

## MILL AND BRENTANO ON RELIGION AND NATURAL THEOLOGY

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**Abstract:** Although John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and Franz Brentano (1838–1917) are polar opposites on the main topics included in natural theology, namely the existence of God, theodicy, and the immortality of the soul, their views of religion as such are not entirely incompatible. Briefly stated, Brentano accepts the traditional outlook of natural theology, namely, that the existence of an infinitely perfect God can be proved, that the problem of evil can be solved, and that immortality of the soul is a reasonable expectation. Mill rejects all three of these claims, holding that the existence of a good but not all-powerful God is at best not impossible, that the problem of evil is perpetual in our experience, and that immortality is at most an object of hope. When it comes to religion as such, however, both Mill and Brentano seem to see it as a means to an end. For Brentano, the goal so far as possible is to replace religion with philosophy. For Mill, the goal is the moral improvement of society. In this paper I take a look at each philosopher’s views on these topics, assuming throughout the discussion that religion and natural theology are distinct topics, even though what is called “philosophy of religion” often focuses on the latter rather than on the former.

**Keywords:** J.S. Mill, Franz Brentano, philosophy of religion, natural theology, problem of evil, theodicy, immortality, the supernatural, Religion of Humanity, Auguste Comte, reism, utilitarianism

Although John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and Franz Brentano (1838–1917) are polar opposites on the main topics included in natural theology, namely the existence of God, theodicy, and the immortality of the soul, their views of religion as such are not entirely incompatible. Briefly stated, Brentano accepts the traditional outlook of natural theology, namely, that the existence of an infinitely perfect God can be proved, that the problem of evil can be solved, and that immortality of the soul is a reasonable expectation. Mill rejects all three of these claims, holding that the existence of a good but not all-powerful God is at best not impossible, that the problem of evil is perpetual in our experience, and that

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immortality is at most an object of hope. When it comes to religion as such, however, both Mill and Brentano seem to see it as a means to an end. For Brentano, the goal so far as possible is to replace religion with philosophy. For Mill, the goal is the moral improvement of society. In what follows I take a look at each philosopher's views on these topics, assuming throughout the discussion that religion and natural theology are distinct topics, even though what is called "philosophy of religion" often focuses on the latter rather than on the former.

### MILL ON RELIGION

Mill's thoughts on religion are to be found mainly in his late essays, *Three Essays on Religion: Nature, the Utility of Religion, Theism*<sup>1</sup>, (Mill, 1874) particularly in "The Utility of Religion," (hereafter UR) but also in "Theism," (hereafter Th) as well as in his *Autobiography*<sup>2</sup>. (Mill, 1924) It has been claimed, in addition, that both *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty* are essentially religious tracts,<sup>3</sup> but I shall not pursue that line of analysis, instead confining my discussion to the other sources just mentioned.

Mill tells us, in the *Autobiography*, that he grew up with no religious belief at all. His father had been raised Presbyterian, but subsequently rejected both revelation and natural theology.<sup>4</sup> So Mill looks at religion from the outside as one might study a foreign culture, and what strikes him in particular is Christianity's moral nobility which, though it may have antecedents in Roman thinkers and in the Hebrew Bible, has nevertheless "become the property of humanity and cannot now be lost by anything short of a return to primeval barbarism." (UR, p. 98)

Mill lists the chief features of this noble morality:

The 'new commandment to love one another;' the recognition that the greatest are those who serve, not who are served by, others; the reverence for the weak and humble . . . ; the lesson of the parable of the Good Samaritan; that of 'he that is without sin let him throw the first stone'; the precept of doing as we would be done by; and other such noble moralities as are to be found, mixed with some poetical exaggeration . . . in the authentic sayings of Jesus of Nazareth . . . (Ibid.)

And he concludes that, while the morality is admirable and to be sustained by a civilized people, nevertheless the supposition of a divine revelation behind it is untenable.

<sup>1</sup> J.S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion – Nature, The Utility of Religion, Theism*, ed. Helen Taylor, London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1874.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Mill, *Autobiography*, (1924), edited by Roger Howson, reprint Hassel Street Press, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> See Linda C. Raeder, *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity*, Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002, pp. 5, 234ff., and 268ff.

<sup>4</sup> J.S. Mill, *Autobiography*, Roger Howson (ed.), reprint Hassel Street Press, 2023, p. 27.

In Part IV of the essay on theism, entitled “Revelation,” Mill asks, “Can any evidence suffice to prove a Divine Revelation?” (Th, p. 215) He divides such putative evidence into two kinds, external and internal. By external evidence he means “testimony of the senses or of witnesses,” and by internal evidence he means “chiefly the excellence of its precepts.” But internal evidence, he tells us, can only serve negatively, that is, to discredit a supposed revelation on the grounds that it falls short of moral excellence. The reason is that, “we cannot have conclusive reason for believing that the human faculties were incompetent to find out moral doctrines of which the human faculties can perceive and recognize the excellence.” (Th, p. 216) The source, in other words, could easily be simply human. Thus the only proof of revelation must come from external evidence.

In discussing possible external evidence of supernatural revelation, Mill largely follows Hume’s arguments concerning miracles, in which Hume famously asks us to weigh the probability of a miracle’s actually occurring against the probability that witnesses have knowingly or unknowingly misrepresented the event.<sup>5</sup> Because miracles violate the laws of nature, and the testimony of unreliable witnesses is common, there is never sufficient evidence of the occurrence of a miracle and so never sufficient evidence of supernatural activity. Mill adds to this the observation that we live in the modern age of scientific progress. Thus,

A few generations ago the universal dependence of phenomena on invariable laws was not only not recognized by mankind in general but could not be regarded by the instructed as a scientifically established truth. . . Accordingly both comets and eclipses long continued to be regarded as of a miraculous nature . . . (Th, p. 222)

In biblical times, then, the belief in – and acceptance of reports of – miracles was widespread and the inference to supernatural causes normally accepted. From this source there arose a tradition of the miracles of Christ which survives, though with diminished influence, today. Now for the most part, though,

When we hear of a prodigy we always, in these modern times, believe that it if really occurred it was neither the work of God nor of a demon, but the consequence of some unknown natural law or of some hidden fact. . . There is, in short, nothing to exclude the supposition that every alleged miracle was due to natural causes . . . (Th, pp. 230–231)

This cuts to the quick any defense of the reality of supernatural revelation, whether it be scripture itself or a passage contained therein, for any alleged miracle can always be explained by natural causes. And Mill concludes that, “. . . miracles have no claim whatever to the character of historical facts and are wholly invalid as evidences of any revelation.” (Th, p. 239)

<sup>5</sup> See David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Second Edition, Eric Steinberg (ed.), Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1993, pp. 72–90.

All that said, however, there remains, as we shall see, the possibility that a good God exists, albeit (again, as we shall see) not an all-powerful one. And the sublime moral teachings of Christ being “an extremely precious gift,” which Christ himself said, “did not come from himself but from God through him,” it remains not unreasonable to hope that what Christ thus said is true. Such hope is the core of what Mill finds valuable and useful in religion.

Religion itself he defines as follows:

The essence of religion is the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire. (UR, p. 109)

And in place of the old, supernatural religions Mill, like Auguste Comte, proposes a Religion of Humanity in which, as Colin Heydt puts it, “an idealized humanity becomes an object of reverence . . . and the morally useful features of traditional religion are supposedly purified and accentuated.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, the social utility of religion<sup>7</sup> is preserved and enhanced because there is no need for spurious inducements to moral behavior such as the promise of heaven or the threat of hell, (UR, pp. 110–112); moreover, by imaginative enhancement the perennial struggle of good against evil takes on the dignity of religious devotion and the dedication to being part of something larger than oneself. (UR, pp. 106–107)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Colin Heydt, “Narrative, Imagination and the Religion of Humanity in Mill’s Ethics,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 44, no. 1, Jan. 2006, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> Mill’s interest in the social utility of religion needs to be construed in light of the type of utilitarianism he advocated. See, for instance, Alan Millar, “Mill on Religion,” in John Skorupski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 197: “. . . we must not lose sight of the fact that [Mill] sought to foster a genuine regard for the good of others and, with some justification, feared that the passing away of supernatural religion might drain away the emotional resources required for the pursuit of the worthwhile ends and deprive individuals of that cultivation of feeling which he took to be a crucial ingredient of a satisfying life.” See also Lou Matz, “The Unity of Religious Illusion: A Critique of J.S. Mill’s Religion of Humanity,” *Utilitas*, vol. 12, p. 138, where he comments as follows on the supernatural side of things and quotes from Mill’s diary: “As opposed to a delusion which is an erroneous opinion, Mill says that an illusion ‘consists in extracting from a conception known not to be true, but which is better than the truth, the same benefit to the feelings which would be derived from it if it were a reality.’” A useful distinction is made by David Brooks, “The Canadian Way of Death,” *The Atlantic*, June 2023, pp. 84–95: Mill’s is not an autonomy-based liberalism, rather it is what Brooks on p.88 calls a gifts-based liberalism, and this matters when it comes to the social utility of religion. “[Gifts-based liberalism] starts with a . . . core conviction: I am a receiver of gifts. I am part of a long procession of humanity. I have received many gifts from those who came before me including the gift of life itself. The essential activity of life is not the pursuit of individual happiness. The essential activity of life is to realize the gifts I’ve been given by my ancestors, and to pass them along, suitably improved, to those who will come after.” Mill’s Religion of Humanity is proposed as such a suitable improvement.

<sup>8</sup> Unlike Comte, Mill did not envision his Religion of Humanity as including rituals and priestly hierarchies. For Comte’s view, see Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, Dubuque, Iowa, Brown Reprints, 1971. See also *The Correspondence of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte*, translated and edited by Oscar A. Haac, New Brunswick and London, 1995, pp. 19–21.

Mill thought the Religion of Humanity to be superior to the old, supernatural religions because of their reliance on dubious revelations:

I say nothing of the moral difficulties and perversions involved in revelation itself; though even in the Christianity of the Gospels, at least in its ordinary interpretation, there are some of so flagrant a character as almost to outweigh all the beauty and benignity and moral greatness which so eminently distinguish the sayings and character of Christ. The recognition, for example, of the object of highest worship, in a being who could make a Hell; and who could create countless generations of human beings with the foreknowledge that he was creating them for this fate. Is there any moral enormity which might not be justified by imitation of such a Deity? (UR, pp. 113–114)

Religion by definition, then, involving a “direction of the emotions and desires toward an ideal object,” and the utility of religion being its morally beneficial effects, it follows that the Religion of Humanity ought by all means to be promoted, according to Mill.

With regard to the religious doctrine of immortality, at first blush, it may seem that this constitutes an advantage of the supernatural religions over the Religion of Humanity. But Mill points out that those who believe in immortality have no less fear of death than do those who do not believe, and that as far as our knowledge and experience extend, there is no certainty to be had either in favor of or against immortality. (UR, 120) Again, we repair to hope,<sup>9</sup> the hope that there is life after death being not unreasonable,<sup>10</sup> but meanwhile the important thing is to side with the good in this life.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Heydt, “Narrative, Imagination, and the Religion of Humanity in Mill’s Ethics,” p. 111, where he explains that the supernatural is relegated to the realm of hope because “the supernatural is not amenable to truth claims.”

<sup>10</sup> Millar, “Mill on Religion,” p. 198, seems to think that Mill goes too far in this because in appealing to imagination and emotion, the hope for an afterlife could also have the negative effect of distancing one from reality. But he adds: “Nevertheless, Mill’s exploration into the territory of imagination and feeling is suggestive. Imaginative visions of how things might become and, indeed, of how, for all we know, things might actually be, are, if Mill is right, no mere embellishment of life, but a condition for both happiness and the energetic pursuit of the good.” On the utilitarian value of religious illusion for Mill, see also Matz, “The Unity of Religious Illusion, pp. 138, 145, 147, 149.

<sup>11</sup> See Nicholas Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: A Biography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 342, for a concise account of Mill’s religious outlook: “Mill accepted in some sense the existence of a deity, denied the divinity of Jesus, opposed ritualism, despised biblical fundamentalism or what Coleridge called ‘bibliolatry,’ shared [the Unitarians’] belief in the freedom of the will, and embraced the notion of a non-omnipotent God with whom we were allies in the struggle against evil.”

## BRENTANO ON RELIGION

Brentano's thoughts on religion, and Christianity in particular, are to be found in *The Teaching of Jesus and its Enduring Significance* (hereafter TJ)<sup>12</sup> and in *Religion und Philosophie* (hereafter RPh).<sup>13</sup> Unlike Mill, who was raised with no religion, Brentano was "born into an ardently Catholic family," (TJ, p. 21) pursued ordination to the Catholic priesthood, and ultimately left both the priesthood and the Church because he found that he could no longer give the assent of certainty to everything the Church teaches. He opposed the declaration of Papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1870 and his efforts in this regard served as the impulse which set him on the path of testing everything he had previously believed on the basis of faith. Like Descartes, he proposed to doubt it all in order to find the truth and be able to accept the truth on a rational, philosophical basis. He also wanted, "to see other youthful souls, who are motivated by the highest aspirations, spared the difficult inner struggles that [he] suffered through." (TJ, pp. 21–23)

Brentano begins by looking at Jesus' moral teaching according to the evangelists. After noting certain objectionable passages in the Hebrew Bible, such as a divine command that not only justified but even obligated Abraham's intention to slaughter Isaac, Brentano turns to the teachings of Jesus. Going beyond Mill's observation of "poetical exaggeration," he criticizes Jesus' mode of expression as leading to misunderstandings:

He loved to use parables, of which he was a master, using them especially effectively to make connections with things in everyday life. He loved pathos and made liberal use of rhetorical hyperbole. . .

Naturally this had to bring with it certain disadvantages. . . The repeated use of figurative language can arouse doubt as to whether something that is to be understood literally is intended metaphorically. It can likewise happen that something intended as rhetorical hyperbole is taken literally. . . Such is entirely the case in the paradoxical sayings: "Whoever takes your shirt, give him your coat also," and "whoever strikes you on the right cheek, offer him your left also."

If one believed this was intended in the general and most precise sense, then one would have to say that Jesus succumbed in the highest degree to the error of those who fail to see that right action lies in finding the right mean, preferring instead to see it in one or another extreme.

Occasionally, we find expressions like "you will bring forth even greater miracles than I" (John 14:12), "if one believes and says to a mountain, move from here, so will it move" (Matthew 17:20), and "whatever you ask of the

<sup>12</sup> Franz Brentano, *The Teaching of Jesus and its Enduring Significance: With an Appendix: 'A Brief Description of the Christian Doctrine,'* edited and translated by Richard Schaefer, Springer, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Franz Brentano, *Religion und Philosophie: Ihre Verhältnis zueinander und ihre gemeinsamen Aufgabe,* edited by Franziska Meyer-Hillebrand, Bern Franke Verlag, 1954. My translations throughout.

father in my name, he will grant it" (John 14:13, Matthew 21:22, John 16:23). It might easily be supposed that even in such instances rhetorical hyperbole is being used.

That this is the case seems obvious when it is said that, whoever calls his brother a fool is destined for the fires of hell . . . (TJ, pp. 37–38)

These examples, among others, led Brentano to conclude that one must take Jesus' moral teachings with a grain of salt, that one must think through for oneself the presuppositions and implications of them, and subject them to something like the Aristotelian principle of the mean. In a word, rhetorical hyperbole should rather yield to a proper philosophical understanding.

The same holds for the "fires of hell":

. . . Indeed, all of those passages that threaten a fire that burns eternally and a worm that gnaws endlessly would have to be read as rhetorical hyperbole . . .

The books of Moses say nothing about such hell-fire awaiting sinners who die.

Naturally, if we take the threat of hell to be hyperbole, then the devil must also appear merely as a personification of the human tendency towards evil. . .

Evidence for just how much the purest hearts strive for a milder interpretation is given by Saint Augustine . . . [who] was led to consider whether the punishment of being consigned eternally to hell might not be alleviated a little over time, and Leibniz seized on this idea with joy in his *Theodicy*. Since suffering could arrive at zero asymptotically, he would allow at least the possibility that pain could be adjusted in a finite and just way to a finite crime, despite its being eternal. (TJ, pp. 40–41)

Granting the problems introduced by rhetorical hyperbole, plus the troubling distance between Jesus' moral teaching about responsibility and punishment for one's actions, on the one hand, and the views of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle on the other, (JT, p. 40) however, Brentano remained an avowed admirer of Jesus' moral character and of the example he set for us all. He quotes David Strauss (1808–1874) as having asked, "are we still Christians," and "do we still believe in God?" Like Mill, Brentano lived in the post-Enlightenment world<sup>14</sup> where the educated were increasingly less likely to be religious believers, increasingly more likely to rely on science for the answers to life's questions. But also like Mill, he saw in religion the impulse toward a higher moral standard, and in Jesus a man who exemplified that standard:

<sup>14</sup> Regarding Mill, I have in mind especially his attachment to Romanticism and the influence of Carlyle and Coleridge on his thinking (which, I add, goes a long way toward explaining Mill's insistence on the quality, and not just the quantity, of pleasure in the *Utilitarianism*). Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: A Biography*, makes a very persuasive case: see pp. x, xv, and 55–132. Heydt, "Narrative, Imagination, and the Religion of Humanity," concurs but is more concerned with Mill's efforts to avoid the excesses of Romanticism: see pp. 100, 108, 114.

. . . Jesus's teachings and noble character as portrayed in the Gospels continue to make the most powerful impression on the soul, so much so that there is almost no one to whom he compares . . . In fact, instead of asking whether we are still Christians and believers, as Strauss does, we might do much better to ask if we have become Christians yet? If we believe in God yet? (TJ, p. 41)

So the ideal of Christianity and of being a Christian is held in high regard by Brentano, as it was by Mill, and they are agreed also in assigning higher and lower status to various religions according as their moral nobility approaches that of Jesus. Brentano adds that the more highly developed religions have aims naturally akin to those of philosophy, and that "barbaric" religions are not really religions in the same sense. (RPh, p. 12) This leads him to the conclusion that the more highly developed religions are in fact surrogates for philosophy. (RPh, p. 38)

Brentano along with Mill also distrusts revelation, as we have seen, and goes further to raise issues concerning the plausibility of theological teachings such as the Trinity (three persons in one God), the divinity of Christ, the dual nature of Christ (fully human and fully divine), and the bodily presence of Christ in the eucharist. (TJ, pp. 44–49) Brentano provides extensive, scholarly and philosophical interpretations of all these, including textual analysis of the original Greek. But let us consider just the last of them, as exemplified by John 6:58 where Jesus refers to himself as "the bread come down from heaven," in the midst of a passage that is traditionally interpreted as explaining the eucharist. Brentano's commentary:

What could be clearer than that this is a case like so many others where he must be interpreted as speaking figuratively, as when he called himself a grape vine and his followers the branches, or when he called himself the gate to the sheepfold or the light that lightens the world, etc. Did he not repeatedly refer to his followers, at one time, as the light of the world, then as the salt of the earth, then as fishermen, then as lambs? (TJ, p. 49)

In every instance where Jesus, as distinct from later theologians, speaks of himself or explains himself, his language can be interpreted, so Brentano, in such a way that the supernatural claims attributed to him subsequently were not said or even intended by Jesus himself. In every case, Jesus' inclination to speak figuratively has led interpreters to overstate and misstate his meaning. Thus in general:

It is true that the Gospel of John begins by saying that the Word became flesh and lived among us, but leaving aside that this too is not Jesus himself speaking, nothing prevents us from interpreting this to mean simply that what God eternally thought of as the primary goal of creation also became real in time. All this is explained by the single thought that he regarded himself, more than all other creatures, as the purpose of creation whose appearance is thus to be called the fullness of time. In fact, there exists not even one



passage that cannot be reconciled with this explanation, and it is the only one that makes it possible to see Jesus's self-conception as anything but absurd. (TJ, p. 48)

In attempting a definition of religion, Brentano suggests that religion exists wherever we find the belief in a superhuman being together with the influence of this belief on behavior. (RPh, p. 77) Putting this idea together with his claim that religion is a surrogate for philosophy, we can easily see how he arrives at the conclusion that Jesus's example is of immense value to humanity quite apart from the traditional dogmatic claims of the Christian religion. Thus, ". . . if his suffering and his death did not bring the redemption and sanctification that he promised, nevertheless, his sublime and holy example, and the hope in a blissful afterlife that he reawakened had the most beneficial influence . . ." (TJ, p. 54) By contrast with Mill, Brentano recommends not the adoption of another religion, such as the Religion of Humanity, but rather the development of a genuinely philosophical understanding of God and of humanity's place in the world.

### MILL ON NATURAL THEOLOGY

Mill is not nearly so confident of humans' ability to understand God and our place in the world.

Let us begin with a look at Mill's essay, "Nature" (hereafter N),<sup>15</sup> and then later continue with his essay, "Theism," (Th) in order to understand his position regarding natural theology.

He begins by developing a definition of 'nature':

. . . Nature in the abstract is the aggregate of the powers and properties of all things. Nature means the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them. . . [I]n its simplest acceptation, [nature] is a collective name for all facts, actual and possible: or . . . a name for the mode partly known to us and partly unknown, in which all things take place. (N, pp. 5–6)

Mill prefers this neutral, factual definition of nature but is also well aware that 'nature' can be, and often is, used in a normative sense. For instance, as by "those who say that we ought to act according to nature." (N, p. 13) This is a mistake, however, according to Mill, because it is "an undeniable fact" that the "order of nature" is not what a Being "whose attributes are justice and benevolence would have made with the intention that his rational creatures should follow it as an example." (N, p. 25) Worse yet:

<sup>15</sup> See John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion – Nature, The Utility of Religion, Theism*, edited by Helen Taylor, London, Longmans Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1874.

Nature impales men, breaks them as if on the wheel, casts them to be devoured by wild beasts, burns them to death, crushes them with stones like the first Christian martyrs, starves them with hunger, freezes them with cold, poisons them by the quick or slow venom of her exhalations. . . All this, Nature does with the most supercilious disregard both of mercy and of justice, emptying her shafts upon the best and noblest indifferently with the meanest and worst; upon those who are engaged in the highest and worthiest enterprises, and often as the direct consequence of the noblest acts. . . (N, p. 29)

To be sure, such evils are not the whole story. There is much good in nature, and in the activities and products of humanity as well, which requires explanation. Religion offers such an explanation so far as the good is concerned. However, there is no way the whole of the Nature we know by experience could be the work of a Being “at once good *and* omnipotent.” (N, p. 38, emphasis added) For if we assume, as those known for religious devotion are wont to do, that the ultimate cause of Nature is a benevolent Being and that the evils of this world can be explained, the only plausible explanation available is simply that the Being responsible for the order of nature was powerless to prevent the evils.

Having established this point in the essay, “Nature,” Mill continues, in the essay, “Theism,” to examine the possible evidence for the existence of God. Not the existence of gods, plural, as he points out, because our knowledge of science now, “after a rather long cultivation of scientific thought,” (Th, p. 131) is such that we understand the order of nature to be a single system, hence requiring a single Governor or Creator. And there is one type of scientific argument for a single Creator, namely the *a posteriori* type (*a priori* arguments merely beg the question, according to Mill), and among these he first considers the argument for a First Cause.

Mill begins by noting that the argument for a First Cause purports to be “a conclusion from the whole of human experience.” (Th, p. 142) Yet, throughout our experience we encounter only changeable things made up of elementary substances that have no beginning as far as we can tell. Further, each change that we experience has a precipitating cause which, in turn, must have had a cause, and so on, indefinitely. We never come, in our experience, to an initial cause, nor can we extrapolate from our experience to conclude that there must have been one. (Th, p. 143) However, we do observe that whatever brings about a change conveys a certain amount of Force, and given the law of the conservation of force, perhaps we can conclude that Force itself is what comes closest to being a First Cause. Force is always present in the world of change. The only time we see a beginning or origination of change is in the case of voluntary action. But voluntary action is not without antecedents. And upon examination, it appears that Force itself “has all the attributes of a thing eternal and uncreated.” It thus appears that insofar as theism rests on the necessity of a First Cause, there is nothing in our experience to support it. (Th, pp. 145–150) Mill concludes, “the world does not, by its mere existence, bear witness to a God.” (Th, p. 153)

Mill then considers the argument from the general consent of mankind and the argument from consciousness, both of which he dismisses rather quickly. The argument from general consent is an argument from authority, and the authority it rests on is notoriously weak, for instance, the beliefs of “barbarous tribes,” and the beliefs prompted by hopes and fears. (Th, pp. 155–160) By the argument from consciousness Mill means the sorts of rationalist considerations to be found in Descartes, Kant, and Leibniz: for Descartes, the fact that we have a “clear and distinct” idea of God; for Kant the claim that the idea of God is, not a conclusion, but a necessary assumption of morality; for Leibniz, the ground of optimism. None of these is convincing to Mill. (Th, pp. 161–166)

Only the argument from design is “wholly grounded on experience,” and truly inductive, according to Mill. (Th, pp. 167–170) This gives it a greater degree of plausibility than the others, and the well-known examples of apparent design are fairly convincing. For instance, the fact of sight gives the appearance of design. The structure of the eye which enables sight must exist before actual vision occurs, and so it appears to be teleological, to have a foreordained purpose. Not only that, but vision conduces to the survival of the creature that possesses it. At the same time, however, it is not impossible that random mutation and natural selection led to the capacity for vision, in which case the appearance of teleology is just that, a misleading appearance. Speculations are plausible on both sides. (Th, pp. 170–172) And so Mill concludes: “I think it must be allowed that, in the present state of our knowledge, the adaptations in Nature afford a large balance of probability in favor of creation by intelligence. It is equally certain that this is no more than probability.” (Th, p. 174)

Turning to the attributes of a Deity, Mill treats the standard ones in order – Omnipotence, Omniscience, Benevolence – and finds either no reason to accept, or else positive reason to reject, all three.

Remarkably, Mill finds that “every indication of design” counts “against the omnipotence of the designer.” Why? Because design involves contrivance and contrivance involves the use of means and the use of means indicates precisely the limitation of power. For example, “a man does not use machinery to lift his arms.” (Th, pp. 176–177) Under normal circumstances, we can lift our arms directly. But apparently God doesn’t do things directly; he contrives to achieve his ends by means, for instance, of matter and force which, by the way, have always existed as far as we can tell, uncreated and undesigned in themselves. (Th, p. 178) Therefore God is not omnipotent but, provided he exists at all, his power is limited.

Is God all-knowing? On the basis of what we know by experience, there is no way to decide whether God’s knowledge is infinite or limited, according to Mill, nor can we tell whether God foresees the future. But based on the limitation of God’s power, we can infer two possibilities. Either the limitation of his power is due 1), to the powers of another intelligent being or beings; or 2), to the inadequacy of the materials of the universe; or 3), to the limitation of his knowledge and skill, i.e., he doesn’t know how to do the things he wants to do. Possibility 1) is

exemplified by the possible existence of the Devil, who interferes with God's plans only because God lets him. Possibility 2) means that God does the best he can, given what he has to work with. Possibility 3) means that God's knowledge is limited. Mill prefers 2) and 3), the existence of the Devil being beyond our capacity to prove or disprove. Therefore God is not omniscient, otherwise he would know how to achieve his purposes with the given materials. (Th, pp. 182–186)

Finally, Mill considers God's benevolence and points out that this issue is easier to deal with if, as Mill proposes, we deny God's omnipotence. We could say, in other words, that God is good and just if we can assume that the evils in the world are beyond his power to correct. And indeed, there is evidence of the creator's goodness in various aspects of the organic and inorganic worlds, vision being one example as is the suitability of various materials to the organisms of which they constitute elements. In addition, there are provisions in nature for the pleasure and survival of creatures, such that benevolent purposes may be attributed to the creator on the basis of our experience of the world. (Th, pp. 186–191) However:

If man had not the power by the exercise of his own energies for the improvement both of himself and of his outward circumstance, to do for himself and other creatures vastly more than God had in the first instance done, the Being who called him into existence would deserve something very different from thanks at his hands. Of course it may be said that this very capacity of improving himself and the world was given to him by God, and that the change which he will be thereby enabled ultimately to effect in human existence will be worth purchasing by the sufferings and wasted lives of entire geological periods. This may be so; but to suppose that God could not have given him these blessings at a less frightful cost, is to make a very strange supposition concerning the Deity. (Th, pp. 192–193)

At this point we have come full circle back to the first essay and are reminded that, "There is no shadow of justice in the general arrangements of Nature. . ." (Th. p. 194) Our conclusion can only be that we have some evidence of God's goodness but nothing sufficient to support outright the claim that God is benevolent.

We have seen, in the earlier discussion of Mill on religion, that he considered immortality a not-inappropriate object of hope. His treatment of the topic under the heading of natural theology supports this view and provides more detail. He notes the scientific evidence for the dependence of thought on a material object, the body, but finds in this no metaphysical necessity. He notes the modern inclination to view the "soul" as a "bundle of attributes," but finds in this no evidence either way regarding its perishability or imperishability. (Th, pp. 197–203) Finally, he examines the argument that, because we desire immortality, therefore immortality must be possible, since no natural desire goes entirely without its fulfillment. But he finds this argument lacking as there is nothing impossible, nor even improbable,

about the possession of a desire that will not be fulfilled. “One thing, however, is quite certain in respect to God’s governance of the world; that he either could not, or would not, grant to us everything that we wish.” Hope remains, hope alone.

### BRENTANO ON NATURAL THEOLOGY

Brentano’s views on natural theology are to be found in *On the Existence of God* (EG)<sup>16</sup> and, to a lesser extent, in *Religion und Philosophie* (RPh).<sup>17</sup> Like Mill, Brentano rejects the ontological argument for God’s existence, what Mill calls an *a priori* argument. Unlike Mill, however, Brentano details and endorses several *a posteriori* or empirical arguments, including the teleological proof (what Mill calls the argument from design), the proof from motion (similar to Mill’s argument for a First Cause), and the proof from contingency, as well as a unique argument of his own, the psychological proof.

In his lectures on the existence of God from 1868-1891, Brentano begins by showing that there can be no *a priori* proof either that God exists or that it is impossible to prove that God exists. (EG, pp. 23–154) Thus, like Mill, he opens the question to scientific, that is, empirical inquiry. Judging by the space allotted to the teleological proof it is clear that Brentano favored it above the other proofs. (EG, p. 155–248) By means of a thorough examination of Darwin’s theory and description of the evolution of species, as well as careful discussion of the inorganic preconditions of life on Earth, Brentano believes he can show that it is extremely highly *improbable* that life has emerged and evolved due to random chance.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, he concludes, we have to admit that it is extremely highly *probable* that the world as we know it was designed and produced by an intelligent creator.<sup>19</sup> Although he concedes that his conclusion is not absolutely certain, he considers it “infinitely many *times* infinitely improbable” that his conclusion is false. (EG, p. 255) Brentano apparently agrees with Hume and Mill that it is a feature of empirical arguments that they result in probability, not deductive certainty. But he considers extremely high probability, as in this case, to be a reasonable substitute for certainty. (EG, p. 257)

<sup>16</sup> See Franz Brentano, *On the Existence of God: Lectures Given at the Universities of Würzburg and Vienna (1868–1891)*, translated and edited by Susan F. Krantz, Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> See Brentano, *Religion und Philosophie*.

<sup>18</sup> For more detail, see Susan Krantz Gabriel, “Brentano on Darwin I: Teleology,” *Brentano Studien* XV/1, 2017, pp. 361–372, and “Brentano on Darwin II: Science,” *Brentano Studien* XVI, 2018, pp. 143–155.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed explanation of Brentano’s view of induction and the mathematical considerations behind calculations of probability, see Franz Brentano, *Versuch über die Erkenntnis*, edited by Franziska Meyer-Hillebrand, Bern, Franke Verlag, 1925, pp. 75–105.

Likewise, in the proof from motion. (EG, pp. 268–284) Following Aristotle, Brentano considers that the existence of alteration (movement) as disclosed by experience rightly leads us to infer that there must have been a source of alteration, namely, a first mover. Unlike Aristotle and others, however, Brentano does not think of this source as being a first *unmoved* mover because, being an intelligence, it must be aware of the passage of time, and as such it must admit of a “steady, infinitesimal change.” (EG, p. 327) There was a time before there were any things to undergo alteration, and at some point in time, the source of all alteration brought those things into existence. Everything that is moved is moved by another, except for the first mover in the series, i.e., God.

The proof from contingency (EG, pp. 285–289) is similarly based on the data of experience which show that everything we experience is contingent, that is, everything we experience depends on something else for its existence, alteration, and so forth. From this fact we infer a universal law, namely, that nothing in our experience is absolutely accidental, rather everything in our experience is such that its being is contingent upon the existence of something else which is thus necessary to it, a *sine qua non* of its existence. The universal law that nothing in our experience is absolutely accidental can also be put another way: everything in our experience is indirectly necessary. But it is impossible for absolutely everything to be indirectly necessary, since that would lead to an infinite regress. Therefore, there must be something directly necessary, or necessary in itself, rather than contingent. Reason discloses this necessity, and the directly necessary being is God.

Finally, in the psychological proof (EG, pp. 290–301) Brentano rejects what he calls the semi-materialism of Aristotle,<sup>20</sup> showing instead that the human soul (the psyche, the thinker) must be incorporeal. The evidence for this comes from inner perception, including especially the unity of consciousness whereby one can notice oneself being aware of several things at once – sounds, colors, scents, or more generally, presentations, judgments, emotions<sup>21</sup> – something that would be impossible, he holds, for an entity extended in space in which these various functions are, as it were, delegated to various parts of it.<sup>22</sup> Since the human soul is incorporeal (as inferred on the basis of inner experience), it follows according to reason that it must be created, not by some corporeal thing, but rather by an incorporeal, creative spirit. And this spirit is God.

Having thus proved, by several arguments, that God exists,<sup>23</sup> Brentano turns to what Mill had called the attributes of God. Unlike Mill’s extended and largely

<sup>20</sup> See Susan F. Krantz, “Brentano’s Arguments Against Aristotle for the Immateriality of the Soul, in *Brentano Studien I*, 1988, pp. 63–74.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance, Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, edited by Linda L. McAlister, translated by Anton C. Rancurello, D.B. Terrell, and Linda L. McAlister, New York, Humanities Press, 1973, pp. 194–200.

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Brentano complained about the backward state of brain physiology in his day. See for instance, Brentano. *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, pp. 24, 48–56, 63–64.

<sup>23</sup> The proofs are far more extensive and detailed than what I have outlined here. For their complete presentations, see Brentano, *On the Existence of God*.

skeptical account, Brentano's demonstration that God is infinitely perfect is fairly brief and confident, including the claim that God is one, what he calls "the unity of the first principle." In summing up his four proofs, Brentano says:

The result, to which we have been led equally by different routes was: The existence of an eternal, creative principle (intelligence) which creatively maintains what it creates. And so all that is missing for a proof of the existence of God is just the demonstration that this creative principle (intelligence) is an infinitely perfect being and that it is a single being. (EG, p. 302)

The proof of God's infinite perfection is relatively easy, according to Brentano, because God creates *ex nihilo*, unlike any effective power with which we are familiar in our experience. Unlike Mill, who assumes that God would have to deal with matter and force, either of which could either hinder or promote his ends, Brentano rather assumes that when God first creates, "there is no material at all receptive to the effect." (EG, p. 303) The gap between something and nothing being infinite, i.e., not finitely determinable, God's creative power must be infinite. "And from infinite power follow infinite being and infinite perfection." (Ibid.) Again unlike Mill, Brentano considers that God must be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. And as a result he also insists that God is unique, that is, there is no possibility of there being more than one infinitely perfect being, since there cannot be either a greater or a lesser infinite perfection. (EG, p. 305–307)

Besides the existence of God, natural theology traditionally also addresses the problem of evil, and attempts to provide a solution to it, a theodicy. (EG, pp. 330–337)<sup>24</sup> Rather than emphasizing the evils of this world, as Mill does, Brentano was entirely in agreement with Leibniz regarding our partial vision of the world and the fact that we cannot see how certain evils actually enhance the good of the whole:

Every case of generation appears to be one of corruption at the same time; and actuality is always bound up with privation when many possibilities are available, some things being deprived of lower uses, others of higher ones or of the highest. For otherwise the whole diversity of the structure would be useless. And this is enough to explain what makes it appear that something less good has been preferred to what is better a thousand times over – until one enlarges the range of one's ideas. (EG, §51, pp. 335–336)

Furthermore, in considering all the things we know of that God has created, if we reflect carefully, we easily see that God is justified in creating them: "Thus even if there are thousands of things in the world which are intrinsically evil,

<sup>24</sup> This is Part III of the 1915 dictation, "The Train of Thought in the Proof of God's Existence," in Brentano, *On the Existence of God*, pp. 330–337. See also Adrian Maître, "Brentanos Gedankengang beim Beweise für das Dasein Gottes," *Brentano Studien XIV*, 2016, pp. 79–126.

still there is nothing which cannot be shown to be fully justifiable on account of its predominating usefulness when its connection with the world as a whole is discerned.” (Ibid., §43i, p. 331)

Notably, Brentano’s way of thinking about this is unique perhaps because of his strict, later view that everything which really exists is an individual, and at that, an individual capable of consciousness.<sup>25</sup> In his later, so-called reistic phase, Brentano held that everything which exists is either a substance, a part of a substance, a collection of substances, or an accident.<sup>26</sup> The prime example of a substance is a thinking thing which can be enriched by a variety of accidents involving intentionality – one-who-sees, one-who-hears, one-who-judges, one-who-loves-or-hates. The accident is a whole which contains a substance (the thinker) as a one-sidedly separable proper part. Now an accident, considered in itself (although it cannot exist apart from a substance), may be bad or evil, such as one-who-judges-incorrectly, or one-who-loves/hates-incorrectly; but underlying what is bad or evil is an entity, a substance, which is good in itself. Thus, everything which God has created is fundamentally good, and in fact nothing is absolutely evil: “A statement by Renan is remarkable, that he would prefer the fires of hell to nonexistence. It appears more correct than what Thomas Aquinas says of the damned, that they would rightly prefer not to exist. (Indeed, God preferred the opposite.)” (RPh, p. 174)

Interestingly, instead of claiming outright that this *is* the best of all possible worlds, as Leibniz famously held, Brentano insists on two points. 1) The world could only be the best together with God, in other words, God plus the world may be the best. More importantly, 2) it is incorrect to think of the world as static or already the best because the world is *becoming*, it is ever evolving toward a degree of goodness infinitely beyond what we can imagine, inasmuch as God is infinitely good.<sup>27</sup> Both conscious beings and the world as a whole are forever rising to higher levels of perfection:

If this is the best of all possible worlds, it can only be so if it is thought of as infinitely improving. Then it may surpass every conceivable level of perfection. [. . .]

<sup>25</sup> See Franz Brentano, *The Theory of Categories*, translated by Roderick M. Chisholm and Norbert Guterman, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1981, Part Two, II, C, §3–4, p. 116. See also Franz Brentano, *The True and the Evident*, edited by Oskar Kraus and Roderick M. Chisholm, translated by Chisholm, Politzer, Fischer, New York, Humanities Press, 1971, Part Four, I, §9–16, pp. 109–113.

<sup>26</sup> See Brentano, *The Theory of Categories*, Part One, I, B, §1, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> As a matter of fact, Leibniz had touched upon this possibility: “. . . it might be said that the whole sequence of things to infinity may be the best possible, although what exists all through the universe in each portion of time be not the best. It might be therefore that the universe became even better and better, if the nature of things were such that it was not permitted to attain to the best all at once. But these are problems of which it is hard for us to judge.” See G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, edited by Austin Ferrer, translated by E.M. Huggard from C.J. Gerhardt’s edition of *The Collected Philosophical Works*, Chicago and LaSalle IL, 1990, §202, 253–254. Under the influence of Darwin, Brentano found it easier to judge.



If we find that people are ignorant, and err, and make all kinds of moral mistakes, this is just what follows from the fact that, as with the macrocosm, so with the human microcosm: things are not complete from the beginning, but rather they reach higher perfection by means of progressive development. Virtue must be earned, and this is the very reason why it is not all there from the beginning. (EG §43. iii–iv, p. 332)<sup>28</sup>

This progressive development continues on at the level of the individual human being, too, as Brentano sets forth in his arguments against materialism and in favor of immortality in RPh. One could anticipate, on the basis of his psychological proof of God's existence, that Brentano considered the spiritual nature of the human psyche to be of utmost importance and that it would be linked by him to its immortality. In fact, he offers several considerations leading to the conclusion of immortality, including one that Mill would reject, namely the general consent of mankind including poets as well as ancient and modern philosophers. (RPh, 245–246) The main difficulty he finds with survival of the soul after death is that the body had been necessary in order to facilitate communication between one soul and another. What mediates when the body is gone? (RPh, pp. 247–248) To address this issue, Brentano speculates about worlds other than the three-dimensional one we are familiar with, and sense perception other than that of the senses we are familiar with – the music of colors, the tones of paintings – and concludes that the problem with materialism is that it is a monism. Calling to mind the Classical ideal of unity in multiplicity, he concludes that, “Not a mere dualism but rather a varied pluralism going to infinity has the last word against the impoverished monistic world view.” Thus any objection against the “spirituality and immortality of the soul” is refuted.

For Brentano, unlike Mill, natural theology is an important part of philosophy, and its conclusions are solid and reliable when argued with sufficient care, including the existence of God, the ultimate defeat of evil, and the immortality of the soul.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Brentano's acceptance of the widely-held 19<sup>th</sup> century belief in progressive development is obvious here. Philosophically, however, a nod to the status of *becoming* is as ancient as Plato.

<sup>29</sup> Eberhard Tiefensee speculates that after his time in Vienna Brentano increasingly abandoned his more empirical approach to philosophy, including natural theology, such that the early lectures on the existence of God are very deliberately empirically based, whereas the late dictation mentioned in n. 22 is, one might say, more Platonic or Cartesian. See Eberhard Tiefensee, *Philosophie und Religion bei Franz Brentano*, Tübingen and Basel, Francke Verlag, 1998, p. 149. This may account for part of the difference with Mill. Also, though, the Aristotelian and Scholastic influence on Brentano is evident very early, for instance, in the habilitation theses of 1867. See Werner Sauer, “*Erneuerung der Philosophia perennis. Über die ersten vier Habilitationsthesen*,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 58/59, pp. 119–149, 2000.

## CONCLUSIONS

In drawing some conclusions from this comparison of Mill and Brentano, let us begin with religion and then turn to natural theology.

I had said that Mill's and Brentano's views of religion are not incompatible. Let me add now that it seems clear neither of them really understood what religion is.<sup>30</sup> Mill told us: "The essence of religion is the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire." (UR, p. 109)

And Brentano said: "We speak of religion wherever we find belief in a superhuman, personal being and that this belief influences behavior." (RPh, p. 77)

Adopting a loftier tone, Hegel tells us: ". . . all that has worth and dignity for man, all wherein he seeks his happiness, his glory and his pride, finds its ultimate centre in religion, in the thought, the consciousness, and the feeling of God."<sup>31</sup>

I am not sure there can be a systematic definition of religion that would include all and only those belief systems that we normally consider to be religions;<sup>32</sup> in fact, 'religion' may designate an "open concept," as Morris Weitz says about the term 'art'.<sup>33</sup>

However, for present purposes I would suggest that every religion at least involves emotional and spiritual acknowledgement of a transcendent reality. If so, then Mill's definition is too broad, including non-supernatural belief systems as it does (perhaps so as to recommend his proposed Religion of Humanity),<sup>34</sup> and Brentano's definition is perhaps too narrow because it excludes belief in a number of "superhuman, personal beings," but more importantly it is inadequate because it does not mention emotion. One could list a number of features religions often have (though not all of them have all of them), thus generating a kind of Wittgensteinian family resemblance.<sup>35</sup> Here are some:

<sup>30</sup> With regard to Mill, see Heydt, "Narrative, Imagination, and the Religion of Humanity in Mill's Ethics," p. 108, n. 30. With regard to Brentano, see Tiefensee, *Religion und Philosophie bei Franz Brentano*, pp. 431–439).

<sup>31</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *On Art, Religion, Philosophy: Introductory Lectures to the Realm of Absolute Spirit*, edited by J. Glenn Gray, New York, Harper & Row, 1970, p. 129.

<sup>32</sup> Brentano makes a similar point. See Brentano, *Religion und Philosophie*, p. 6. See also Andrew J. Burgess, "Brentano as Philosopher of Religion," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. V, no. 2, pp. 79–90, 1974, p. 84.

<sup>33</sup> See Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. XV, no. 1, 1956, in John Andrew Fisher, *Reflecting on Art*, London and Toronto, Mayfield Publishing Company, 1993, pp. 13–18.

<sup>34</sup> See Heydt, "Narrative, Imagination, and the Religion of Humanity in Mill's Ethics," p. 108, n. 30, where he suggests that Mill's Religion of Humanity is not a religion at all but rather an ethical ideal.

<sup>35</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Third Edition, edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, New York, MacMillan, 1958, §§ 66–67.

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|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • Belief in the transcendent    | • Mystical union with the divine |
| • Community of believers        | • Ritual                         |
| • Figurative or poetic language | • Sacred objects and spaces      |
| • Holy writings                 | • Theology                       |
| • Moral principles              | • Worship                        |

Both Mill and Brentano emphasize the ethical features, both ignore worship and ritual as well as sacred spaces and objects. Mill would like to dispense with the transcendent (supernatural); Brentano criticizes the uses of language in Scripture, apparently overlooking the fact that a gap between form and content is inevitable when representing the divine.<sup>36</sup> Community has some meaning for Mill, the human community or humanity idealized; the transcendent is very significant for Brentano. Where they agree is in their explicit and implicit criticism of Christianity from their shared 19<sup>th</sup> century standpoint according to which Christianity appears pre-scientific and consequently outgrown by educated people of the time. Mill would like to replace Christianity with the Religion of Humanity; Brentano thinks even the best of religions is just a substitute, an inferior surrogate, for a theistic philosophy.

On the topic of natural theology, however, their differences are striking. For Mill, as for David Hume before him,<sup>37</sup> the proofs of God's existence all fall short, and the traditional divine attributes are largely implausible. Based on experience, Mill claims, the existence of the Creator is at most an unprovable possibility, there is no way the Creator could be omnipotent or omniscient, and the Creator's goodness is limited by the limits on its power. By contrast, for Brentano, several proofs of God's existence are successful, especially the teleological proof, and the traditional divine attributes are easily demonstrated because God creates *ex nihilo*. Interestingly, Brentano agrees with Mill, to a certain extent, that empirical proofs of God's existence are best and that they result in probability, not mathematical or deductive certainty. But the degree of probability is so high, according to Brentano, that it might as well be certainty.<sup>38</sup> The difference between Mill and Brentano on this topic is that the degree of probability that God exists – or that the soul is immortal – is so

<sup>36</sup> Consider what Hegel tells us about "symbolic art," which applies so clearly to medieval art and religious icons: "First, the Idea gives rise to the beginning of art . . . As indeterminate it does not yet possess in itself that individuality which the Ideal demands; . . . The Idea has not yet found the true form even within itself, and therefore continues to be merely the struggle and aspiration thereafter. In general terms we may call this form the *symbolic* form of art . . . as when a lion is used to mean strength." See Hegel, *On Art, Religion, and Philosophy*, pp. 110–111.

<sup>37</sup> See David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, New York and London, Hafner Publishing Company, 1969.

<sup>38</sup> To take a homely example of how this could be true, consider a spouse or friend who is so familiar that you could never mistake him or her for somebody else. If an empiricist were to tell you that such knowledge of the other person is only probable – there could have been an invasion of the body snatchers perhaps – the normal reply would be to say with Brentano that some degrees of probability are so high that they amount to certainty. Brentano spells this out mathematically. See Brentano, *Versuch Über die Erkenntnis*, pp. 75–105.

low for Mill as to reduce to mere hope or illusion,<sup>39</sup> whereas for Brentano it is so high as not to be reasonably deniable.

Brentano says this outright about immortality of the soul:

Thus I do not hesitate to regard as certain the continued existence of the spirit and with it a truth which is valuable above all to the desire of those still living. This need for personal continuity is witnessed by the voices of poets, and precisely the poets deserve to be heard as witnesses when it is a matter of knowing the human heart. The vast extent of belief in immortality among peoples is also a witness, and again the ancient philosophers, even those whose theory of nature is hardly compatible with the nature of the soul. I think here of Heraclitus and Empedocles. Indeed even a positivist thinker of our own time [he names Buckle and Helmholtz among others] . . . (RPh, p. 245)

Notice also that Brentano accepts types of arguments that Mill had rejected, namely from the consent of mankind or public opinion and from authority. But there is also significant philosophical support in the psychological argument for God's existence, particularly the proof that the soul is immaterial. In this we see a willingness on Brentano's part, which is typical of his thought, to extend the validity of empirical evidence beyond what is immediately perceived, on the basis of inner perception and on the basis of reason. Here is where Mill and Brentano part company. Though both are modern, industrial-age and science-oriented thinkers, the one construes his empiricism in the narrow, modern sense, while the other maintains the ancient and medieval view of the empirical as reliable sign of things beyond. It is as though Mill were confined to the *de dicto* reality in interpersonal relations, to what was actually said, while Brentano permits himself the *de re* extension to the mind behind what was said.

At the same time, it must be added that Mill's and Brentano's primary interests were quite diverse. Mill's involvement in the social and political concerns of his day in Britain, his essentially secular background, his post with the East India Company,<sup>40</sup> and his remarkable education at the feet of his famously utilitarian father, left him with an overpowering concern for human beings in this world, in this life, in the face of injustices and oppressively dysfunctional social and political systems. He also had an affinity for the Romantic movement of his day,<sup>41</sup> whereas Brentano is decidedly a classical type. Brentano's Catholic background, his long life in academia, his being steeped in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas shaped his interests in an entirely different direction from Mill's. He studied Mill's work in logic,<sup>42</sup> as he also studied Auguste Comte's positivism with interest and a

<sup>39</sup> For a full discussion of the role of illusion in Mill's understanding of religion, see Lou Matz, "The Unity of Religious Illusion."

<sup>40</sup> See Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: A Biography*, pp. 35–54, 241–245.

<sup>41</sup> See Capaldi, *Ibidem*, pp. 86–132.

<sup>42</sup> See Brentano, *Versuch Über die Erkenntnis*, various citations, and Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, numerous citations.

degree of adoption,<sup>43</sup> but essentially Brentano had a traditional, scholastic bent the rigorous aspect of which continues to be an attraction for analytic philosophers today.

Finally, and perhaps as a result, one senses a deep emotional pessimism about nature and the world in Mill,<sup>44</sup> while the exact opposite, a rational optimism is evident in Brentano. Comparing Mill and Brentano is a bit like comparing Hume and Leibniz. The psychologist William James (who admired Brentano's work to some degree,<sup>45</sup> but dedicated his own work to Mill<sup>46</sup>) would tell us that our preference in this regard is a matter of temperament.<sup>47</sup> As a philosopher, I like to think it goes deeper than that. Where they differ, Mill and Brentano cannot both be right, nor are they necessarily right where they agree.

<sup>43</sup> See Franz Brentano, "Auguste Comte and Positive Philosophy," in Tănăsescu *et al.* (eds.), *Brentano and the Positive Philosophy of Comte and Mill*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2022. In this connection, see Burgess, "Brentano as Philosopher of Religion," p. 89: "[Brentano's] method is to be empirical, but not empiricist. He criticizes the empiricists, not because they trusted too much in empirical methods, but because they trusted in them too little to be willing to apply them to the primary metaphysical questions."

<sup>44</sup> See Millar, "Mill on Religion," p. 200. It is important in this connection to remember, however, that despite his view of nature in the essay by that name, Mill valued good cheer for its utility. As Heydt points out in "Narrative and Imagination and the Religion of Humanity in Mill's Ethics," p. 112, "Cheerfulness involves . . . a selective filtering by the imagination (notice the similarity to the process of idealizing humanity) . . . The way the cheerful person views the world is not justified epistemically, but ethically. Mill is quick to point out that cheerfulness need not compromise one's necessary attentiveness to the evils of the world . . ."

<sup>45</sup> See Tiefensee, *Religion und Philosophie bei Franz Brentano*, pp. 431–439. Tiefensee here also notes a similar comparison in outlook between James and Brentano; see p. 34.

<sup>46</sup> See William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Writings of William James*, edited by John McDermott, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1977, p. 3. See also Matz, "The Unity of Religious Illusion", pp. 139, 153, and James, *Ibidem*, p. 734.

<sup>47</sup> William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 9–26.

