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J.S. MILL AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE “DESIRE OF WEALTH”

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Abstract

This paper deals with a debate about the universality of the “desire of wealth” in John Stuart Mill’s thought. The debate occurred in the literature about fifteen years ago, when Samuel Hollander and Sandra Peart published in 1999 a criticism of Abraham Hirsch and Neil De Marchi’s interpretation of Mill’s methodology. This article constitutes an attempt to solve the debate by providing a rationale for the disagreement between both sets of scholars. In particular, we show that the divergence between them comes from the fact that they ground their respective arguments using different texts, while neglecting that Mill gradually changed his mind in his writings subsequent to the 1836 essay entitled “On the Definition of Political Economy...”. First, in accordance with the development of his ethology, Mill deprived the maximizing behavior of its universal validity; then, Mill focused more and more on “competition” as economics’ basic axiom in order to stress its historical relevance; and finally Mill strengthened the relativity of the behavioral axiom with the introduction of the concept of “custom”.

Keywords: homo oeconomicus; universal laws; John Stuart Mill; economic methodology.

JEL classification: B12; B41

I. INTRODUCTION

About thirty years ago, a long-lasting debate opened in the history of economic thought between eminent specialists of John Stuart Mill's work, when Abraham Hirsch (1986) disputed some of Samuel Hollander's interpretations of Mill's methodology (Hollander 1985). Four years later, Hirsch, along with Neil De Marchi, followed up the criticism (Hirsch and De Marchi 1990); and in 1992, Hirsch published an additional and enhanced critique (Hirsch 1992). The last stage of the debate took place when Hollander and Sandra Peart published in 1999 a rejoinder to Hirsch's and De Marchi's analysis, followed by an answer from Hirsch (2000), and it ended eventually with a last counter-reply (Hollander and Peart 2000). The core of the debate was about the role imparted by Mill to verification in testing and modifying economic theory¹. Given that Mill famously defined economic theory as an inquiry based upon one central assumption he calls "desire of wealth"—specifically, that man is "a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging of the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end" (Mill 1836, 321)²—the debate also fundamentally involved the issue of the universality of this hypothesis in Mill's writings. It is this particular element of the debate that we would like to discuss in this paper. Indeed, we argue that both sets of commentators fail to see that Mill's thought on this issue varied over time, and that this fact explains the disagreements between them.

Let us briefly recall the respective arguments of each camp. Hollander, reiterating his thesis defended in 1985 in *The Economics of J.S. Mill* (Hollander 1985, 1:135–36), contends with Peart that "the central behavioral axiom [that man wants to possess wealth and knows the best means of getting it] is not of universal relevance but is pertinent only to the local circumstances of contemporary Great Britain and America", so that consequently "the axiom itself is empirically based" (Hollander and Peart 1999, 372). According to Hollander and Peart, this assumption should be regarded as what Mill calls an "empirical law of human nature", that is, a

¹ Hollander and Peart claim that Mill allowed for modification and improvement of the economic model through verification, while Hirsch and De Marchi consider that, according to Mill, only the *a priori* method can establish scientific truth, not *a posteriori* verification.

² This definition of the desire for wealth is in fact not unique in Mill's work, and hence not free of ambiguity (cf. Mill 1836, 322; 323, and 1843b, 901, 1848b, 736–8; 890).

generalization which holds true only in specific instances. Hirsch and De Marchi assert on the contrary that the desire for wealth is, according to Mill himself, a “natural” or “causal law of human nature”, or in other words a universally valid axiom (Hirsch and De Marchi 1990, 128). It is noteworthy, to clarify the debate, that all four commentators—rightly—agree that Mill denied any pretension to establish universal economic *results*: Mill was quite clear from the beginning that the deductions based upon the desire for wealth (such as the laws of the distribution of the produce) elaborated by economists are mere “tendencies” (Mill 1836, 337), which hold only in the abstract.³ This being said, Hirsch puts forward against Hollander and Peart the fact that Mill’s vision of abstract science “involves absolute truth”, a conception which is precisely “found in the causal law (or laws) embodied in the premises of the theory. This, of course, is the central behavioral axiom in economics, as everyone knows” (Hirsch 2000, 356). Hirsch puts a particular emphasis on the fact that, on the other hand, when it comes to applied science, Mill provides an explanation of why theoretical conclusions grounded on the universal central axiom may not coincide with facts: namely, because “there are different causal laws to be considered in [actual] cases” (*ibid.*). Hirsch refers here to Mill’s idea of “disturbing causes” that has to be heeded in applied economics: while abstract science considers only the necessary or universal effects of one causal hypothesis, applied science has to take into account other causes that may act in the empirical case under consideration, which renders the conclusions reached in the abstract science always provisional. Therefore, Hirsch blames the other two scholars for having “conflated assumptions and implications” (*ibid.*). Here stands the core of Hirsch and De Marchi’s argument, already formulated in their 1990 book: Hollander and Peart are said to run together “empirical and causal laws, on the one hand, and assumptions and implications on the other” (Hirsch and De Marchi 1990, 128, note 3; see also Hirsch 2000, 356).

Both readings appear irreconcilable. Yet, this article constitutes an attempt to solve the Hirsch–De Marchi versus Hollander–Peart debate by providing a rationale for their mutual misunderstanding. Our claim is that Mill’s viewpoint on the issue of the

³ For further explanation see note 7 below.

central axiom of political economy was not immutable over time. In particular, our thesis is that all protagonists mentioned above base their argument using different texts, while neglecting the fact that Mill, in his writings subsequent to the 1836 essay entitled “On the Definition of Political Economy...”, progressively circumscribed the validity of the behavioral axiom. He did so first in the *System of Logic* through his ethological approach to human nature; he then did so through the emphasis he put on two institutions directly aiming at underlining the relativity of the desire for wealth: “competition” (Mill 1843b) and “custom” (Mill 1848a). Once these elements are heeded, one may, on the one hand, explain why our four commentators could not reconcile and, on the other hand, draw attention to Mill’s growing relativist stance concerning economic science.

Section II will first deal with some specific problems raised by Hirsch’s and De Marchi’s interpretation. Section III will highlight Mill’s unnoticed shift towards a more relativist conception of the desire for wealth. Section IV tackles the role of introspection in the overall issue. The concluding section tries to explain Mill’s move. There we suggest that it can be understood both as an answer to the growing epistemological critique of political economy Mill had to face and as a corollary of Mill’s own increasing political aspiration to further human improvement and social progress.

II. WHY HIRSCH AND DE MARCHI’S INTERPRETATION APPEARS ON THE WHOLE LESS CONVINCING

Hirsch and De Marchi put particular stress, as mentioned above, on the idea that, for Mill, science deals with “absolute truth”. However, neither of them brings compelling textual evidence to buttress their view. In fact, the phrase is very rarely used in Mill’s entire writings. We have been able to find four instances, all of them in the *System of Logic*. The first three definitely contradict Hirsch and De Marchi’s interpretation, in as much as the phrase is employed by Mill in a negative way, while clearly rejecting the very idea of any absolute truth in the sciences. As for the last occurrence of “absolute truth”, though Mill refers to it in a positive manner (and

paradoxically when dealing with moral sciences), it doesn't involve the central behavioral axiom. Let us look into these four instances in detail.

Mill and the issue of "absolute truths"

The first occurrence appears in book II, when Mill discusses the validity of geometry. Since there exist no points without magnitude, no lines without breadth, etc., Mill claims that the suppositions from which the conclusions of geometry are deduced "are so far from being necessary, that they are not even true" (Mill 1843a, 227). Contrary to William Whewell, who claims that the axioms of geometry are assumptions of the real existence of things and thus are universally true, Mill contends: "[Whewell] must show [these axioms] to be *absolute truths*" (Mill 1843a, 228, emphasis mine). Mill thus clearly means that this is an impossible task.

Later in book II, the phrase appears when Mill deals with logical statements. It is used there, but again in a critical way, while rejecting William Hamilton's opinion according to which the principle of contradiction (that one of two contradictories must be false) is an axiom equivalent to an absolute truth: "as this is always assumed to be the case in treatises on logic, the axiom is always laid down there as of *absolute truth*" (Mill 1843a, 278, emphasis mine). Mill adds, contrariwise, that "between the true and the false there is a third possibility, the Unmeaning"; therefore, "a proposition must be either true or false, *provided* that the predicate be one which can in any intelligible sense be attributed to the subject" (Mill 1843a, 278, emphasis in the original).

The third case is to be found in book III, when Mill qualifies (in a rather Popperian way) the so-called universality of the law of causation (that every event must have some cause). First, such a law should be regarded, says Mill, as "universal *provisionally*, until an undoubted exception appears" (Mill 1843a, 574, my emphasis). Then, in passages added in the last edition of the *System of Logic* (published in 1872), the expression appears in order to strengthen the very impossibility of finding absolute truths:

“when physical science is said to depend on the assumption that the course of nature is invariable, all that is meant is that the conclusions of physical science are not known as *absolute truths*: the truth of them is *conditional* on the uniformity of the course of nature” (Mill 1843a, 576, italics mine).

Interestingly, until the last edition of the book, Mill tended to be convinced that the law of causation had reached such a degree of universality thanks to “the progress of experience” of mankind (Mill 1843a, 574), that this law could be regarded “as not merely comparative, but for all practical purposes, *absolute*” (Mill 1843a, 573, emphasis mine). But, in the 1872 edition, the term “absolute” was replaced in this sentence by the less strong one he used in the first two editions (1843 and 1846), namely “complete”. Mill being always cautious about the validity of the law outside the solar system, he felt it necessary to add in the 1872 edition that

“in matters of evidence, as in all other human things, we neither require, nor can attain, the *absolute*. We must hold even our strongest convictions with an opening left in our minds for the reception of facts which contradict them” (Mill 1843a, 574, emphasis added).

As a matter of fact, this occurrence refers to the debate Mill had with Hippolyte Taine on the evidence of axioms, which the latter did not hold to be grounded on experience. In his review of Taine’s *De l’intelligence* (1870), Mill blames the French thinker for his conception of the origin and evidence of the first principles of all sciences, the strength of which leads Taine to “attribut[e] to them an *absolute truth*, valid for the entire universe, and independent of the limits of experience” (Mill 1870, 447, emphasis mine).

The fourth and last instance seems to support Hirsch and De Marchi’s understanding. In fact, in contrast to what has been said so far, Mill astonishingly defends in book VI of the *System of Logic* the idea that in moral science there exist absolute truths. This appears when Mill discusses the nature of familiar and common maxims concerning human nature, such as “old people are wiser”. Mill names this kind of generalization “empirical laws”, that is

“an uniformity, whether of succession or of coexistence, which holds true in all instances within our limits of observation, but is not of a nature to afford any assurance that it would hold beyond those limits. [...] Its *truth* is not *absolute*, but dependent on some more general conditions” (Mill 1843b, 861, emphasis mine).

Mill adds: “The really scientific truths, then, are not these empirical laws, but the *causal laws* which explain them” (Mill 1843b, 862, emphasis mine). In other words, Mill states here unambiguously that (moral) science, as opposed to common wisdom, is concerned with “causal laws” which provide absolute truths, or as Mill puts it, “it cannot be the ultimate aim of science to discover an empirical law” (Mill 1843b, 915).

Yet, this being said, it doesn’t prove that the behavioral axiom itself is a causal law. We now turn to the examination of this issue.

Is the desire for wealth a “natural law of human nature” or an “empirical” one?

As a matter of fact, we find no textual support to bolster the idea that the desire for wealth is a “natural law of human nature”. Instead, as rightly noted by Hollander and Peart (1999, 382), Mill avers that “there exist universal laws of the *Formation of Character*” (Mill 1843b, 864), but no universal laws of character itself. The whole issue has to be related to Mill’s reflection on “ethology”⁴ developed in book VI, chapter V, of the *System of Logic*, and even more generally to his philosophical considerations about the diversity of human character⁵. His point is that men are the products of their social conditions of existence: individual modes of conduct and of feeling depend necessarily on social causes. Here lies the “natural law”. But, from the very fact that in reality “every individual is surrounded by circumstances different from those of every other individual,” it follows that “mankind have not one universal character” (Mill 1843b, 864). Consequently, “the generalizations which assert that any given variety of conduct or feeling will be found universally, [...] will be considered as scientific propositions by no one” (*ibid.*). Statements such as “all

⁴ Mill defines it as “the science of the formation of character”.

⁵ A thorough presentation of Mill’s transformational conception of human nature as molded by institutions can be found in Mattos (2005).

men are liars” are, as Mill formulates it, mere “empirical laws of human nature”, that is, “generalizations which can be made respecting the feelings or actions of mankind without reference to the causes that determine them” (*ibid.*). These empirical laws are mere “approximate generalizations”, the cause or explanation of which remains unknown due to the high complexity of circumstances acting simultaneously. The causal laws, studied by the science of ethology, would be the social and individual circumstances that lead individuals to lie⁶. Now, when Mill says that only laws of the formation of character are natural laws of human nature, he clearly means that it is not a certain desire (or character) as such which is universal because it is invariably enshrined in us (e.g. the proclivity to lie), but he stresses that it is the *link* between this desire (or character) and certain social conditions (“circumstances”) entailing such a desire (or character) which is universal. As a result, the desire for wealth is not for him a “natural law” of human nature but only the product in certain circumstances of a natural law. To claim that Mill regards such a human motivation as a “natural law of human nature” would thus be entirely inconsistent with his whole reflection on ethology. And, as noted by Hollander and Peart (Hollander and Peart 1999, 381), Mill does explicitly designate, in the *System of Logic*, the desire for wealth as an “empirical law of human nature.”

Yet, there is one aspect of Mill’s discussion here that contradicts Hollander and Peart. Hollander and Peart suggest that Mill mentions explicitly the desire for wealth as an example of “approximate generalization.” But Mill does no such thing. First, when Hollander and Peart contend that ““approximate generalization” happens to be *Mill’s* term for the behavioral axioms” (Hollander and Peart 1999, 381) they quote a passage⁷ which does not explicitly refer to the desire for wealth. In fact, Mill there is

⁶ See also his explanation of that other “common wisdom of common life” (Mill 1843b, 864), according to which age would make people more cautious: “It is chiefly, if not wholly, because the old, during their many years of life, have generally had much experience of its various evils, and having suffered or seen others suffer much from incautious exposure to them, have acquired associations favourable to circumspection: while the young, as well from the absence of similar experience as from the greater strength of the inclinations which urge them to enterprise, engage themselves in it more readily. Here, then, is the explanation of the empirical law” (Mill 1843b, 862).

⁷ Here is the quotation: “wherever it is sufficient to know how the great majority of the human race, or of some nation or class of persons, will think, feel, and act, these propositions are equivalent to universal ones. For the purposes of political and social science this is sufficient. As we formerly remarked [p. 603], “an approximate generalization is, in social inquiries, for most practical purposes

not even dealing with economic science but with what he calls “the science of human nature” (which is a far broader science comprising economics). Besides, more decisive against Hollander and Peart’s case is the fact that Mill, immediately after the passage in question, makes clear he is dealing with applied, not abstract, science:

“But in order to give a genuinely scientific character to the study, it is indispensable that these approximate generalizations, which in themselves would amount only to the lowest kind of empirical laws, should be connected deductively with the laws of nature from which they result” (Mill 1843b, 848).

The passage quoted by Hollander and Peart seems irrelevant in the discussion about the universality of economic *hypotheses*, because it concerns *conclusions* not assumptions of political economy—a distinction cogently emphasized by Hirsch and De Marchi (and recalled in our introduction).

Besides, there is undeniably one argument in favor of Hirsch and De Marchi’s reading, which is to be found in the 1836 essay. At the very end of the text, Mill dispels the common mistake consisting in regarding scientific laws as “generalizations” which could admit “exceptions”: “in any tolerably advanced science there is properly no such thing as an exception” (Mill 1836, 337). In economic science as in physics, phenomena are, according to Mill, the result of a “concurrence of causes” (*ibid.*), each “acting in the whole hundred cases” (Mill 1836, 338). It clearly follows, then, that the 1836 Mill regards the desire for wealth as a universally valid axiom.

In the light of the above, it is striking how Mill contradicts himself: in the essay entitled “On the Definition of Political Economy ...” he regards the maximizing behavior as a cause, an assumption acting universally (and from which conclusions may be drawn by economics), whereas in the *System of Logic* (and other later texts), he envisages the desire for wealth as an effect, an actual behavior (the cause of which

equivalent to an exact one: that which is only probable when asserted of individual human beings indiscriminately selected, being certain when affirmed of the character and collective conduct of masses” (Mill 1843b, 847).

may be studied by ethology) which by no means can be said to be universally true. More accurately, in the *Logic*, this behavior is presented by Mill both as a consequence (of the operation of ethological laws) and as the cause of the economic phenomena—but not as a universal cause any more.

In fact, Mill's contradiction corresponds rather to an evolution of his thought on this very topic—a point which we will now look into and which remains overlooked by any of the four commentators.

III. THE GROWING RELATIVIST CONCEPTION OF ECONOMICS' CENTRAL AXIOM(S) IN MILL'S WORKS

Decisive to the understanding of the disagreement between the two groups of commentators is the fact that they do not ground their respective interpretations on the same Milleian texts. Hirsch and De Marchi base their entire argument on the 1836 essay, while Hollander and Peart refer mostly to ulterior texts. The protagonists of the debate seem unaware of that and discuss Mill as if his thinking about the central behavioral assumption of political economy remained unchanged over time. Instead, we claim that Mill's thinking underwent substantial changes. First, in accordance with the development of his ethology, he deprived the maximizing behavior of its universal validity; then, Mill focused more and more on "competition" as economics' basic axiom in order to stress its historical relevance; and finally he strengthened the relativity of this central axiom with the introduction of the concept of "custom".

How the desire for wealth became gradually less regarded as the predominant cause of economic action

In the 1836 essay, the assumption of the desire for wealth has obviously in Mill's mind a special pre-eminence. But why did Mill choose this particular central hypothesis? As noted by Collini, Winch and Burrow: "after all, hypothetical

reasoning could proceed from any premise” (Collini, Winch, and Burrow 1983, 136). Now, if Mill retains the maximizing behavior it is because in “certain departments of human affairs”—namely production and exchange—it turns out that “the acquisition of wealth is the main and acknowledged end” (Mill 1836, 323).⁸ In this text, the desire for wealth is not only a universal cause driving human beings but also the principal or “general” cause behind all economic activities (Mill 1836, 326). Whereas Mill excludes unequivocally that the actual, empirical, man may be reduced to an exclusively greedy being, yet the desire for wealth constitutes a hypothesis which “of all hypotheses equally simple, is the nearest to the truth” (Mill 1836, 323) when dealing with commercial situations. Contrastingly, “with respect to those parts of human conduct of which wealth is not even the principal object, to these Political Economy does not pretend that its conclusions are applicable” (Mill 1836, 322–23). In other words, apart from economic affairs, the desire for wealth is no longer central and belongs to the “less conspicuous” forces, which Mill names “disturbing causes” (Mill 1836, 338). This conception could rightly be interpreted—as De Marchi and Hirsch suggest—as if the *Essay* implies that all phenomena within the sphere of trade and production would at all times and in all places be mainly governed by the pursuit of profit. Again, De Marchi and Hirsch are right in their reading of Mill’s 1836 essay.

However, they overlook what Mill says in 1843 in the *System of Logic*, where such a conception is denied. First, as we have seen in the previous section, Mill’s developments on ethology definitely strip away the universality of such a behavior. Secondly, Mill begins to question its centrality even in economic matters themselves—unlike the much more confident statements of the 1836 essay. Mill became increasingly aware that this motivation was not universally the predominant cause of economic action. Indeed, he explicitly states that this behavior prevails in economic situations only in Anglo-Saxon countries:

⁸ Nonetheless, as far as the application of science is concerned, the usual main force may be fully offset, in specific empirical cases, by other forces (equally valid without exception). Therefore, any conclusion of abstract science has to be called a “tendency”, that is “a power acting with a certain intensity in [the] direction [of one result]”, as opposed to a “predicated [...] actual result” (Mill 1836, 337). In this sense for Mill, “all heavy bodies *tend* to fall” (Mill 1836, 338, italics in the original text).

“In political economy for instance, empirical laws of human nature are tacitly assumed by English thinkers, which are calculated only for Great Britain and the United States [...]. An English political economist, like his countrymen in general, has seldom learned that it is possible that men, in conducting the business of selling their goods over a counter, should care more about their ease or their vanity than about their pecuniary gain. Yet those who know the habits of the Continent of Europe are aware how apparently small a motive often outweighs the desire of money-getting, even in the operations which have money-getting as their direct object” (Mill 1843b, 906).

(1)

The maximizing behavior is now depicted in the very most part of the world as a minor cause in economic affairs. Though Mill certainly still thought it was, overall, the predominant motivation in the economic sphere among his compatriots at the time, in the rest of the world he regards it now as no “general” cause any more, but as a secondary one compared to non-maximizing behaviors⁹.

Bearing this fundamental shift in mind, it is interesting to trace in Mill’s writings the decreasing relevance given to the desire for wealth in favor of institutions of limited validity, as far as the premises of economics are concerned.

How “competition” superseded the “desire of wealth” as economics’ central axiom

In 1836, the central axiom was definitely the maximizing behavior, whereas competition was mentioned as a required supposition but only in passing (Mill 1836, 322):

Under the influence of this desire, it shows mankind [...] sanctioning by mutual agreement the institution of property; establishing laws to prevent individuals from encroaching upon the property of others by force or fraud; adopting various contrivances for increasing the productiveness of

⁹ Therefore, we entirely agree with Hollander and Peart’s comment on this excerpt that “it makes little sense to suppose that Mill would have [...] treated as disturbing causes the *predominating* behavior traits” (Hollander and Peart 1999, 382, italics in the text). But again, this interpretation of Mill’s method is not true of “Mill in general” but only of his writings ulterior to the 1836 essay.

their labour; settling the division of the produce by agreement, under the influence of competition (Mill 1836, 322).

In this early paper, Mill didn't feel it necessary to specify the difference between the maximizing behavior and competition. He even seems unaware of the fact that in order to exist, competition presupposes a set of legal arrangements, among which is private property. Instead, he presents private property as a mere consequence of the desire for wealth.

Now in the *System of Logic*, Mill suggests that a legal framework must also be assumed in political economy in order to make possible the very pursuit by individuals of their desire for wealth:

“English political economists [...] discuss the laws of the distribution of the produce of industry, on a supposition which is scarcely realized anywhere out of England and Scotland, namely, that the produce is ‘shared among three classes, altogether distinct from one another, labourers, capitalists, and landlords; and that all these are *free agents, permitted in law and in fact to set upon their labour, their capital, and their land, whatever price they are able to get for it*’ [...]” (Mill 1843b, 903, italics mine).

(2)

Mill strikingly characterizes the core premise here (“free agents”) not as a maximizing behavior but rather as a set of legal institutions (“permitted in law”) and of social norms (“permitted in fact”) which allows agents to pursue such a behavior. Mill obviously means that people may be driven by pecuniary interests, but if laws or customs prohibit their pursuit, then no competition exists. As a result, the maximizing behavior is regarded, in the *Logic*, as a hypothesis which is, though necessary, not sufficient for economics.

In the *Principles*, published five years after the *System of Logic*, things are made even clearer. The “competition” assumption seems to have become paramount over that of the “desire of wealth”. First, the latter expression appears, except in other very

rare formulations¹⁰, only once within the thousand pages of the book (Mill 1848a, 105). Second, the only significant epistemological remark in connection with the fundamental assumptions of political economy, within the entire book, involves competition and not the interested behavior:

“Only through the principle of competition has political economy any pretension to the character of a science. So far as rents, profits, wages, prices, are determined by competition, laws may be assigned for them. [...] As an abstract or hypothetical science, political economy cannot be required to do, and indeed cannot do, anything more” (Mill 1848a, 239, emphasis added).

(3)

Third, this passage opens the fourth chapter of Book II significantly entitled “Of Competition, and Custom”. Custom, strictly speaking, refers to non-maximizing behaviors and thus should have been opposed by Mill to the desire for wealth, not to competition. The very fact that Mill contrasts custom not to the desire for wealth but to this much broader and complex hypothesis named competition, a hypothesis which obviously compounds behavioral but also legal aspects, reveals how Mill considered that his earlier definition of the central axiom of economics focused on the sole maximizing axiom was insufficient.

Yet, these were not just mere refinements on the part of Mill. Our thesis is that Mill puts the emphasis on the legal aspect of competition precisely in order to give a further account of the relative and historical character of economics’ basic axiom. As evidence of that, consider the new limitations introduced in the *Principles* to the validity of the basic axiom. As seen in quotation (1) above, Mill made clear, in the *System of Logic*, that the maximizing behavior is characteristic of Anglo-Saxon societies solely. Now in the *Principles*, the focus put on that (new) central assumption of political economy—competition—allows Mill to claim that this very hypothesis is proper to *modern* Anglo-Saxon economies exclusively:

¹⁰ Mill refers to the “desire of accumulation” (Mill 1848b, 736–38) or the “desire of acquisition by industry” (Mill 1848b, 890).

“Competition, in fact, has only become in any considerable degree the governing principle of contracts, at a comparatively modern period. The farther we look back into history, the more we see all transactions and engagements under the influence of fixed customs” (Mill 1848a, 240).

Mill stresses in the *Principles* the recent origin of competition, providing an overview of the historical evolution of legal relations in economic matters. He asserts that “the law of the strongest” reigns first; then “every relaxation of it has a tendency to become a custom, and every custom to become a right. Rights thus originating, and not competition in any shape, determine, in a rude state of society, the share of the produce” (Mill 1848a, 240).

This double (spatial and temporal) limitation to the relevance of the competition axiom we have pointed out is lastly completed, in the *Principles*, by a third more radical restraint.

The introduction of “custom” as a predominating cause

For, even in the case of countries like Britain or the United States in modern times where competition exists, Mill states that the desire for wealth can nevertheless be thwarted by custom. Mill declares that the influence of competition on prices “is by no means, *even in the present activity of mercantile competition*, so absolute as is sometimes assumed” (Mill 1848a, 242, my emphasis). This relegation of competition to a secondary cause occurs even though competition, understood as a set of rules that legally allows the free pursuit of individual interests, does exist in Britain or in other countries of the continent. Mill says explicitly that he speaks of cases:

“in which there is nothing to restrain competition ; no hindrance to it either in the nature of the case [natural monopoly] or in artificial obstacles [state regulation]; yet in which the result is not determined by competition” (Mill 1848a, 239);

“[w]here competition, though free to exist, does not exist” (Mill 1848a, 244).

Mill establishes here an important distinction—to my knowledge not discussed in the literature—between *formal competition*, that is, a legal framework that allows free economic decisions (as opposed to regulated monopoly or regulations), on the one hand, and *actual competition*, on the other, that is, formal competition plus the desire for wealth being effective (i.e. not counteracted by custom). By doing so, Mill focuses attention on the peculiarity of the effectiveness of the maximizing behavior. This double conditionality also appears when Mill deals with the exchange value of commodities susceptible of indefinite multiplication. He claims that the law of cost of production applies under the proviso that competition is “free and active” (Mill 1848b, 472, 475). The term “free” seems to refer to the formal feature of competition, “active” to the actual one. Interestingly, the words “and active” were added only from the third edition of the *Principles* (1852) on, as if Mill became gradually aware of the distinction he had himself introduced.

By the same token, Mill describes at least four situations where competition formally exists despite being ineffective, on account of a lack of desire for wealth. Firstly, in the case of booksellers until the mid-1850s and of professional remunerations, Mill affirms that prices are set according to custom, whose transgression is sanctioned by social pressures (Mill 1848a, 243). Secondly, in continental Europe, where competition is legally permitted in many areas, prices remain high due to the lack of what Mill calls “the general energy in the pursuit of gain” (Mill 1848a, 244). Thirdly, with regard to the regulation of wages in Britain, Mill comments: “In this country there are few kinds of labour of which the remuneration would not be lower than it is, if the employer *took the full advantage of competition*” (Mill 1848a, 337, italics mine). It is noteworthy that this passage was neither in the manuscript nor in the first edition of the *Principles*. Mill argued instead, in the early versions of the text, that custom can hardly be maintained but in a stationary economy (Mill 1848a, 337, note). The removal of this last passage therefore shows, once more, the increasing weight Mill has granted over time to the role played by custom in economics in place of the desire for wealth. Fourthly, Mill argues that, if British wholesale buyers certainly scrutinize all prices and thus have their desire for wealth unhampered, this is not true in the retail sector where prices

vary from one client to another, according to personal relations. Similarly, he contends that competition in retail trade is effective mainly in large cities, whereas

“elsewhere it [competition] rather acts, when it acts at all, as an occasional disturbing influence; the habitual regulator is custom, modified from time to time by notions existing in the minds of purchasers and sellers, of some kind of equity or justice” (Mill 1848a, 243).

It is noteworthy that here the central axiom—competition—is described as a “disturbing influence”. Reciprocally, custom is said to be the main cause determining the actions of individuals in the British retail sector. Studying retail prices in the *Principles*, Hollander and Peart properly demonstrate how Mill provides an analysis of price discrimination and of monopolistic competition which is based on non-maximizing consumer behaviors (Hollander and Peart 1999, 384–86). Now, even more interesting for our thesis, they mention—though without paying special attention to it—the increasing amendments Mill made in the successive editions of the *Principles*: at least in 1852, 1862 and 1865 did Mill strengthen the predominance of non-pecuniary interests (see Hollander and Peart 1999, 385).

Consequently, the shift is significant in Mill’s writings: now in the *Principles*, the maximizing behavior can no longer be reported as “of all hypotheses equally simple, [...] the nearest to the truth”, as was the case both in the *Essay* and in the *System of Logic* (Mill 1836, 323, 1843b, 902).

Notwithstanding, it might be objected that the wealth-maximization hypothesis remains implicit in the *Principles*; admittedly, but this is true only for some parts of the book, mainly when Mill deals with the Ricardian laws of the distribution of the produce (in book II) and with the question of value (in book III). However, the first book on “Production”¹¹ strikingly provides abstract economic theorems that are not based on the maximizing assumption. For instance, Mill’s analyses of growth or of his “fundamental propositions respecting capital” (book I, Chap. V) are grounded neither on any behavioral premise nor on competition. And this is precisely why the

¹¹ To the extent that Book IV and V essentially deal with applied economics instead of theoretical economics, it seems normal that the desire for wealth is not central there.

previous quotation (3) affirming the necessity to suppose competition in economics surprisingly appears not until the beginning of the second book.

In fact, the idea of a discrepancy between Mill's method in principle (stated in the 1836 essay) and in practice (employed in the *Principles*) is not new. The case for a gap within Mill's writings is at the very core of Hollander and Peart's paper of 1999, as mentioned before. They consider, legitimately, that Mill not only regards it possible to depart from the *homo œconomicus* assumption, but even "does attempt to provide a theoretical account of observed retail-pricing practice in the presence of non-maximizing consumer behavior" (Hollander and Peart 1999, 384). Neville Keynes contends that economic man "occupies a position of central and all-pervading importance" in the *Essay*, whereas it "plays a much humbler part" in the *Principles* (Keynes 1890, 19). Whitaker notes, along the same lines, that the *Principles* constitutes "the most unself-conscious of economic treatises" (Whitaker 1975, 1045), in particular because it is "obviously far from a narrow deductive development from the axiom of self-interest" (Whitaker 1975, 1046)¹².

IV. THE INTROSPECTION ISSUE AND THE MALLEABILITY OF HUMAN NATURE

Another point of disagreement between our four commentators concerns the role of introspection in order to establish the universality of interested behavior. De Marchi says in Mill's mind "the wealth motive was very real, as everyone could affirm by looking inside themselves or at those around them" (De Marchi 1986, 92). Contrary to that, Hollander and Peart, quoting excerpt (1) above (p. 15 in this paper), argue that according to Mill, "[g]iven this sharp contrast [between entrepreneurial motivation in Britain and the Continent], it is inconceivable that introspection would yield the identical outcome in a British or American and (say) a French domain" (Hollander and Peart 1999, 380–81). Again, our four commentators do not base their case on the same texts. The argument in the 1836 essay that the axiom is universally

¹² See also Viner (1949, 380).

true because it is based on introspection, no longer appears at all in the later works. Here is what Mill says in 1836:

“The desires of man, and the nature of the conduct to which they prompt him, are within the reach of our observation. We can also observe what are the objects which excite those desires. The materials of this knowledge every one can principally collect within himself” (Mill 1836, 329).

Contrastingly, in the *System of Logic*, after the aforementioned passage (1) related to the “habits of the Continent of Europe” where some “motive often outweighs the desire of money-getting”, Mill contends instead:

“The more highly the science of ethology is cultivated, and the better the diversities of individual and national character are understood, *the smaller, probably, will the number of propositions become, which it will be considered safe to build on as universal principles of human nature*” (Mill 1843b, 906, emphasis mine).

None of the four commentators comments on this passage. In the secondary literature we have looked into, only Collini et al. note the rupture introduced by this passage in Mill’s thought, observing that “disturbingly, Mill [...] even raised doubts about the operation of the ‘familiar psychological law’ ” of the desire for wealth (Collini, Winch, and Burrow 1983, 137). More precisely, Mill abandoned the idea that the axiom is universally true because it is based on introspection¹³ while developing his increasing thrust concerning human nature, namely its malleability according to circumstances. In fact, since the first edition of the *System of Logic*, Mill suggests that we abandon our conviction that human nature is immutable:

“The majority of those who speculate on human nature, prefer dogmatically to assume that the mental differences which they perceive, or think they perceive, among human beings, are ultimate facts, incapable of being either explained or altered, rather than take the trouble of fitting

¹³ This does not mean that introspection lost importance in Mill’s mature works as an instrument for the moral scientist helping revealing different human characteristics in distinct circumstances.

themselves, by the requisite processes of thought, for referring those mental differences to the outward causes by which they are for the most part produced..." (Mill 1843b, 859).

Mill certainly considers that, as a human passion, the desire for wealth is an inclination shared naturally by every man. In an essay entitled "Nature", written in the first half of the 1850s, Mill says that "so completely is it the verdict of all experience that selfishness is natural" (Mill 1874, 394). Admittedly, this remark must be taken cautiously: "selfishness" is not an equivalent, strictly speaking, of the "desire for wealth", the latter being more specific, defined as this "[familiar] psychological law [...] that a greater gain is preferred to a smaller" (Mill 1843b, 901). But even if we accept selfishness as a synonym, Mill immediately adds in the 1874 essay:

"By this I do not in any wise mean to deny that sympathy is natural also; I believe on the contrary that on that important fact rests the possibility of any cultivation of goodness and nobleness and the hope of their ultimate entire ascendancy" (Mill 1874, 394).

In fact, his point is rather to show that actual behavior is a product of socialization, and as such is liable to be regulated by noble desires through education. This subtle viewpoint is also underlined in *Utilitarianism* where he distinguishes between "innate" and "natural" feelings:

"if [...] the moral feelings are not innate, but acquired, they are not for that reason the less natural. [...] The moral feelings are not indeed a part of our nature, in the sense of being in any perceptible degree present in all of us; but [...] is a natural outgrowth from [the moral faculty,] susceptible of being brought by cultivation to a high degree of development" (Mill 1861, 230).

The question of the possibility of cultivating nobler motivations than the economic motive has to be connected with Mill's growing concern for the question of human betterment and social progress, which we will discuss in the next section.

V. WHY DID MILL CHANGE HIS VIEWS?

Now, how did Mill come to accept that the sole content of the laws of behavior that matters, for a political economist, are mutable social customs? We suggest it is for epistemological purposes as much as for political and moral ones.

The context of a growing critique of political economy

As said before, Mill became himself a critic of political economy. But in the face of a wider context of growing criticism towards political economy in the 1830s and 1840s (see De Marchi 1974), to relativize the *conclusions* of political economy was perhaps not enough, and Mill had to question the universality of the very *assumption* of economics—namely, economic man. Therefore he became increasingly critical of the premises used by economists. For instance, in a passage from his later work *Auguste Comte and Positivism* Mill claims that:

“The principal error of narrowness with which [economists] are frequently chargeable, is that of regarding, not any economical doctrine, but their present experience of mankind, as of universal validity ; mistaking temporary or local phases of human character for human nature itself ; having no faith in the wonderful pliability of the human mind; deeming it impossible, in spite of the strongest evidence, that the earth can produce human beings of a different type from that which is familiar to them in their own age, or even, perhaps, in their own country” (Mill 1865, 306).

Another example may be found in a review of Harriet Martineau’s *Summary of Political Economy*, which Mill published in a periodical in 1834 (and from which the quotation within the above excerpt (2) originates). There, Mill condemns the “almost irresistible tendency of the human mind to become the slave of its own hypotheses” to which almost all economists succumb, inducing them to mistake “arbitrary conditions [...] for laws of nature” (Mill 1834, 226). It seems rather disturbing that Mill stresses the relativity of the central axiom two years before the publication of his much universalizing essay “On the Method...” But the essay published in 1836 was

in fact written earlier, in 1831 (Robson in Mill 1836, 309)¹⁴, at a time when Mill was just discovering Comte's and the Saint-Simonians' thought—influences that played a crucial role in the overall scenario.

Mill's political and moral aspirations

Mill declares in his *Autobiography* that his encounter with Comte and especially with the Saint-Simonians, from 1829 on, marked a turning point in the progress of his thought. First, they drew his attention to the mutability of human nature:

“the chief benefit which I derived at this time from the trains of thought suggested by the St. Simonians and by Comte, was, that I obtained a clearer conception than ever before of the peculiarities of an era of transition in opinion, and ceased to mistake the moral and intellectual characteristics of such an era, for the normal attributes of humanity” (Mill 1873, 173).

Second, Saint-Simonians made him aware of the possibility of improving economic institutions in a sense compatible with socialistic goals, that is to say opposed to the mere individualistic desire for accumulation:

“it was partly by their [Saint-Simonians'] writings that my eyes were opened to the very limited and temporary value of the old political economy, which assumes private property and inheritance as indefeasible facts, and freedom of production and exchange as the *dernier mot* of social improvement” (Mill 1873, 175, italics in the original).

At the same time, Harriet Taylor influenced him in the same direction (Mill 1873, 239; 241). This assuredly led Mill to yearn for overturning the negative effects of the desire for gain¹⁵. As Mill puts it in 1848, when defending the positive aspect of the

¹⁴ In fact, Mill rewrote the essay in the summer of 1833. He then published a last and almost unmodified version in 1844, but as Mill himself declared, it was “only printed [at that time] after the success of the 'System of Logic'” (Robson in Mill 1836, 230). The fact that he made only minor changes from the 1833 version suggests that he seemed hardly aware of his own contradictions.

¹⁵ For an interesting discussion about Mill's appeal to reduce the prevalence of the desire for wealth in connection with his idea of human improvement, see Mattos (2005, 50–52).

purportedly forthcoming stationary state, the competition for money should be replaced by social relations of a higher level of morality:

“I confess I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other’s heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind, or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress” (Mill 1848b, 754).

Therefore, Mill not only came to regard economic man as temporary but he more and more firmly appealed for its replacement, especially through the development of cooperative societies¹⁶, “which, whether they succeeded or failed, could not but operate as a most useful education of those who took part in them, by cultivating their capacity of acting upon *motives pointing directly to the general good*” (Mill 1873, 241, emphasis mine). This has to be connected with Mill’s idea, expressed in *Utilitarianism*, that “so long as [human beings] are co-operating, their ends are identified with those of others; there is at least a temporary feeling that the interests of others are their own interests” (Mill 1861, 231)¹⁷. In fact, insofar as the standard of the principle of utility is “not the agent’s own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether” (Mill 1861, 213), Mill’s whole utilitarianism must be seen as a philosophical criticism of the desire for wealth.

VI. CONCLUSION

As far as the debate between Mill’s experts is concerned, our study has tried to make clear that both camps have strong arguments in favor of their respective theses, despite some misinterpretations. And the disputation itself is profoundly revealing

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that Mill pleads, through the installation of cooperatives, to supplant the desire for wealth but not competition. In the last section of the *Principles*’ famous chapter on the “Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes”, after having supported cooperation schemes, he endeavors to show how competition remains an indispensable institutional arrangement. A further evidence in favour of our contention that competition and desire for wealth are differentiated in his work (see above section III).

¹⁷ It is notable that, in this passage, “cooperation” has a broader meaning than the sense related to the cooperative societies.

for all scholars interested in Mill. Nonetheless, the debate is as telling for what we learn about Mill as for what it overshadows. All protagonists pretend to capture Mill's definitive stance on the issue of the universality of the desire for wealth without noticing the gap between the 1836 paper and his more mature works. They all neglect to observe that Mill's thought was mutable. And even if, on the whole, Mill's writings provide far more arguments in favor of Hollander and Peart's point of view, these two scholars fail to pay attention both to Mill's much universalist approach in the 1836 article and to his later gradual concern for stressing the relativity of economic assumptions. They leave unnoticed the fact that Mill, after 1836, gradually reduced the empirical relevance of the maximizing behavior, and that he put more and more stress on the historicity of the legal apparatus that renders such a behavior operative.

The question of whether the desire for wealth is universal in Mill's mind is not just interesting for academics highly specialized in the study of Mill's works. It is also of particular importance in the history of economic thought, insofar as a wide range of epistemological and theoretical criticisms levelled at the classical mainstream in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries consist precisely in denouncing the alleged pretension to build universal laws upon *homo oeconomicus*. In the wake of Sismondi and Richard Jones, influential authors like Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Veblen and the German historicists launched attacks of this kind on classical political economy and on Mill specifically. The perplexing thing is that among classicals, Mill made outstanding efforts to stress the non-universality of economic laws. As said in the introduction, the idea that economic laws are mere "tendencies" was steadily defended by Mill from the 1836 essay on¹⁸. Therefore, the oft-repeated attacks against Mill's pretension to establish natural or universal laws appear illegitimate¹⁹. This idea that political economy, as conceived by Mill, has a very limited empirical scope is unanimously recognized by all four commentators. This is obvious in Peart and

¹⁸ In the *System of Logic*, this idea was not only fully included, as evidenced by the fact that entire passages from the *Essay* are reproduced verbatim (Mill 1843b, 901-3), but enhanced. For instance, Mill avers that "the deductive science of society will not lay down a theorem, asserting in an universal manner the effect of any cause" (Mill 1843b, 899).

¹⁹ For a comprehensive discussion of this point in the case of Marx see Gillig (2016), and in the case of Durkheim see Gillig (2015).

Hollander's texts; and De Marchi holds that "Mill's science was of very limited scope and potential" (De Marchi 1986, 91). Only Hirsch seems quite embarrassed with this issue. He considers that the desire for wealth cannot reasonably be regarded as relative; otherwise, "what pretensions can economics have to be called a science if its central causal law is so limited?" (Hirsch 2000, 356). Here Hirsch stresses precisely the problematic way Mill defines economic science, a narrow definition which Mill himself did not respect in his practice, as rightly pointed out by Hollander and Peart (1999, pt. IV). What seems hard to recognize for Hirsch is that Mill was not necessarily the best epistemologist of his own economics. Mill should have explicitly amended his 1836 essay or, let us say, should have criticized it in an ulterior text, all the more so as he provided until his death eight editions of his *System of Logic* and seven of his *Principles*. But this is of course the kind of task which typically is our responsibility as historian of ideas.

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