

## Mill versus Durkheim on the Methods of the Social Sciences

By Gustav Jahoda\*

*The first part deals with J.S. Mill's account of the "moral sciences" in his famous treatise on Logic. He lays down the "canons" of all scientific studies and considers the extent to which these are applicable in this sphere. Beginning with psychology, he presents his associationist approach which holds that all mental processes are based on sensations, distinguishing between "laws" and empirical generalizations. All this refers to individual functioning and is viewed by him as universal. When dealing with differences, he proposes a new science of "ethology" (not to be confused with our current usage of the term) and suggests possible ways of studying it. Mill then goes on to discuss the methods of the social sciences, where he contends that all the laws in this domain have to be founded on more fundamental psychological ones. Generally he is doubtful whether his "canons" are relevant for psychology as well as the other social sciences, owing to their greater complexity. His style is highly abstract, and when it comes to concrete examples he falls back on the doctrines of Comte. In the second part Durkheim's critiques of Mill are outlined. As against Mill's conception of psychology, he regards "collective representations" as the source of social phenomena. Furthermore Durkheim strongly objects to Mill's notion of a multiplicity of causes, which he alleges would make scientific inquiry impossible. The concluding section evaluates these divergent contributions, pointing out that while there have been significant advances, many of the problems raised are even now far from fully resolved.*

**Keywords:** Comte, Durkheim, "Ethology", J.S. Mill, Methods, Psychology, Sociology.

John Stuart Mill (1806-73) and Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) were both outstanding thinkers who had immense reputations in their times.<sup>1</sup> Of the two, Mill had a much wider range as a philosopher and social reformer, while Durkheim concentrated more narrowly on sociology, being regarded as the founder of the discipline. Mill's *System of Logic* ([1843] 1879) was his most important work that influenced figures like John Venn, Friedrich Frege and Bertrand Russell, especially on the issue of induction. In fact the whole work was designed to describe the rules of induction. Part of the second volume of the *Logic* deals with what he called "The logic of the moral sciences", and that is the main part considered here. Durkheim published *The rules of sociological method* ([1895]1982) in order to establish a sociology that is "objective, specific and methodical" (1982: 35). Here again, the present aim is not to discuss the work as a whole, but concentrating on the critiques directed at Mill. It has even been suggested that "Durkheim proposed his own *Rules of Method*,

---

\* Emeritus Professor, Strathclyde University, UK.

<sup>1</sup> Two useful biographies are, respectively, Capaldi (2004) and Lukes (1985).

with a critique of Mill in mind." (Fletcher 1973: 32) He added "There is therefore an interesting argument here", and the point of this paper is to pursue this argument, beginning with an account of Mill's position.

At the end of the preface to the first edition of the *Logic* (1879: viii) Mill writes that given the great changes in European societies it is important to know

Whether moral and social phenomena are really exceptions to the general certainty and uniformity of the course of nature; and how far the methods, by which so many laws of the physical world have been numbered among truths irrevocably acquired and universally assented to, can be made instrumental in the formation of a similar body of received doctrine in moral and political science.<sup>1</sup>

The first two books of the first volume of the *Logic* deal with formal logic, and the third book is on the logic of scientific methods. Nearly all the latter concerns the natural sciences, but in his treatment of the social sciences in the second volume Mill refers back frequently to the "methods of experimental Inquiry" and considers whether they are applicable to the "moral" sciences. Hence the main ones are listed below as he described them. Further details of them will be discussed in relevant places.

1. The method of agreement. If two or more instances of the phenomenon . . . have only one circumstance in common, then the circumstance in which alone all the circumstances agree, is the cause (or effect) of the given phenomenon. (vol. I: 451).

2. The method of difference. If an instance in which the phenomenon . . . occurs, and an instance in which it does not occur, have every circumstance in common save one, that one occurring only in the former; the circumstance in which alone the two instances differ, is the effect, or the cause, or an indispensable part of the cause, of the phenomenon. (vol. I: 452)

2a. There is also the joint method of agreement and difference, combining 1. and 2.

3. The method of concomitant variations. Whatever phenomenon varies in any manner when another phenomenon varies in some particular manner,

---

<sup>1</sup> Much the same issue had previously been discussed by Marie Jean, Marquis de Condorcet (1743-94). He had proposed that the collective progress of the human mind

"is subject to the same general laws that are observed in the in the individual development of our faculties."(Condorcet 1794] 1966, p. 76). In his view the 'moral Sciences' are no less certain than the physical one, but society is more ready to accept the latter because it is unaffected by the preconceptions and biases which affect judgements of the moral sciences. Condorcet also advocated the establishment of a 'social mathematics'.

is either a cause or an effect of that phenomenon, or is connected with it through some fact of causation." (vol.I: 464)

*Is there a Science of Psychology?*

The overall title of Book V was "The logic of the moral sciences" and the question was raised, and answered in the affirmative, whether there are sciences which are not exact sciences. Section III deals with "laws of the mind", where the question above is asked and answered positively. For Mill that was a rhetorical question, but he notes that others, notably Auguste Comte (1798-1857) denied that there could be one. For Comte all mental phenomena were in the realm of physiology, and he regarded psychology as akin to astrology.

As against this, Mill maintains that "it remains incontestable that there exist uniformities of succession among states of mind, and that these can be ascertained by observation and experiment (II: 438). Yet in the pages that follow not a single experiment (in the modern sense) is cited, and it is unclear what exactly he meant by "experiment" in this context. What Mill calls "laws of mind" are arrived at by the "laws of association", which have a venerable history and in the modern period can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679); he had postulated that our ideas come from the senses and are the decaying remains of sensations. Thereafter associationism in some form remained dominant in British psychology until James Ward (1843-1925) largely dethroned it in an article in the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Warren (1967) provides a history of these developments.

Mill was a prominent adherent of associationism, following in the footsteps of his father James who had expounded it in his *Analysis of the phenomena of the human mind* ([1829] 1878). So according to J.S. Mill the subject of psychology consists of "the uniformities of successions, the laws . . . according to which one mental state succeeds another." (vol. II. Book VI, ch.3, section 3: 439)

Mill elaborates the consequences of the "laws of association", laws which he compares to chemical ones. When several impressions or ideas come in the mind together, they tend to fuse, as different elements do in chemistry, and are not consciously perceived as combinations of more elementary ones.

While Mill agrees that it is likely there is such a thing as "mental chemistry", whereby is meant that the various parts of our minds, i.e. conceptions, sentiments, emotions and volitions, are created from simple ideas of sensation, he does not think that the case for this has been conclusively made out. He goes on to say that if the question of the origin of moral ideas were at issue, one would have to compare all actions and states of mind and show that they were connected by association, which would be a tall order! Even so, that would only be the Method of Agreement. One would have to go further and use the Method of Difference by demonstrating that this kind of moral stance, when it becomes associated with a previously neutral action or idea, then becomes subject to moral condemnation. There is a footnote (vol.

II,VI ,3: 443) which provides insight into the wide range of meanings the term "experiment" had for Mill: "In the case of the moral sentiments the place of direct experiment is to a considerable extent supplied by historical experience . . ." Mill claims to have attempted this in relation to the sentiment of justice in his *Utilitarianism*; but having read it, I found that it consists again just of verbal arguments.

The remainder of this section deals with a number of questions which in his time remained open.<sup>1</sup> These include: the laws according to which one belief leads to another; as regards Desire, it is what objects we wish for "naturally", and how we come to want something to which we had previously either been indifferent or had even disliked. Then he states that all of what we would call the "higher mental processes", once they have become habitual, are elicited in the same way as our simple ideas.

Then the problem arises as to the extent to which the shift from one state of mind to another is influenced by any identifiable state of the body. He points out that, as a result of varying mental histories and unlike organic dispositions, individuals will have different ideas, desires, etc.

Towards the end of the section Mill cites an exemplary passage that begins by declaring that sensations are the basis of all knowledge. Previously he had written that the immediate antecedent of a sensation is a state of the body, but the sensation itself is a state of mind. Hence it is not surprising that he ends this part of the discussion by suggesting that advances in the physiology of the brain and nervous system are likely to throw a fresh light on this whole problem area. He also notes that phrenology is not the answer.

Mill regards this part of his analysis to be applicable universally, to all humans. Thereafter he elaborates a new approach to human differences, which he calls "ethology", the science of the formation of character. (It will be obvious that this term was not concerned with animal behaviour, as it is used today.)

### *Mill's Ethology*

At the outset Mill distinguishes between general and empirical laws. The latter correspond to "empirical generalizations" which hold true only within particular limits. He illustrates this with reference to the view that the old tend to cautious and the young impetuous. He treats that as an empirical law, whose explanation is that the former have had many negative experiences, which the latter lack. This shows that the general laws of the human mind are not sufficient to account for particular cases, which are too complex to be inferred from the general laws. Our mentalities and dispositions are conditioned by the numerous things that happened us, such as our education and particular circumstances. In this matter we can arrive only at approximate generalizations, which are the stuff of common wisdom and common life. Maxims of this kind, when derived from Englishmen cannot be applied directly to the French, whose

---

<sup>1</sup> A good account of J.S. Mill's general position is to be found in Miller (2010), especially in chapter 2. As regards the utilitarianism espoused by Mill, cf. Sen and Williams (1982).

lives are different. This, it may be noted, is the *raison d'être* of present-day cross-cultural psychology. What, then, is to be done?

Mill had an inkling of a suitable procedure:

. . . in a given number of Frenchmen, taken indiscriminately [read "randomly"], there will be found more persons of a particular mental tendency . . . than among an equal number of Italians or English, similarly taken; or thus: of a hundred Frenchmen, fairly selected, and arranged according to the degree to in which they possess a particular mental characteristic, each number, 1,2,3, etc. of the one series will be found to possess more of that characteristic than the corresponding number of the other. (vol.II,VI, v,3: 454/5)

This, it will be noted, is a hypothetical instance of the Method of concomitant variations. Even then, he rightly comments, the result can only be approximate, a matter of ratios and degrees. He also mentions that if the differences were only small, then a larger number would be needed to eliminate chance.

As the above passage indicates, Mill correctly anticipates some major methodological problems. In a footnote (p. 455) he elaborates this further, maintaining that "the character of a nation is shown in its acts as a nation"; at first this sounds absurd, but then he adds that he does not mean the government as such "but public opinion, writings that are generally admired, its laws and institutions", and so on.

On second thoughts, Mill seems to have had doubts about the permanence of national character, since he points out that the French had radically changed, eliminating their aristocracy and establishing new institutions. He extends these remarks to the character of women, supposedly totally different from that of men; he ventures to forecast that in the future these differences might cease to exist or at least be completely changed.

When it came to specifying the manner of studying ethology, he remarks that laws of this nature can only be arrived at by deduction or by experiment, and the latter for him includes observation. In that sense he envisages a procedure adumbrated already by the *Société des Observateurs de l'Homme* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup> to observe children brought up in strictly controlled environment, except that Mill went much further when he states that it would be necessary to know and record every sensation or impression received by the young pupil from earliest infancy to maturity. He was of course aware that such an experiment is impossible.

Hence he proposes that the formation of character should be derived altogether *deductively* from the more general laws of the human mind; but Mill does not show how that might be done. The task, as he sees it, is one corresponding to education in its widest sense.

While Psychology is the science of the elementary laws of mind, Ethology will serve for the ulterior science which determines the kind of character

<sup>1</sup> For the story of the Société cf. Copans and Jamin (1978).

produced in conformity with these laws, including the formation of national collective character as well as individual" (vol.II,VI, v, 4: 457).

Subsequently he adds that this "important but most imperfect science" should also be concerned with "the various types of human nature that are to be found in the world" (vol.II, VI, v, 6: 462) Those charged with this task would with this work would have to be prodigies who not merely have a sound understanding of psychological laws, but would also have to be able to explain how a type of character arises from particular circumstances.

Any conclusion reached, he says, must be subject to constant verification by observation as well as historical data. "As in other deductive sciences, verification *a posteriori* must proceed *pari passu* with deduction *a priori*" (vol.II,VI,v,6: 463), which is asking rather a lot !

The chapter on Ethology inspired Alexander Shand (1914) to elaborate an expanded theory of character formation in which the concept of "sentiment" was prominent. That in turn was taken up by McDougall in later editions of his classic text on social psychology (McDougall [1908]1943). The concept of "sentiment" overlaps extensively with that of "attitude", which became central to social psychology in the 1930s.

## Social Science

### *Preliminary Considerations*

Compared with the formation of individual character, that of collectivities is more complex, since such phenomena are the result of a multiplicity of interacting causes. It is therefore not surprising, notes Mill, that collective phenomena have not hitherto been considered ones capable of being treated scientifically. Yet while the phenomena of collective life might not be determined by known causes, the modes of action of these causes could conceivably still be accounted for by some simple laws. Then follows a crucial statement that underlies all the subsequent discussions:

All phenomena of human nature are generated by the action of outward circumstances upon masses of human beings; and if, therefore, the phenomena of human thought, feeling, and action, are subject to fixed laws, the phenomena of society cannot but conform to fixed laws, the consequence of the preceding. (vol. II, vi, 2: 466).

In other words, social phenomena are not merely analogous to, but have to be based on, individual ones. Yet each case must be regarded separately, since societies differ.

Mill suggests that even if our knowledge in this sphere remains partial and insufficient for prediction, it could still serve to provide general guidance. His aim in the following chapters was to set out first false and then true methods in this sphere.

*On Two Unsuitable Methods*

The next two chapters deal at some length with approaches he regards as inappropriate for the study of society. The first is the so-called "chemical method", where one critical passage needs attention: "human beings in society have no properties but those which are derived from, and may be resolved into, the laws of the nature of individual man." (vol.II,VI, vii, 1: 469).

In other words he was a methodological individualist, and as such was quite wrong. What he forgot is the fact that people in societies form *social relations*, which have laws of their own not derivable purely from individual psychology. I say "forgot", since in many of his other writings, especially political ones, he clearly displays his awareness of the existence of social relations.

Returning to Mill's discussion, he deplores the unwillingness of many people to accept a scientific approach, regarding it perhaps as mere abstract theorizing. They rely on common sense notions, especially experience. This applies to arguments typically used by politicians. Mill gives this example: England has prospered on having excluded foreign imports; therefore the prohibition was the cause. Experience is insufficient to establish causation.

It comes as something of a *non sequitur* when Mill goes on to say that the main problem with the "chemical" method is the impossibility of conducting artificial experiments. Even if it were possible, results would be vitiated by the fact that societies are constantly changing.

He starts by considering the possible application of the Method of Difference. But that would require finding two groups or nations which are exactly alike in all features except one, and that is hardly practical, though approximations to this condition can be found, e.g. Berry (1966). Mill then discusses other methods, beginning with the Indirect Method of Difference, where one compares "two or more *classes* of instances respectively agreeing in nothing but a presence of a circumstance on the one side and its absence on the other." (vol.II,VI,vii, 3: 472; emphasis in original) He seeks to show that neither of these methods are feasible, and dismisses the Method of Agreement as of little value.

Next there is the Method of Concomitant Variations [i.e. correlation]. On this he comments that since the state of a society is determined by a multitude of interacting factors, no causes can be ascertained by this method.

Finally there is the Method of Residues, which presumes that one already knows the causes operating in a particular country or society. Now if one abstracts from these known causes, the residue of circumstances which these do not explain, one can surmise that the circumstances not explained by these causes may be attributed to the remaining circumstances. However, if we subtract any number of causes we can never be sure that we have done so except for one cause. Hence, Mill says, that method will not serve either.

He concludes that chemistry itself, when dealing with more complex organic compounds, has had to become a deductive science. That is why he

rather oddly labelled this chapter, which illustrates inadequate inductive approaches, the "chemical method".

The second one discussed is the "Geometrical, or Abstract Method". Here again Mill had mainly politicians in mind, as well as people lacking in scientific education. For both these types, Mill alleges, geometry is seen as the prototype of deductive science – hence the title. Ideally, the powerfully Method of Difference would be the best suited for collective phenomena. Alas, it would need two nations which, with one single exception, are exactly the same in every respect, Mill continues to argue that the Method of Agreement is too weak, and that of Concomitant Variations [correlation] cannot prove causation. In sum, none of the strictly scientific methods is applicable.

### *On Two Appropriate Methods*

The first of these is, remarkably, the "Physical, or concrete deductive method", because of the complexity of physics. As regards sociology, a term describes as "barbaric"<sup>1</sup>, Mill states that the complexity arises not from the large numbers of laws governing it, but from the richness of the data in this sphere. Sociology infers the laws of each effect from the laws on which that effect depends, and is therefore a deductive science. He compares it to astronomy!

Once again Mill says that the behaviour of human beings in society is entirely governed by psychological and ethological laws, yet he offer hardly any concrete examples. One cause he identifies is the desire for wealth, which is presumed to be a psychological law. He admits that one could not make any predictions on this basis, but only "tendencies" or, as we would say, probabilities. Moreover, these would apply only to particular societies and not be universal.

Each cause must be studied separately, and the law of the centripetal and that of the projectile force must have been known, before the motions of the earth and planets could be explained, or many of them predicted. The same is the case with the conduct of man in society. (vol.II,VI, ix,3: 497)

Mill introduces what he calls "Political Ethology", which refers to the laws concerning national character, which he says are little understood, but are the most important sociological laws. The more one knows about them, the smaller will be the number of "propositions" by which one can arrive at "universal principles of human nature".

Mill then discusses how a (hypothetical) theory could be verified, and rather lamely suggests that it could be done by "experience". Later he proposes indirect verification through other conclusions from the same laws – whatever that may mean. As will be apparent, everything is kept at a high level of abstraction, and so provides no guidance whatsoever for practical purposes. The general vagueness is epitomized by the concluding paragraph:

---

<sup>1</sup> Presumably because it is an amalgam of Latin and Greek, as did Wundt somewhere.



To prove (in short) that our science, and our knowledge of the particular case, render us competent to predict the future, we must show that it would have enabled us to predict the present and the past. If there be anything which we could not have predicted, this constitutes a residual phenomenon, requiring further study for the purpose of explanation; and we must either search among the circumstances of the particular case until we find one which, on the principle of our existing theory, accounts for the unexplained phenomenon, or we must turn back, and seek the explanation by an extension and improvement of the theory itself. (vol.II,VI, ix,6: 506/7)

The second method regarded as valid is the "inverse deductive", or "historical" one. There are, Mill declares, two different research strategies: In the first the question is what effect will be produced by a given cause, *ceteris paribus*. For instance, what would be the effect of introducing or repealing Corn Laws in any European country, irrespective of its general circumstances. As this example shows, Mill had in mind large-scale phenomena of huge complexity, which is quite unrealistic. The other question is: what are the laws which resulted in those particular circumstances? The aim here is said to be the discovery of laws which govern the general "state of a society". To show what he meant by that phrase, he offers a long list of characteristics, including moral and intellectual levels, industry and wealth, types of occupations, kinds of beliefs, etc. Such a list could be extended indefinitely, without being very enlightening about the "state of society", which is a catch-all phrase. He uses an organic analogy, common in 19<sup>th</sup> century writings, likening that state "to the organism as a whole as distinct from specific organs." The fundamental problem of social science, Mill avers, is to "find the laws according to which any state of society produces the state which succeeds it". (vol.II,VI, x, 2: 510)

Now the trouble is that people change over the generations, and effects react back on their causes. People are influenced by their circumstances, and in turn deliberately change them. This leads Mill to the question whether man and society are progressive. He turns to Vico, who had viewed historical changes as both lawful and progressive.

After lengthy discussion Mill concludes that history, "when judiciously examined", can yield empirical laws of society of two kinds: by dividing them into "social statics" and "social dynamics", Mill adopts Comte's typology. The former is concerned with comparing different states of society during a particular period, while the latter deals with changes over time. Among such changes Mill lists a decline in "the military spirit" and a shift towards "productive pursuits", adding that "all such results are still at too great a distance from the elementary laws of human nature on which they depend – too many links intervene . . ." (vol.II,VI,x,7: 524) Fortunately there is one sphere where the lessons of history and human nature converge, and that is the predominance of one factor involved in progressive changes, namely the state of knowledge and beliefs of humankind. The question is whether this empirical law can be transformed into a scientific theorem by deducing it *a*

*priori* from the principles of human nature. In order to do so it would be necessary to scan the whole of recorded history. This leads Mill on to the single attempt to follow this line, namely the work of Comte which resulted in the so-called "law of the three stages", from supernatural beliefs via metaphysical speculation to the reign of positive science. This he suggests, following Comte, would enable us to foretell the future of humanity. This and what follows shows Mill to have been a determinist.

The following chapter (XI) further elaborates this theme, starting with the assertion that history is subject to general laws. In this connection Mill refers to Thomas Buckle's "History of civilization in England", whose thesis is that human actions are a combined function of these alleged general laws and their particular characters. Mill adds that: ". . . if this principle is true of individual man, it must be true of collective man( VI, xi, i: 532) Here again it appears that according to Mill the collective is nothing but the individual writ large. Buckle cites the work of Quetelet about the regularity with which the same crimes recur in much the same frequency year after year, though Mill does not cite Quetelet's name. Buckle's deterministic stance evoked a great deal of critical discussion by his contemporaries, since it appeared to deny the possibility of free will. Even distinguished scientists like Darwin and Clerk Maxwell commented on Buckle's views about the nature of scientific method. While dissenting from some aspects of Buckle's claims, Mill nonetheless agrees with him that the intellectual level of humans and their beliefs constitute the main factors influencing their progress. There follows a discourse on what is known as the "great man theory" of history, on which Mill hedges his bets.

### *Durkheim's Critique of Mill*

In the introduction of "The rules of sociological method" (1895/1982) Durkheim scathingly contends that there is nothing new in Mill's discussion of sociological methods, it all having already been said by Auguste Comte in his "*Cours de philosophie positive*" 1830-42). In a number of passages in "*The rules*", Durkheim takes issue with Mill's positions; some salient examples are given below.

In connection with the observation of social facts, Mill had stated that the key element of political economy was the acquisition of wealth. For Durkheim that was putting the cart before the horse. In order to understand the essentials of an institution and its functioning, the scientist [Durkheim's term] has first to study it before deciding what its central features are. Mill had been wrong in assuming *a priori* what the predominant goals of political economy were: "Consequently the subject matter of economics, so conceived is made up not of realities which may be precisely pointed to, but merely of possible ones, pure conceptions of the mind." (p. 67)

Generally, Durkheim objects to the high level of abstraction which characterises Mill's approach.

Another fundamental critique concerned Mill's conception of causality. When discussing the nature of sociological proof, Durkheim refers to Comte's

rejection of the comparative method in favour of the consideration of successive developments in the states of society. That, it may be recalled, was also the ultimate position of Mill, who had adopted it from Comte together with Comte's label of "the historical method". In this connection Durkheim notes Mill's view that experimentation in any form cannot be used in sociology. This is based on lengthy discussion in the first volume of Mill's *Logic* (III, x,5: 514-528), in a chapter entitled "Of plurality of causes: and of the intermixture of effects". There Mill argues that the four methods of research (cited above) are inapplicable not merely in sociology, but also in such fields as chemistry, biology, and medicine. The reason he gives is that any effect may be the product of several independent causes, which renders interpretations uncertain. In the case of chemical action, entirely new phenomena are created, that are governed by different laws. This leads him to conclude that "Anything like the scientific use of the method of experiment, in the complicated cases, is therefore out of the question" (p. 525).

If it were true that an effect may be sometimes due to cause A, and at other times to cause B, then as Durkheim alleges, this notion of the plurality of causes would undermine the whole principle of causality. This, he says, is contradicted by "all the findings of science". But it should be remembered that Durkheim was writing at a time when an optimistic and rather mechanical conception of science was prevalent, which has given way to a more nuanced outlook, whereby findings tend to be reported in terms of probabilities rather than absolutes.

According to Durkheim it is particularly important for sociology to reject Mill's plurality axiom, since a number of (Durkheim's contemporary) sociologists remained under the influence of Mill's teaching:

Thus it is commonly stated that crime can equally be produced by the most diverse causes, and that this holds true for suicide, punishment, etc. If we practice in this spirit [of Mill] we shall collect together a considerable number of facts to no avail, because we shall never be able to obtain precise laws or clear-cut relationships of causality. (Durkheim: 149)

So one should stick to the scientific principle that "*To the same effect there always corresponds the same cause*" (p.150, italics in original). The use of the comparative method in this way is far from straightforward, and Durkheim fails to spell out how one should proceed. For his own classic study of suicide Durkheim created a typology of suicide that was meant to correspond with different kinds of causes. He admitted that some of these might be contributory, but by progressive elimination arrived at the conclusion that an anomic social environment is the prime cause.

But this clearly implies that several causes are operating in producing one particular effect, namely suicide. This is clearly in direct contradiction to the postulate above of one-to-one pairing of cause and effect. Such a view is at the opposite pole of Mill's notion of an unlimited plurality of causes and effects. The issue of "causality" is of course a highly complex one, that cannot be

pursued here. What can be said is that neither of these extreme position is tenable.

Another matter on which Mill and Durkheim differ radically relates to their respective approaches to psychology. For Mill, "psychology" refers to the laws of mental functioning of individuals. Moreover, these laws constrain the form sociological generalizations can take. Mill presupposed a direct relationship between individual psychology and the functioning of social institutions of whatever kind. As already stated, Mill lacked the concept of social relations which operate at an intermediate level between individuals and large-scale phenomena, and have their own "laws". Durkheim, on the other hand, dispenses altogether with individual psychology, which he reduces almost to physiological aspects of human functioning.

He is concerned with supra-individual processes, which for him are quintessentially "social", as indicated by the following passage

Here, then, is a category of facts which present very special characteristics: they consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him. Consequently, since they consist of representations and actions, they cannot be confused with organic phenomena, nor with psychical phenomena, which have no existence save in and through the individual consciousness. (p. 52).

This shows that there is a complete incompatibility between the ways Mill and Durkheim conceptualized the role of psychology in social research.

### *Concluding Discussion*

For Mill there were two basic forms of psychology which concerned not the facts but their origin. One is based on innate givens, while the other to which he himself subscribes is based on experience.

Everything mental such as beliefs were grounded in the twin roots of sensation and feeling, which presented difficulties he was unable to avoid, particularly when he postulated that everything social was ultimately reducible to psychology. Since we now know that such a view of psychology is untenable, so his analysis of social science methods has become outdated. And yet his canons of method are still relevant and widely employed in current social sciences, including psychology, sociology and comparative political science, often in a more elastic fashion than he had envisaged. For example, Campbell (1969) has shown how Mill's canons can be applied in large-scale research. In experimental psychology the "method of difference" in the strict sense is routinely used. Let me describe its essence again for the reader: "We require . . . two instances resembling one another in every other respect, but differing in the presence or absence of the phenomenon we wish to study". Now in experiments the subjects are randomly allocated to an experimental and control group, it being assumed that they are equivalent in every respect except

for the experimental treatment, present in one and absent in the other group. Any significant difference in the outcome is then causally attributed to the treatment.

What Mill failed to point out clearly is that the preliminary formulation of a hypothesis is a *sine qua non*. As regards his "concomitant variations" which call correlation, he was right to point out that it does not prove causation; but there are circumstances where this does not apply. For instance, take the correlation between age and height. Since the latter cannot cause the former, a cause is indicated. Mill's general contention that social science, where causes usually hard to ascertain, is less exact than the natural sciences, remains undisputed.

Turning now to Durkheim's critiques, he is correct in stating that a good deal of what Mill wrote is little more than a reformulation of Comte, on whom Mill fell back when it came to offer a concrete illustration. Again Durkheim is correct in accusing Mill of operating at a high level of verbal abstraction.

The same is true when Durkheim objects to Mill's account of economic institutions. However, with regard to plurality of causes, Durkheim is wrong. A particular effect, such as death which Mill cited, can have a multitude of different causes.<sup>1</sup>

All these critical comments are of course made with the benefit of hindsight. Both Mill and Durkheim were pioneers who grappled with problems which are by no means wholly resolved even today. They have the merit of having provided platforms on which their successors have been able to build.

## References

- Berry J (1966) Temne and Eskimo perceptual skills. *International Journal of Psychology* 1: 207-29.
- Campbell D T (1969) Reforms as experiments. *American Psychologist* 24: 409-29.
- Capaldi N (2004) *John Stuart Mill: A biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Condorcet M-J de ([1794]1966) *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* [Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the human spirit]. Paris: Editions Sociales.
- Copans J, Jamin J (1978) *Aux origines de l'anthropologie Française* [The origins of the French anthropology]. Paris: Le Sycomore.
- Durkheim E ([1895] 1982) *The rules of sociological method*. London: Macmillan.
- Fletcher R (1973) (Ed) *John Stuart Mil: A logical critique of sociology*. London: Nelson.
- Lukes S (1985) *Emile Durkheim: His life and work*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- McDougall W ([1908]1943) *An introduction to social psychology*, 25<sup>th</sup> edn. London: Methuen.
- Mill J (1878) *Analysis of the phenomena of the human mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Longmans Green.
- Mill J S ([1843]1879) *A system of logic, ratiocinative and inductive*, 2vols., 10<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Longmans, Green & co.

---

<sup>1</sup> Durkheim's interpretations have been much debated – cf. Pickering and Walford (2000),

- Miller Dale E (2010) *J.S. Mill: Moral, social and political thought* (14-27).  
Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pickering WSF, Walford G (2000) *Durkheim's suicide: a century of research and  
debate*. Hove, UK: Psychology Press.
- Shand A (1914) *The foundation of character*. London: Macmillan.
- Warren H C (1967) *A history of the association psychology*. New York: Scribner.