science and economics. He felt great affection for Harriet Taylor, so he expressed this by lauding her for her great mind and giving her credit for many of the ideas expressed in his books. Some of the extreme statements about his wife, are, "What I owe, even intellectually, to her, is in its detail, almost infinite" (10, p. 113), and, "I have often compared her . . . to Shelley: but in thought and intellect, Shelley . . . was but a child compared with what she ultimately became" (10, p. 112). The reader is embarrassed for Mill as he reads such statements.

He needed the support of a strong will behind his own convictions—his father provided that support for his utilitarian and rational convictions; Harriet Taylor for those involving feeling, poetry, and intuition which he needed to round out his theories. He looked to his father and Harriet Taylor for emotional support and tended to transfer to them much of the credit for his own achievements. Some scholars believe that she was instrumental in strengthening the rationalist rather than the "sentimental" element in his thought (9, p. 17). But this is certainly not how Mill interpreted her influence in his *Autobiography*.

*Underdeveloped Social Interest*

Social interest which directs the striving of the individual toward the socially useful side of life is Adler's criterion for mental health (5, p. 133). "Social feeling is not inborn; but it is an innate potentiality which has to be consciously developed" (2, p. 31). The resolution of Mill's mental crisis can best be understood in terms of his developing social interest. Basically, Mill moved from an *abstract* interest in the general welfare of mankind to a more *concrete* interest in his fellowmen.

Although Mill did not experience the normal peer-group contact as a child, and had inferiority feelings, he was not quiet in the presence of others. On the contrary, he was quite argumentative. When his father brought friends to the house he would argue with them to the point of showing bad manners (10, p. 21). This indicates a somewhat haughty attitude and an inability to work with others. Later, the only important contact he had with his fellows was through debating societies. And though Mill identified with his father, there is little evidence in the *Autobiography* to indicate that his social interest was spread further (3, p. 42). There do not seem to have been characteristics in the cold-natured James Mill to spread his son's social interest.

Nevertheless, Mill considered himself to be a crusader for the ideals of his father, and this gave meaning to his life. "From the winter of 1821, when I first read Bentham, and especially from the commencement of the *Westminster Review*, I had what might truly be called an object in life; to be a reformer of the world. My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object" (10, p. 80). The goal he was striving for was an admirable one, as he identified his development, worth, and happiness with the development of mankind (3, p. 305). And he did experience an initial period of enthusiasm when he was unencumbered by doubts, the period he describes as "Youthful Propagandism" in the *Autobiography*. However, as we have seen, he came to realize during his depression that the interest in mankind he had was completely abstract. A great deal of the common experience of man had not been taken into account. He had concentrated on excellence for its own sake, taking an elitist and egotistical view of his work: "My dejection, honestly looked at, could not be called other than egotistical" (10, p. 87).

When Mill rejected the purely rationalistic and analytical approach to the study of psychology and political science, his rejection involved more than a change of doctrine. It involved a breaking away from the father, to whom the doctrine was all-important. Their

affinity had always been expressed in the form of a shared theory of knowledge rather than in a demonstrable affection for one another. Even this limited relationship then was not actually one of social interest.

### *Increase in Social Interest*

We have seen that Mill realized that the need to love someone had something to do with the roots of his depression and that the "turning point" came as he was reading the account of the young Marmontel's desire to "be everything" to his family after her father's death. It is evident that Mill was experiencing a need for concrete personal relationships in which he would share with others and help them on a personal level rather than dictate to them from afar. His reading of poetry at this time was important because poetry provides one means of sharing the common experience of man (10, p. 89).

This new experience led him to adopt a line of thinking and conduct which did not have the stamp of approval from his father. He continued to accept the goal of the improvement of mankind but rejected the intense self-consciousness, meaning here virtually the same as self-centeredness, which his father had fostered. Mill was wise in seeing that the goal itself was an ideal one, and he remained until the last dedicated to it. But he now emphasized the working toward the goal instead of the goal itself. Happiness should not be pursued as an end in itself; happiness is a by-product of the pursuing of other goals. As Adler put it, it is the striving for the goal that is connected with the intensity of a person's movement and "his accomplishments give him temporarily a high feeling of value which is identical to the experience of happiness" (3, p. 54).

Mill's later writings give every indication that he had indeed developed a healthy social interest, and, incidentally a definition of it almost identical with Adler's. In the early 1860's, he could write: When people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is, caring for no one but themselves. . . . those who leave after them objects of personal affection, and especially those who have also cultivated a *fellow-feeling with the collective interests of mankind*, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigor of youth and health (13, pp. 16-17, italics added).

Mill eventually arrived at the position that "only altruistic feelings are truly moral" (15, p. 27). However, it remains to look at the facts of his personal life to see how successful he was in altering his style of life in accordance with a healthier social interest.

## THE THREE LIFE PROBLEMS

Adler held that "all problems of life merge into the three social problems of work, neighborly love, and sexual love" (3, p. 25). If we examine an individual's attitudes toward these three problems, we see a good indication of his success in life. Although Mill worked for the East India Company for thirty-six years, this was employment purely out of the economic necessity to earn a living, and he only mentions it in passing in the *Autobiography*. His real occupation was the dissemination of ideas in order to better mankind. As we have seen, his one object was to be "a reformer of the world," and it was working toward this goal which made him happy. For Mill, then, occupation was directly connected to a feeling of community with his fellow men (after his crisis had been resolved), and he achieved a solution of these two problems of life in the direction of social interest.

Nevertheless, Mill remained a loner who seemed able to relate to his fellow man almost exclusively in terms of intellectual debate. He did, of course, have one close personal relationship—that with Harriet Taylor. As pointed out before, she filled the role left vacant by the father, in addition to that of a friend and partner. Mill still required the support of one stronger than himself to buttress his own ideas. He writes in his diary on February 16, 1854,

Niebuhr said that he wrote only for Savigny; so I write only for her when I do not write entirely *from* her. But in my case, as in his, what is written for only one reader, that one being the most competent intellect, is likeliest to be of the use to the many, readers or not, whose benefit is the object of the writing, though not the principal incentive to it (9, p. 198).

To say that their relationship was unusual is not to say it was without love or empathy. The case was just the opposite, as their correspondence and diary entries show. It could be argued from such statements as the one above that Mill at least was too much obsessed with his "partner." Other entries from Mill's diary, such as the one of January 9 of the same year, speak of the power of her love: "What a sense of protection is given by the consciousness of being loved, and what an additional sense, over and above this, by being near the one by whom one is and wishes to be loved the best" (9, p. 187).

It is difficult to believe after reading such statements as well as letters which begin with such phrases as, "This is the first time since we were married, my darling wife, that we have been separated and I do not like it at all" (9, p. 184), that their relationship was not a sexual one. But that was the case. As a matter of fact, their marriage

after the death of Harriet's husband was undertaken only as means of protecting their long-standing friendship from social criticisms. Both actually had a contempt for the institution of marriage (14, pp. 344-345). It seemed to them that marriage symbolized the subjugation of women, and "so viewed, the sexual relation became for them revolting and unjust" (14, p. 319). Therefore, even though they loved and respected each other, they felt the necessity to "stop short of a physical passion" for example's sake (14, pp. 319-320).

Harriet Taylor did not fill the role of a partner in sexual love. It is not possible to say, then, that Mill achieved a solution to this third problem.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

An Adlerian interpretation of John Stuart Mill's "mental crisis" and its resolution adds to our understanding of these events. Prior to the crisis, although the "improvement of mankind" was his ostensible goal, he was somewhat egotistical in his outlook and lacked true empathy with his fellow men. His recovery was accompanied by an increasing personal modesty and the realization that happiness is not a direct goal to be sought, but rather a result of working with and for the community of men. Although his subsequent relationship with Harriet Taylor did not include a solution of the problem of sexual love, it was for him a close friendship with a fellow human being, something he had not experienced before. We can see the resolution of the "mental crisis" as concomitant with increased social interest.

Adler always stressed the uniqueness of the individual and, in the final analysis, his success as being dependent upon his contributions to humanity. Adler recognized a place "for the independent spirit . . . who contributes to the advancement of mankind" (5, p. 147). Mill, who extended his social interest into the future through his works, was such a spirit. A passage from *On Liberty*, one of his most influential works, could be most fittingly applied to Mill himself: "If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode" (12, p. 82).

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