MILL'S ANTIREALISM

By Christopher Macleod

One of Mill's primary targets, throughout his work, is intuitionism. In this paper, I distinguish two strands of intuitionism, against which Mill offers separate arguments. The first strand, a priorism, makes an epistemic claim about how we come to know norms. The second strand, 'first principle pluralism', makes a structural claim about how many fundamental norms there are. In this paper, I suggest that one natural reading of Mill's argument against first principle pluralism is incompatible with the naturalism that drives his argument against a priorism. It must, therefore, be discarded. Such a reading, however, covertly attributes Mill realist commitments about the normative. These commitments are unnecessary. To the extent that Mill's argument against first principle pluralism is taken seriously, I suggest, it is an argument that points towards Mill as having an antirealist approach to the normative.

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Ethical intuitionism is a position generally taken to be composed of two strands. The first is epistemic: the claim that the mind can know directly—without empirical input—truths about how we ought to act or which states of affairs are good. Call this *a priorism*. The second is structural: that there is more than one fundamental norm in the practical domain. Call this 'first principle pluralism'.[1] Mill takes issue with both of these intuitionistic claims.

It is clear that *a priorism* and first principle pluralism are not equivalent. *A priorism* is a claim about how we come to know—that we can know normative propositions non-inferentially. First principle pluralism, in contrast, is a position about the number of those norms and the priority relation that holds between them. First principle pluralism has nothing to say, on its own terms, about how we come to know: one need not say anything about the

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[1] On intuitionism as combining these pluralistic and epistemic claims, see Dancy (1991: 411). See also Rawls (1991: 344ff.) for an influential statement of intuitionism 'as the doctrine that there is an irreducible family of first principles', between which 'we are simply to strike a balance by intuition'. In a recent and useful discussion, Stratton-Lake (2010: 467) also notes this dual aspect of intuitionism: prioritizing 'the view that basic moral principles are self-evident', he notes that '[m]ost intuitionists are pluralists about basic moral principles—that is, they believe that there is an irreducible plurality of basic moral principles'.

origins of first principles as known a priori, in order to think that they might be irreducibly plural. Neither does *a priorism* offer any support on *purely logical* grounds for first principle pluralism.[2]

The aim here, however, is not to legislate on terminology. 'Intuitionism' has come in ethics to refer both to *a priorism* and to first principle pluralism, and so long as we use the term carefully, this causes little harm. Rather, I wish in this paper to highlight the fact that Mill has separate arguments against each of these strands of intuitionism—and that while we might understand the nature of Mill's argument against *a priorism* well, we still lack a solid understanding of his argument against first principle pluralism. This is easy to miss, perhaps because the refutation of either conjuct will suffice to dismiss intuitionism as a whole. But our lack of understanding of this argument is to be regretted, for it is indicative of his basic orientation towards ethics as a human institution, serving human ends.

In this paper, I offer a reading of Mill's argument against first principle pluralism. I shall suggest that one natural reading of the argument against first principle pluralism is incompatible with the naturalism that drives Mill's argument against *a priorism*. It must, therefore, be discarded. Such a reading, however, covertly attributes Mill realist commitments about the normative. These commitments are unnecessary. To the extent that Mill's argument against first principle pluralism is taken seriously, I shall suggest, it is an argument that points towards Mill as having an antirealist approach to the normative.

I. MILL AGAINST *A PRIORISM*

The focus of this paper is on Mill's argument against first principle pluralism, though in order to assess this argument, it will be useful briefly to rehearse Mill's views on *a priorism*. Mill's argument against *a priorism* is generally familiar, and is motivated by his epistemological and metaphysical naturalism. Mill's naturalism involves a basic commitment to the claim that human beings are to be understood as belonging to the natural order—that the operation of mind, as well as world, is explicable in natural terms.

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[2] There is, no doubt, an explanation for the fact that the two strands often come bundled together. Those who have thought that there are many irreducible first principles without a priority relation between them have in general thought that, where those principles conflict, the only resolution can be an appeal to intuition. But this thought is very much an added extra to the pluralist claim—it remains open in theory to the first principle pluralist to suggest that there is an alternative method of resolving conflicts between the competing claims of fundamental norms. Similarly, those who have looked to intuition to establish fundamental norms a priori have often found more than one such norm intuitively appealing. Once again, this is, strictly, a further claim—it is certainly possible to think that intuitive rational insight identifies only one such norm.

Because the mind is a *part of nature*, any knowledge of the world must be transmitted by receptive faculties of cognition—the senses. There being no logical relation between matters of fact, and our own mental composition being merely a matter of fact about how one part of the natural world is, no observation about how the mind is composed can directly warrant an inference to facts external to the human mind.[3] We may, for instance, be naturally disposed to believe that God exists, or that the parallels postulate is true—or unable to conceive of the falsity of these propositions.[4] But this is merely a fact about our psychology, personal or collective. An observation of this sort does not provide a priori assurance about the independent issue of how the world is.

> Such an inference would only be warrantable, if we could know a priori that we must have been created capable of conceiving whatever is capable of existing: that the universe of thought and that of reality, the Microcosm and the Macrocosm (as they once were called) must have been framed in complete correspondence with one another [. . .] an assumption more destitute of evidence could scarcely be made. (*Examination*, ch. 6, IX: 68)[5]

In this regard, Mill shares with Kant a worry about how a priori knowledge of a world independent of the mind could be possible. 'By what means are these things given to us, if not by the way in which they affect us? And if such intellectual representations depend on our inner activity, whence comes the agreement that they are supposed to have with objects—objects that are nevertheless not possibly produced thereby?'[6]—though whereas Kant seeks to maintain the possibility of substantive a priori knowledge by rejecting naturalism, Mill maintains naturalism by rejecting the possibility of substantive a priori knowledge. For Mill, there can be, in Kantian parlance, no *spontaneous* knowledge of how things are: only knowledge earned through our receptivity to the world.[7]

This is a result of a naturalistic view of the mind—beliefs, as mental states, are outcomes of causal circumstances, and are therefore explicable in natural terms. Some beliefs will be given vindicating explanations by pointing to the nature of the circumstances that occasion their formation—showing that they

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[3] In Hume's terms: 'In vain, therefore, should we pretend to determine any single event, or infer any cause or effect, without the assistance of observation and experience' (Hume 1997: 30).

[4] Mill often wavers on any given occasion between the denial that a belief *is* held intuitively—explaining away a purported intuition as a covertly acquired belief—and the claim that even if it *is* held intuitively, it is not thereby warranted. His strategy for any given intuition should not concern us here, though—as is made clear by the following quotes, the philosophic suspicion of intuition is self-sustained.

[5] All quotes are taken from Mill (1963–1991). References are given by (*Short title*, chapter/section, volume: page).

[6] See Letter from Kant to Marcus Herz, 21 Feb 1772, 10: 131, reprinted in Kant (1991).

[7] On the relation of Mill to Kant on this point, see Skorupski (1989: 5–8).

arise from suitable natural interaction with the object of knowledge. But such a causal story cannot be given about beliefs which do not *involve* interaction with the world—at least not without appeal to further facts which are themselves established empirically.[8] '[A] conviction might be really innate, i.e. prior to individual experience, and yet not be true, since the inherited tendency to accept it may have been originally the result of other causes than its truth' (*System*, II.vii.4, VII: 276).

Mill's view that there are 'no truths cognizable by the mind's inward light, and grounded on intuitive evidence' (*Coleridge*, X: 125) extends to the practical domain. 'The doctrine of *a priori* principles is one and the same doctrine, whether applied to the ὄν or the δέον —to the knowledge of truth or that of duty' (*Whewell on Moral Philosophy*, X: 171).[9] Claims about how there is reason to act are not merely *verbal* claims—they are substantive claims, and cannot, Mill argues, be known merely by reflection on how we use words. Indeed, it is here that he held that the 'notion that truths external to the human mind may be known by intuition' was in his time 'the great intellectual support for false doctrines' (Mill, *Autobiography*, ch. 7, I: 233). The citation of the intuitions in support of claims about how we ought to act, Mill holds, is again merely to report matters of psychology—but such facts do not warrant beliefs about which principles have objective *call* on us, and to think otherwise is to make 'opinions their own proof, and feelings their own justification' (Letter to Theodore Gomperz, 19 Aug 1854, XIV: 134).[10]

To take such beliefs as their own justification is to sacrifice any claim to objectivity in ethics, for it precludes the possibility of a separate standard by which to judge those beliefs.[11] As such, *a priorism* about practical reason—that the mind can know directly truths about how we ought to act or which states of affairs are good—is false.

> We see no ground for believing that anything can be the object of our knowledge except our experience, and what can be inferred from experience by the analogies of experience itself; nor that there is any idea, feeling, or power in the human mind, which, in order to account for it, requires that its origin should be referred to any other source. (*Coleridge*, X: 128–9)

Such is Mill's argument against *a priorism*—similar points would be made later by twentieth-century philosophers such as Quine, also seeking to explore the

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[8] So, for instance, one might offer an empirical argument to vindicate the appeal to intuitions, by pointing to the past success of intuitional beliefs, or by offering some evolutionary reason to think that intuitions track truth. But this affords warrant to such beliefs on the grounds established a posteriori—not on the basis *merely* of what we find ourselves disposed to believe.

[9] Such, interestingly, Mill thought, 'has always been indistinctly thought', but only 'proved' by 'the German metaphysicians of the last and present age'.

[10] This phrase, in variations, is a favourite of Mill's to highlight the problem of intuitionism. See also *System*, III.xii.1, VII: 564, and *Whewell on Moral Philosophy*, X: 177, 178.

[11] It has long been recognized that attempting to establish an objective basis for ethics was a central aim for Mill. See Ryan (1987: 187ff).

philosophic consequences of a thoroughgoing naturalism. The reading has been repeated many times recently, and I will assume, for the purposes of this paper, that Mill was at least on the right track in pursuing his naturalistic views this far.[12]

II. MILL AGAINST FIRST PRINCIPLE PLURALISM

As was noted above, there are two quite distinct strands to intuitionism, and as well as taking issue with the *a prioristic* strand, Mill also argues against first principle pluralism—the claim that there is no *single* practical principle against which acts should be judged, but, rather, *many equally fundamental* principles.[13] This might, for instance, take the form of a belief that there are two principles—that one should maximize happiness and that one should always tell the truth—with no way to guarantee that they will coincide, and no way to resolve conflicts when they occur.

II.1 First principle pluralism and Utilitarianism

In the opening chapter of *Utilitarianism*, Mill notes that intuitionists hold that principles determining how we ought to act are known a priori. What is important, for our purposes, is that he argues against this position not by taking issue with its epistemic strategy of intuitionism, but by taking issue with its pluralism. The following is a key passage from *Utilitarianism* I.3.

> The intuitive, no less than what may be termed the inductive, school of ethics, insists on the necessity of general laws. They both agree that the morality of an individual action is not a question of direct perception, but of the application of a law to an individual case. They recognise also, to a great extent, the same moral laws; but differ as to their evidence, and the source from which they derive their authority. According to [the intuitionists], the principles of morals are evident a priori, requiring nothing to command assent, except that the meaning of the terms be understood. [...] Yet they

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[12] See, for instance, Miller (2010: 14–8), and Donner & Fumerton (2009: 155–74).

[13] As is by now generally acknowledged, the principle of utility is for Mill the supreme principle of practical reason *overall*, sitting at the head of the 'Art of Life'—see *System*, VI.xii.6, VIII: 949–50. Of course, Mill often implies in *Utilitarianism* that the principle of utility applies directly to the *moral* domain, determining not just what there is *most reason to do*, but what is *morally required*. On my reading, this is best understood as a simplifying device of exposition at the start of a popular work, to be corrected throughout that work, and in particular by the sentimentalist account of distinctively *moral* requirements given in ch. 5. As this paper primarily concerns the principle of utility, I will frame the discussion in this paper in terms of practicality rather than morality—though in quoting from earlier chapters of *Utilitarianism*, I draw on passages in which Mill uses morality as a proxy for practicality more generally. Little, in any case, hangs on the moral/practical distinction for the purposes of the arguments made here (though whether one reads the argument as having application to morality or practicality more broadly will of course determine what Mill's antirealism is *about*). On the moral/practical distinction in Mill, see Jacobson (2008) and Eggleston (forthcoming).

seldom attempt to make out a list of the a priori principles which are to serve as the premises of the science; still more rarely do they make any effort to reduce those various principles to one first principle, or common ground of obligation. They either assume the ordinary precepts of morals as of a priori authority, or they lay down as the common groundwork of those maxims, some generality much less obviously authoritative than the maxims themselves, and which has never succeeded in gaining popular acceptance. Yet to support their pretensions there ought either to be some one fundamental principle or law, at the root of all morality, or if there be several, there should be a determinate order of precedence among them; and the one principle, or the rule for deciding between the various principles when they conflict, ought to be self-evident. (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 1, X: 206–7)

Though the target is clearly pluralism, the details of Mill's argument in *Utilitarianism* I.3 are not easy to follow. The intuitionists are criticized on the grounds that they lack some 'one fundamental principle or law, at the root of all morality' or 'a determinate order of precedence among' their proposed principles, because without this, they cannot 'support their pretensions'. What these pretensions are, however, is a little less obvious. Earlier in the paragraph, Mill writes that 'those believers in [a moral instinct] who have any pretensions to philosophy, have been obliged to abandon the idea that it discerns what is right or wrong in the particular case in hand' and have therefore retreated to the claim that a moral instinct 'supplies us only with the general principles of moral judgments' (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 1, X: 206).

It seems, then, that the substance of the pretension Mill has in mind is that practical evaluation be grounded on 'general laws'—that determinations about how we ought to act are specified not by direct perception of the normative status of acts, but by 'the application of a law to an individual case' (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 1, X: 206). Mill thinks that this pretension—which all genuine philosophers are supposed to admit—cannot be met by those who endorse a system that is structured around an irreducibly pluralistic set of principles.

The basic difficulty Mill has in mind seems clear. Where a moral system has only *one* principle to assess actions, there is, trivially, a principled mechanism of assessing any action: find out whether the action lives up to the specified principle. With multiple principles, lexically ordered, there is, again, a principled means by which to assess an action: consult the lexically dominant principle first, and if no answer is returned, consult the lexically subdominant principle, and so forth. Given an irreducibly plural and *unordered* set of principles, however, we have no principled means to assess an action, for we have no means of deciding to which principle we should first appeal. And so, Mill believes, for the pluralist, there is no principled mechanism by which to assess actions.[14]

[14] This interpretation finds support in the work of those (few) commentators who have discussed this passage of *Utilitarianism* in detail. See, for instance, West (2007: 32–4) and Donner (1991: 32–3).

Mill's worry about pluralism, then, is essentially a worry about the rule following. Those who believe in an irreducible plurality of principles are disloyal to their commitment to genuinely *principled* judgement, because they do not specify the further and necessary metaprinciples with which to interpret and implement their heap of duties.[15] Irreducible pluralism collapses into a higher order variety of particularism, relying on direct perception of which principle should take precedence on any given occasion. But such a priori perception is no more convincing than first-order moral perception of the rightness and wrongness of actions themselves.

II.2 *Assessing the argument*

The first thing we should note about this argument is that, insofar as it presents a problem for irreducible pluralism, it presents a generalized problem for any form of irreducible pluralism and not merely pluralism with an a priori epistemology. As noted, first principle pluralism is not directly connected to any doctrine about *how we come to know norms*. Were the inductivist to propose an irreducible plurality of practical principles, Mill's worry would apply equally well to that claim.

The second thing we ought to note is that this argument is presented in the mode of a *conceptual* argument. The argument is not that systems with multiple principles have been trialled in the past, and have been shown to be unworkable on the grounds of irresolvable disputes. Rather, the argument is that, in order for an ethical system to claim to be principled—which is part of what it means to *be* an ethical system, Mill thinks all 'who are entitled to the name of thinking' admit—it must possess a principled method of decisively arbitrating the status of any action. The argument is ambitious. Though Mill does not frame it in these terms, it has the effect of ruling out the possibility—on conceptual grounds—of a certain kind of practical dilemma, whereby the assessment of an action is problematically over determined.[16] If the pluralist is correct, Mill claims, one action might be assessed by two standards, without a court of appeal when conflicts occur. But this cannot be, for to believe this would be merely to abandon the claim that assessment of action is guided by principles.

So stated, the result does not seem trivial—it is philosophically significant and interesting. Arguments that bear a strikingly similarity to Mill's—that is a

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[15] Of course, as Wittgenstein would later point out, a push can be generated to specify metaprinciples of interpretation and implementation even in the cases of *single* principles—leading to a regress problem in general for normativity. Mill does not see this issue clearly, and I will not pursue it here.

[16] West (2007: 34) draws out the connection between *Utilitarianism* I.3 and moral dilemmas. As we shall see, the connection is brought more clearly to the foreground in a related passage in *System* VI.xii.7.

formal feature of moral systems that dilemmas cannot occur—have been made more recently, and have grown increasingly sophisticated.[17] It will not be my task here to assess this claim in its own terms, but rather to question whether *Mill* should have been able to make this species of argument. For given its seeming non-triviality, Mill's limitations on the power of the a priori might be thought to rule out such a strong result. We might worry, that is to say, whether Mill should have taken himself to be able to establish monism by merely conceptual argumentation.

As was seen in Section I, Mill holds that truths by definition are the only results that can be established a priori. Yet Mill's argument against first principle pluralism involves moving from 'subject to evaluation' to 'subject to evaluation by one fundamental principle' a priori, and it does not seem plausible to characterize this as a merely verbal inference. It does not seem plausible to hold that the intuitionist who claims that there are multiple, equally fundamental, practical principles is making a *linguistic* mistake and misusing the terms—nor does it seem that a denial that there is only one fundamental principle guiding action is radically incoherent by virtue of the meaning of 'guiding action'.

The crux of the matter is this: if Mill holds that no substantive results can be established a priori, then there is at least something to be explained about why he thinks it possible to establish the falsity of first-principle pluralism a priori. Mill takes issue with the structure of intuitionism on a priori grounds—but it is not obvious that Mill should have taken himself to know anything about the necessary structure of morality a priori.

II.3 Ignoring the argument

My task within this section so far has been to suggest that the argument of *Utilitarianism* I.3 is, at least, puzzling. It might, however, be thought that rather too much is being made of the passage. After all, this is but one comparatively short argument, and Mill has, besides, another argument against pluralism later in that same work. In *Utilitarianism* IV.4–12, Mill offers an *empirical* argument to vindicate his monism. Mill here considers proposed non-utilitarian objects of desire, questioning whether they, in addition to happiness, might be considered to generate fundamental moral principles. Mill's particular target is those who think that the cultivation of virtue might be an irreducible practical end, though the argument offered generalizes. Mill claims that, though other objects may *appear* to have the status of ultimate goals of action, the desire for such objects is in fact grounded in the desire for happiness.

Mill's 'parts of happiness' argument is an empirical argument for monism, aided by associationistic psychology. Mill does *not* argue that all desires must,

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by virtue of meaning, be subsumed under the heading 'happiness'. Rather, he claims that in the case of a desire for virtue (as in the case of a desire for wealth, power, or fame) '[w]hat was once desired as an instrument for the attainment of happiness, has come to be desired for its own sake' (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 4, X: 236). Mill writes that 'there is in reality nothing desired except happiness. Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desire for itself until it has become so' (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 4, X: 237). What was once a means to happiness has become so closely associated with that goal as to enter into our very conception of what it means to be happy. As such, there are no additional ultimate goals, and a utilitarian monism is preserved.[18]

This is more the flavour of argument that we might expect from an empiricist. As such, we may be tempted to downplay the argument from ch. 1 of *Utilitarianism* as a mere slip—an instance of an unconsidered argument, motivated by the desire to make a particularly strong opening gambit against the intuitionists, which it would do little harm to Mill's project to ignore. But there is strong evidence to suggest that this was not accidental overreaching, but a well-considered argument, showing an important development in Mill's thinking. The passage highlighted in *Utilitarianism* I.3 finds a close parallel in an argument offered in Book VI of the *System*.

> There is, then, a *Philosophia Prima* peculiar to Art, as there is one which belongs to Science. There are not only first principles of Knowledge, but first principles of Conduct. There must be some standard by which to determine the goodness or badness, absolute and comparative, of ends or objects of desire. And whatever that standard is, there can be but one: for if there were several ultimate principles of conduct, the same conduct might be approved by one of those principles and condemned by another; and there would be needed some more general principle as umpire between them. (*System*, VI.xii.7, VIII: 951)[19]

The section from which this argument is taken—*System* VI.xii.7—was inserted into the third edition of the *System*, in 1851. The section was added by Mill alongside *System* VI.xii.6, which offers consideration of what Mill termed (drawing explicitly on work by 'the German metaphysicians') 'the principles of Practical Reason' (*System*, VI.xii.6, VIII: 949–950). These sections, then, are indicative of conscious engagement by Mill with questions concerning the structure of practical rationality, sustained at least between 1851 and the initial publication of *Utilitarianism* in 1861. The argument should not be discarded: it is representative of ongoing consideration of important themes in moral philosophy.

The statement of the argument in *System* VI.xii.7 is, of course, subtly different from that in *Utilitarianism* I.3. The generation of practical dilemmas

[18] See Crisp (1997: 83–8) for useful discussion on this argument.
[19] Donner also draws a comparison between this passage and *Utilitarianism* I.3. See Donner (1991: 32).

under pluralism is brought more sharply into focus in the *System* passage than in *Utilitarianism*; the need for some one principle is pressed on these grounds, rather than on the grounds of adhering to a principled, rather than particularist, approach to ethics. This is, however, merely a change in accent. And interestingly, in the argument of the *System*, the theoretical reason, alongside the practical reason, is brought into play. 'There are not only first principles of Knowledge, but first principles of Conduct' (*System*, VI.xii.7, VIII: 951). Given that this discussion comes at the end of a book-long argument as to the supremacy of inductive reasoning, it is natural to assume that Mill is here gesturing towards the principle of enumerative induction as the first principle of theoretical reasoning; this might suggest that Mill thinks of the faculties of reasoning as sharing structural features that prevent overdetermination dilemmas in either domain. I shall return to this thought in Section IV.

Despite these differences, the basic claim of each passage is the same. A moral theory which has more than one fundamental norm does not provide a principled means of assessing actions, because these norms could issue differing assessments, with no principled means of determining which assessment should take precedence. And the key objection remains. It is not clear that Mill's empiricist epistemology should allow the dismissal of this possibility a priori. Mill's argument is a *conceptual* one for monism, but given of his naturalism, it is unclear whether such powerful results should be available to Mill prior to empirical investigation.

III. TWO READINGS OF THE ARGUMENT

Let me briefly recount the state of play. I have argued that intuitionism is a position composed of two claims: a claim that we can know practical norms by direct rational insight (*a priorism*) and a claim that there is more than one fundamental practical norm in the practical domain (first principle pluralism). Mill argues against the first strand of intuitionism by denying that there can be any genuine knowledge a priori, and against the second by suggesting that only monism is compatible with a view of practical judgement as being properly determined by the application of principles. The worry which emerged in Section II is how Mill can claim to know anything about the structure of normativity prior to empirical investigation. If Mill's arguments against the *a prioristic* strand of intuitionism are successful—and we have seen that they are motivated by a naturalism which many will find appealing—then nothing with genuine content can be known a priori, monism included.

The question is why Mill takes himself to know that the world couldn't have been such that pluralism was true, prior to the 'practised self-consciousness

and self-observation, assisted by observation of others' he advocates for the study of practical reason (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 4, X: 237). Mill's objection to first principle pluralism is that it allows for the possibility of cases in which our fundamental practical principles might conflict. Now, to be sure, if the world turned out to be such that we were subject to genuinely conflicting practical principles, it would be a genuinely sticky situation for human agents to be in—but it is far from clear that this should be taken as evidence for the fact that pluralism is *false*. The first principle pluralist is likely to grant that it is bad luck for humans to find themselves in this situation, but to maintain that this is just the way the world is. After all, they might claim, the world wasn't built with humans in mind, and it is under no obligation to make things easy for us—and it is reasonably clear that Mill would agree with *this* sentiment.

III.1 Realism and antirealism

There is, then, at least a tension. In order to see how this tension can be defused, it will be useful first to characterize, in the broadest terms, two basic approaches to the status of norms of practical reason. It is notoriously difficult to find a satisfactory way to mark the distinction between realism and antirealism about any given domain precisely—though the persistence of the distinction indicates that there is some deep and fundamental disagreement that it strives to articulate. One aspect of the disagreement, at least, centres on the basic question of whether objects in a given domain are in some sense *mind independent*.[20] The realist about electrons, for example, thinks that they exist independently of whether human beings believe them to; the antirealist thinks that the term 'electron' is a construction, its use vindicated by the role it plays in our lives. There are various ways to attempt to bring out this disagreement—to press the question of whether electrons *really exist*, whether they are 'out there in the world', or whether they would exist even if we didn't think to carve the world as we do. But these are, at root, just so many ways of attempting to specify an important sort of independence from human cognition.

As one can be a realist about electrons, so one can be a realist about practical norms—holding that there are mind-independent facts about how we should act.[21] In this spirit, one might claim: 'It *really is* wrong to lie. And it would be,

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[20] Independence need not be the *only* claim that realism makes, but there is consensus that it is least *one* important aspect of the realist temperament. See, for example, Crispin Wright, who along with the 'modesty' of independence ('that the external world exists independently of us, that it is as it is independently of the conceptual vocabulary in terms of which we think about it, and that it is as it is independently of the beliefs about it which we do, will, or ever would form') characterizes realism as endorsing a certain 'presumptuousness' of basic accuracy (Wright 1992: 1ff.). See also Button on the credo of realism, which combines the independence principle ('The world is (largely) made up of objects that are mind-, language-, and theory independent') with the principle of truth as correspondence and the possibility of radical falsity (2013: 7–11).

[21] See DeLapp (2013: 12–8) for a useful defence and clarification of this aspect moral realism.

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whatever human beliefs and desires were!' Such a realist can, of course, accept that such norms are highly abstract, finding *implementation* in practice only by combination with concrete facts about human psychology. They can do so while maintaining that the most primitive norms *themselves* are not dependent on such facts—that 'the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective' (Shafer-Landau 2003:15).[22] The following, then, might be taken as a rough statement of realism about practical norms.

> *Practical realism*: there are truths about how we should act which are independent of human beliefs and goals.

Antirealism, of course, can be taken to be a denial of this claim.

> *Practical antirealism*: there are no truths about how we should act which are independent of human beliefs and goals.

The best known versions of practical antirealism are those theories which deny that there are *truths* about how we should act independent of human beliefs and goals. Such positions are *non-cognitivist*. But it is important to note that practical antirealism need not amount to a denial of truth-aptitude or objectivity of practical norms. One can, rather than deny that there are *truths* about how we should act independent of human beliefs and goals, deny that there are truths about how we should act *independent of human beliefs and goals*. Practical antirealism need not imply non-cognitivism about the normative any more than antirealism about scientific terms implies non-cognitivism about scientific discourse—it might merely involve a recasting of truth and objectivity in an antirealist mould.[23] Such positions can be broadly termed *cognitivist antirealism*.[24]

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[22] To clarify this by way of an example, we might consider realist and antirealist interpretations of (a naïve version of) utilitarianism. The utilitarian might claim that the practical norm that pleasure is desirable is mind independent, and thereby qualify as a realist, while acknowledging that in order to assess any given action, knowledge of mind-dependent facts (i.e., about what human beings find pleasurable) is needed. Alternatively, the utilitarian might claim that *all* practical norms, including the norm that pleasure is desirable, are mind dependent, and thereby qualify as an antirealist. One test of whether an account of practical normativity is realist or antirealist is to ask: *could even our most fundamental norms have been different, had human beings or their communities been differently constituted?* So, for instance, to the extent that Aristotle holds that, had our forms of life been different, our most fundamental structures of value could have been different, he thereby endorses a form of antirealism. One place in which such a test is awkward to apply, of course, is where the counterfactual is hard to assess. Kant, who holds that morality is grounded not on how human beings *happen* to be, but on the *necessary* structure of the will of any finite rational agent who experiences empirical incentives, serves as a useful example—it is for this reason that it is difficult to judge whether we should think of his position as realist or constructivist.

[23] See Fisher (2010: 346–55) for useful discussion.

[24] John Skorupski's 'cognitivist irrealism' is one such version of this theory (see Skorupski 2010: 420–41). But, equally, response-dependence accounts (see Pettit 1991), and more recent

III.2 Mill as an antirealist

This is meant to be no more than the briefest characterization of two general approaches to the normative, intended to help us better understand Mill's argument against first principle pluralism. On what I shall term the 'realist reading' of *Utilitarianism* I.3 and *System* VI.xii.7, Mill's argument is problematic, because he claims to know that monism is true prior to any empirical investigation. And because we have no means of being receptive to facts external to the mind prior to empirical investigation, it certainly *would* be problematic to claim to know that monism was true a priori, if monism's truth was a fact about how the world is: it would be to assume 'that the universe of thought and that of reality [. . .] must have been framed in complete correspondence with one another' (*Examination*, ch. 6, IX: 68). But, of course, this reading assumes practical realism.

If we are not prepared to discard Mill's claim to know about the structure of normativity a priori—as I suggested in II.3 that we should not be—the obvious alternative is to attempt a more sophisticated reading of Mill as an antirealist. Whether such a reading is viable depends on whether Mill thinks that the most fundamental facts of practical normativity are at root human dependent, and whether knowledge of those norms, therefore, is not knowledge of some mind-independent reality, but something else entirely.

Recall that the argument for monism turned on the fact that first principle pluralism does not generate a method of decisively arbitrating the status of any action—it allows that the same action might be approved by one principle, and condemned by another. This argument suggests that Mill thinks that a system of practical norms can be criticized on the basis that it doesn't fulfil the function we expect of it. Pluralism is faulted because it might fail to issue instruction on how to act in certain circumstances—and that is what practical norms *are for*. A system of practical norms which generated practical dilemmas, Mill claims, would be a system which didn't answer our questions about how to act—and it is the primary job of such a system to steer our actions. What *we* need from norms appears, at least in part, to determine those norms. And in this regard, Mill shows a basic orientation towards practical antirealism.

The practical antirealist takes norms to be a tool which enables us to navigate the world. But in this case, even the most fundamental norms turn on how *human beings* are—the nature of their agency, and the human goals their norms facilitate. This is not to say, of course, that such truths can be *reduced* to natural facts about how human beings are. We might take norms, following a non-cognitivst reading of Mill, to be prescriptions issued in a universal voice—and interpret the argument as suggesting that prescriptions just wouldn't be

constructivist accounts (see Street 2008) share the attempt to offer a cognitivist account without robust mind independence.

useful *as such*, unless they were clear and could be followed. Or, with the cognitivist antirealist, we might take norms to be those principles which ideal judges would freely take as making a claim on them—and place weight on the claim that such judges would not endorse conflicting norms, by virtue of the idealization.[25] Neither of these theories would *reduce* the normative to facts about human beings, but attempt some other grounding relation.

I should stress that I do not wish to push for either of these conclusions here—my goal in this paper is not to argue for any *particular* antirealist reading of Mill. The question of which antirealist position should be attributed to Mill is certainly an interesting one in its own right, but one which requires analysis that cannot be attempted here.[26] The key claim here is rather that we should, for the reasons cited above, approach Mill as basically antirealist in orientation, and the point to be emphasized is that valid practical norms are not, for Mill, truths about how the external world is composed—but are dependent on human goals all the way down. As such, knowledge of the structure of such norms need not involve mysterious intuition of facts external to the mind, but rather critical reflection on the conditions that render the principled guidance of human actions possible. Mill takes himself to know a priori that monism is true not because a priori cognition is guaranteed to conform to some set of mind-independent normative facts, but because normative facts must conform to their role in regulating human affairs.[27]

Read in this manner, the worry that the world might turn out to be such that pluralism is true or that this cannot be ruled out prior to inquiry makes little sense, given the questions that Mill is asking. For Mill is asking not *what is the world like*, but *what must our system of practical norms be like to guide action*? The question decidedly *doesn't* focus on whether there are values *in the world* which

[25] These readings are meant to be no more than suggestive of two possible antirealist readings of Mill—the options presented are clearly not exhaustive. The latter reading, however, clearly bears on other issues of Mill's philosophy related to the qualitative distinction between pleasures outlined in *Utilitarianism* II.3–9. It is a continuing point of interpretive debate as to whether competent judgement in these passages is meant to be *constitutive* of pleasures being higher, or merely *evidential*. Another way of framing this issue, however, is simply to ask whether a given pleasure's being higher or lower is a *mind-dependent* or *mind-independent* fact, and whether an antirealist reading of Mill is correct will therefore have important consequences for this issue. (On the debate, see for instance Crisp 1997: 26–7 and Millgram 2000: 296–7).

[26] See, however, Macleod (2013a), in which I argue against Ryan's claim (1987: 188–90) that we should not read Mill as a non-cognitivist. Such a reading leaves open the possibility a cognitive antirealist reading.

[27] It is, of course, an open question as to whether Mill should assume that we know even the *role* which practical norms play for us a priori. The push to doubt *whatever* assumptions the antirealist attempts to make use of in explicating the normative is a powerful one. We must keep in mind, however, that such a priori assumptions might be just that: beliefs which strike us spontaneously as reasonable and are afforded initial credibility, but which remain subject to revision, should there emerge any reason to doubt them. Mill deploys this tactic elsewhere in his work. See Macleod (2013b: 62–3).

might conflict, but how practical norms must be structured if they are to be of any use to beings such as ourselves.[28]

The reading of Mill as an antirealist—as holding that the most fundamental norms are human dependent—finds support in his general strategy in attempting to discover the content of practical norms. Looking to human psychology during the proof—what human beings freely *do* desire, when attending critically to those desires—Mill does not seek to establish what is valuable for beings other than ourselves, but what is desirable for beings of our nature. It is a key part of the proof that '*[h]uman nature* is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means to happiness' (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 4, X: 237, my emphasis). That is a feature of how *we* are, which might not be shared with beings constituted very differently from us—and the principle of utility is therefore a principle for beings such as ourselves. Practical norms are human norms, reflecting human psychological traits.

IV. ANTIREALISM AND NORMATIVITY

Mill is pushed towards practical antirealism by his commitment to naturalism. If the only things that exist are natural things, then questions about the nature of practical norms loom large, and the naturalist is put under pressure to provide an account of those norms. What *are* norms, and where do they fit into an ontology exhausted by natural objects and an epistemology exhausted by empirical observation? One option is some form of naturalistic realism or reductionism—to claim that norms just *are* natural facts, at least under some description.[29] Another option is some form of antirealism—to claim that norms themselves are not, and cannot be reduced to natural facts, and to offer an account of the discipline of normative discourse by appeal to the role it plays in our lives.

The point is seen clearly in the case of practical normativity, which concerns *reasons for action*—it is generally acknowledged that what there is *reason to do* in a situation is not identical to any natural fact about that situation. But the case of theoretical normativity presents parallel issues to that of practical normativity. There are reasons for belief, as well as reasons for action—and the status of

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[28] As has been pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, we might doubt that Mill has given us sufficient reason to trust that only a system of practical norms which gives *decisive* and *univocal* instruction in each and every possible situation would meet our needs and guide action. Indeed, this claim does seem to require more argument than Mill provides—and such an argument would perhaps itself be suspicious if made in a priori terms. One possible solution for Mill is to argue for the regulative assumption that we should, as philosophers, continue to *look for* and *assume the existence of* a single norm to systematize our practice. Such a view, of course, will be hostage to a lingering suspicion that the complexities of life mean that there just is no such norm to be found.

[29] Such as that offered, for instance, by the Cornell Realists. See, for instance, Brink (1989).

reasons to believe is no less in need of explanation by the naturalist than the status of reasons to act. That performing action *a* will give me some pleasure provides reason to perform *a*; that *b* is well supported by the evidence gives reason to believe *b*. But the fact that there is *reason to believe b* is no more identical to the natural facts surrounding *b* than the fact that there is *reason to perform a* is identical to the natural facts surrounding *a*.

Mill sees this parallel between theoretical and practical normativity—as John Skorupski observes, 'Mill's way of vindicating the claim that happiness is desirable, is exactly analogous to his way of vindicating the claim that enumerative induction is rational' (Skorupski 1989: 286). In both cases, Mill justifies normative principles by appealing to agents' spontaneous dispositions. The fundamental principle of theoretical reason—the principle of enumerative induction—is grounded in the fact that human agents spontaneously take an observation that x_1, x_2, x_3, . . . x_n are *P* as providing reason to believe that some unobserved x_{n+1} is *P*. The fundamental principle of practical reason—the principle of utility—is grounded in the fact that human agents spontaneously take a sensation's being pleasurable as providing reason to desire it.[30]

It is well known that Mill endorses only *one* norm in the theoretical domain—the principle of enumerative induction. The *System* is an extended argument to show that application of this principle is the sole means of legitimating theoretical beliefs. This, of course, leads to the rejection of inference to the best explanation as an autonomous principle of reasoning—Mill claims that hypotheses about unobserved entities made in an effort to explain empirical observations can provide useful *suggestions*, but that *warrant* for these beliefs can only be provided by reasoning based on the principle of enumerative induction.[31] '[H]ypothesis, by suggesting observations and experiments, puts us on the *road* to that independent evidence if it be really attainable' (*System*, III.xiv.4, VII: 496, my emphasis).

The attempt to account for *all* warranted theoretical inferences by way of induction has consequences throughout Mill's philosophy—most notably, it leads to his rejection of the external world and an endorsement of a phenomenalistic idealism. We only ever experience sensations, Mill argues—'our knowledge of objects [. . .] consist[s] in nothing but the sensation which they excite' (*Examination*, ch. 2, IX: 6). Because our mind never makes unmediated contact with objects genuinely external to the mind, a belief that there *are* such objects behind our perceptions cannot be justified on the basis of induction—this would amount to a postulation of something *unobserved* to explain observed

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[30] For detailed consideration of the parallel between theoretical and practical normativity in Mill's work, see Macleod (2014).

[31] As Skorupski puts it, Mill 'was unable to accept that the Hypothetical Method is an autonomous method of induction—that it is an *independent* and *primitive* principle of the "Logic of Truth"' (1989: 197).

entities, and such an inference is exactly the sort of hypothesis that Mill thinks is not warranted if unsupported by inductive reasoning (Skorupski 1989: 233). All that can be established *inductively* is that such objects of sensation are stable—that they can be returned to, after durations in which they go unperceived. 'Matter may be defined, then, a Permanent Possibility of Sensation. If I am asked, whether I believe in matter, I ask whether the questioner accepts this definition. If he does, I believe in matter: and so do all Berkeleians. In any other sense than this, I do not' (*Examination*, ch. 10, IX: 183).

What is less clear is *why* Mill thought that there could be only *one* supreme principle of theoretical reason. Principles of theoretical reason are to be discovered, as we have seen, by observing the spontaneous dispositions of human agents—'learnt by seeing the agent at work' (*System*, VI.i.1, VII: 833)—and there is a good case to be made that a principle of inference to the best explanation *does* play this role in our ordinary reasoning. If that is so, it seems clear that Mill *should* endorse this as an autonomous principle.[32] Mill notes that hypotheses are always underdetermined by the data—though this of course holds for inductive inferences. The question might be pressed as to whether there are deeper reasons for Mill to reject the possibility of the existence of multiple principles of theoretical reason.

Consider the text quoted from *System* VI.xii.6 previously.

> There is, then, a *Philosophia Prima* peculiar to Art, as there is one which belongs to Science. There are not only first principles of Knowledge, but first principles of Conduct. There must be some standard by which to determine the goodness or badness, absolute and comparative, of ends or objects of desire. And whatever that standard is, there can be but one: for if there were several ultimate principles of conduct, the same conduct might be approved by one of those principles and condemned by another; and there would be needed some more general principle as umpire between them. (*System*, VI.xii.7, VIII: 951)

In this passage, Mill explicitly parallels the case of practical normativity to theoretical normativity. Coming at the end of the *System*, it seems clear that the *Philosophia Prima* of theoretical reason that Mill refers to is the principle of induction. It should be noted that the same argument that Mill makes explicit in the case of practical reason can be applied in the theoretical case—the merits of that argument do not depend on any features peculiar to *practical* normativity. If there were several ultimate principles of *theoretical* reason, the same *belief* might be approved by one of those principles and condemned by another—for the theoretical pluralist, there would be no principled mechanism by which to assess beliefs. One who believes (for instance) in both the principle of enumerative induction and the principle of inference to the best explanation opens up the possibility of cases in which our fundamental theoretical principles

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[32] See Skorupski (1989: 197ff.) on this point.

clash, suggesting conflicting beliefs with no more general principle as umpire between them.

To read the argument in *System* VI.xii.6 as having application to the theoretical reason as well as the practical reason is, of course, to read Mill as an antirealist about this domain also. But, as noted, the force of the metaphysical push towards antirealism that comes from Mill's naturalism should be felt here just as strongly as in the practical case. (That *there is reason to believe φ* is not itself a physical fact—so what makes it true, and how does this norm fit into our view of the world?) And, because Mill endorses a broad parallelism between theoretical and practical normativity, antirealism in one domain is good evidence of antirealism in both. Under this reading, Mill's theoretical monism is guided by consideration of what a system of theoretical norms must be like, if it is to play the role of guiding belief.

The claim that theoretical norms are constrained by what humans need them to do—that they too are tools which help us navigate the world, and which are in part determined by the role they play in our lives—of course pushes Mill in the direction of later pragmatist movements. Opening up the question of the role theoretical norms play in our lives generates the possibility that they ultimately play some practical role. This should be of no surprise. Mill's thoroughgoing naturalism is often compared to Quine, who himself argued for 'a shift toward pragmatism' (Quine 1961: 20). James, pushed to pragmatism as the result of his 'radical empiricism', saw an ally in Mill, from whom he 'first learned the pragmatic openness of mind' and who he pictured 'as our leader were he alive to-day' (James 1907: v).

Such connections are suggestive—though can be taken as no more than that. I have, in this paper, proposed that Mill's argument against first principle pluralism in the practical domain points towards an antirealism about practical reason—that Mill's naturalistically driven argument against intuitionism suggests that we could not know that practical monism is true a priori if practical monism was a mind-independent fact about how the world is. I have also proposed that there is at least a case to be made for a parallel argument in the theoretical case. But the details of Mill's antirealism remain very much unknown. The nature of the dependence relation between humans and the norms of reason still requires investigation—as do the consequences of Mill's account of human malleability for any antirealist interpretation. However, with the recent increase of focus on the details of Mill's account of normativity, there is reason to be hopeful that these questions are coming more sharply into focus.

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