

# *The Pursuit of Certainty*

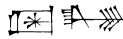


Shirley Robin Letwin

# The Pursuit of Certainty

*David Hume,  
Jeremy Bentham,  
John Stuart Mill,  
Beatrice Webb*

Shirley Robin Letwin



Liberty Fund  
INDIANAPOLIS

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Printed in the United States of America  
Originally published in 1965 by Cambridge University Press  
Frontispiece photo courtesy of William Letwin  
All other photographs courtesy of Corbis-Bettmann

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Letwin, Shirley Robin.

The pursuit of certainty : David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill,  
Beatrice Webb / Shirley Robin Letwin.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-86597-194-3.—ISBN 0-86597-195-1 (pbk.)

1. Political science—Great Britain—History.
2. Hume, David, 1711–1776—Contributions in political science.
3. Bentham, Jeremy, 1748–1832—Contributions in political science.
4. Mill, John Stuart, 1806–1873—Contributions in political science.
5. Webb, Beatrice Potter, 1858–1943—Contributions in political science.

I. Title.

JA84.G7L44 1998

320'.092'241—dc21 97-47485

3 5 7 9 11 C 10 8 6 4 2  
2 4 6 8 10 P 9 7 5 3 1

Liberty Fund, Inc.  
8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300  
Indianapolis, IN 46250-1684

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## *Acknowledgements*

I would like to thank the William Volker Foundation, the Earhart Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation for grants during the early stages of my work. I owe a special debt of gratitude to the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study and its director, Miss Constance Smith, for enabling me to complete the book under circumstances most unusually encouraging and agreeable.

I am grateful to the Passfield trustees for permission to read and quote from the unpublished diaries of Beatrice Webb, and to Mr. C. G. Allen of the library at the London School of Economics for his kind assistance.





## Introduction

Although nothing inspires dispute more easily than matters of politics, there is wonderful agreement about the questions at issue. Not only is the nature of political controversy in the distant past supposed to be clear. What has more recently agitated men seems equally certain. And hardly anyone denies that the distinctive political issue since the eighteenth century has been whether government should do more or less.

The agreement extends to accounts of how this came to be such an important question in England. Toward the beginning of the nineteenth century, the historians all tell us, new social conditions aggravated the problem of poverty. The lower classes began to insist on a measure of equality, and the upper classes came to recognize in that demand a claim on their consciences. Those who welcomed change and novel solutions, that is, those who were “progressive,” became collectivists or socialists. They were so successful in converting others to their opinions that the activity of government has vastly expanded. The opposition, which has declined to move ahead—so the story runs—is led by “reactionaries,” who desire less government and long for a return to times past. They are the individualists or defenders of capitalism or perhaps *laissez-faire*. The image of modern politics is accordingly that of a debate. It is presumed to have two sides, and anyone who declares a political opinion is classified as either forward or backward.

While this image corresponds to something real, it is not altogether satisfying. It seems to be lacking a dimension. For not everyone who speaks on politics at any given moment may be addressing himself to the same issues. A dispute on how much government ought to do for social welfare may be related to a disagreement on what welfare comprises. There may be no independent clockwork which is wound up to answer political questions. Not only a man’s worldly interests, his compassion, or knowledge of objective

circumstances may determine his political convictions. They may depend even more on his character, his tastes, his notion of the relation between man and God, his preference for a quite particular way of living.

If we look at modern politics from this point of view, the presumed debate between more government and less dissolves. Instead, political disagreement emerges as clusters of conversations. Party lines no longer seem to mark out groups of soul-mates, and the important divisions are not between progressives and reactionaries, or collectivists and individualists. The divisions are defined rather by basic differences in temperament—philosophers are opposed to artists, logicians to historians, puritans to pagans. The most striking change is no longer in the attitude toward the role of government, but in the conception of what sort of activity politics is.

How the conception of politics changed in England can be traced through the lives and work of four writers—David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Beatrice Webb. Each represents a distinctive way of looking at politics, which has become intertwined with others and obscured in political practice, and yet remains a vital part of the political tradition in England. Nevertheless, each writer contributed to a transformed outlook on the nature of politics. It was first suggested by Jeremy Bentham; its shape was defined by John Stuart Mill; and the finished product appears in the work of Beatrice Webb. But the significance of what happened becomes plain only by comparison with the earlier view of David Hume.

The four writers are taken here to speak for something more than their individual preferences, but not for any mysterious reason. As people who meet together very often, whether directly or indirectly, tend to communicate to one another their convictions and inclinations, there is likely to be a kinship in any given time and place between the reactions and ideas even of very different sorts of people. And what is common to the group may be stated unusually well by some member. In this manner, Hume may be said to express better than anyone else the dominant attitude to politics in the eighteenth century. But it does not follow that Hume's contemporaries all looked at politics exactly as he did, or for just the same reasons. Nor would any attempt to make an abstract of Hume's outlook and call it "the eighteenth-century view" produce anything short of a monstrosity. One must see the portrait of Hume as one among many portraits of a family. The resemblance cannot be analysed or isolated. It is stronger in some faces than in others. Like a shadow's, its outlines are never sharply defined, but somehow it can be dis-

covered in all the family faces. In this sense, and only in this sense, the patterns found in the four writers may be considered generic patterns for their time, and the changes from one pattern to another may be said to represent a broad change in moral and political ideals.

What makes the differences among the four writers especially impressive is that in a way they all owe allegiance to the same intellectual tradition. The name utilitarian most readily comes to mind. They have all been called utilitarians, and they themselves have claimed some such kinship with one another. Bentham said he had discovered the idea of utility in Hume; Mill, who first made utilitarianism a popular name, was tutored by Bentham himself, as well as by Bentham's chief disciple, James Mill; and the Webbs often liked to describe themselves and other Fabians as latter-day utilitarians. In fact, the name is misleading because it suggests that they all shared a common philosophy. But it does point to certain common sympathies. All these writers praised a common sense, matter-of-fact, concrete, experimental approach to human affairs. All tried to justify their arguments ultimately by referring to something that any man could see with his own eyes. It is even more important that their philosophies were inspired not by metaphysical convictions, but by moral preoccupations. What concerned them was how their ideas affected the world they lived in, rather than how completely they had captured or conformed to some abstract truth. Their ultimate objectives were not philosophical, but moral.

In temperament, too, the four have some important affinities. Although each summed up and reflected currents of thought and emotion common in his day, all had the reputation of being radical and all shocked their more conventional contemporaries. Each of them rebelled against what he had learned, or believed he had learned as a child. At the same time, all of them esteemed moderation and tolerance. There is among them no true revolutionary, no one who actually tried to blow up the house, no one who advocated or even welcomed the use of violence. While they all wished to influence practice, they hoped to do so through theory, and relied mainly on the power of the pen.

In these ways, all four are excellent representatives of what is distinctive in British political thinking. Nevertheless, the change that can be traced through their lives is a story of a departure from, a decline of, a uniquely British pattern.

The story not only begins with, but, in a way, rests on David Hume because

he more than anyone else has given expression to the peculiar genius of British politics. The political outlook he voices lived and breathed most freely in the eighteenth century, in an elegant, witty, and careless civilization. Yet it was alive in Britain before the eighteenth century. And it has lived on to temper every other theory that has gained a hold there. It accounts for the curious, unexpected, incoherent mixture that any theory becomes when applied in Britain, and it has contributed at least as much as anything else to the unparalleled peaceful development of her political institutions.

Although Hume is best known today for having made a revolution in philosophy, his philosophy was designed to support a revolution in morals. He set out to destroy the traditional Christian view of man as divided between divine reason and brute passion, and directed his attack at the metaphysics that had since Plato's time supported it. He proposed to show how the human powers that had hitherto been traced to a faculty that man shared with God could be accounted for otherwise, that man's much vaunted reason was nothing that set him apart from the rest of nature, or required him to renounce his earthly connections. But as his attack on reason denied to man any possibility of discovering a rational warrant for his beliefs, Hume's philosophy in effect undermined itself. He thereby involved philosophy in dilemmas from which it has not yet managed to escape. For himself, Hume solved the problem he had created in the simplest fashion, by retiring from the field and turning essayist and historian, teaching the moral spirit he admired by means of examples without the encumbrance of a doubtful epistemology.

But throughout, his view of the human condition remained unchanged. It was, as he saw it, neither good nor evil, neither unknowing nor omniscient; it could be pleasant, but never secure. His notion of goodness included all things that men love, honour, and enjoy, without elevating any one activity or kind of life above all others. If a man exercises courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom, he does, according to Hume, as much as can be expected of him. He is not required to transcend his nature, or to struggle against evil. There is no more harm in the passions than in the reason, and they naturally work together. Virtue flows from harmony and a disposition to heed natural sentiments.

The sternness in Hume was entirely reserved for one enemy, the puritan. The puritan believes man is a divided creature, that virtue consists in making brutish passion submit to divine reason; he feels certain he can penetrate the

ultimate mystery of the universe and achieve a single unifying vision of life that will free him from uncertainty and confusion. He is righteous, austere, godly, an enemy to everything that makes human life a pleasure. Worst of all, he insists on remaking all men to fit the one image he admires. All the rogues and villains that Hume discovered were somehow tainted by puritanism. The men he admired were averse to anything like dogma or rigid definition; they preferred the near to the far, the seen to the unseen; they valued a steady judgement and a lively capacity for enjoyment; they accepted and were even amused by the variety and vicissitudes of human life. They were pagans who respected the power of their gods, but expected no mercy, not even justice, from them.

Hume thus denied the possibility of demonstrating the superiority of any single way of life, or of any set of rules. There was no ideal to be enforced on all, nor any City of God to be reached. And nothing very exalted was left for politics to do. Government has to look after certain things that individuals cannot do for themselves. Without these activities, civilization cannot survive, but they are no more than an indispensable condition of a good life. For the purposes of politics, society is merely a web of interests that has to be managed so as to let each man live as he likes without fearing either his neighbours or his rulers. To reach for perfection, to seek an ideal, is noble, but dangerous, and is therefore, according to Hume, an activity that individuals or voluntary groups may pursue, but governments certainly should not. Politics is just one of many social activities, by no means the highest, concerned with the ordinary business of life, with things as they are, not as they should be.

What was fixed in Hume's politics was not any set of policies, not even any general principles about the best form of government or constitution, but simply the conviction that the office of government is to protect men against arbitrary interference, or, in other words, to enforce the rule of law. Everything else had to be subordinated to this, for where there is no rule of law, force prevails and civilization is impossible. One is obliged to remember how dangerous it is to unsettle established rules, but beyond that politics offers neither any absolute truth nor any fixed goal. The politician never can choose between good and evil, but merely between greater and lesser evils. What he ought to choose cannot be known beforehand because what is right today might be wrong tomorrow. There is no escape from the uncertainties of politics either through technical knowledge or esoteric learning; one can rely on

nothing more than political wisdom, that is, a good working knowledge of what men are like, and how to deal with them, a sense of proportion and delicacy.

Those who hold this view of politics would never criticize a government for failing to be daring, bold, or inspiring, but rather for being rash, crude, or dishonest. Nor are they likely to encourage glorious deeds or to want sweeping reforms; they are reluctant to go to war or to inflict suffering. They leave great changes to take place over a long time, and content themselves with making piecemeal and somewhat haphazard adjustments to circumstances. The world never appears to them as divided between saints and villains, because they expect even virtuous and reasonable men to differ.

Some of these sentiments continued to rule in Jeremy Bentham. He was as anxious as Hume to preserve diversity in opinion and action, to protect liberty and the rule of law. Nevertheless a new temperament was at work, a temperament that could not bear either uncertainty or the intrusion of personality. While Bentham's work was inspired partly by a sensitivity to injustices that had been allowed to accumulate, the way in which he proposed to deal with them reflected more than a desire for justice. He represented in England the spirit that possessed France in the late eighteenth century, the urge to remake the world according to a rational pattern. There is perhaps no better evidence of the nature of the British temper than the fact that in England this urge took the form of Benthamism.

For Bentham concerned himself even less than Hume did with men's souls; he did not undertake to make them secure of bliss in the hereafter, not even on earth. But within the limited province he allotted to politics, essentially the same as Hume assigned to it, he proposed to change the character of politics. It was no longer to be an art, or left to gentlemen amateurs. It was to become a technical activity. Not merely the particular reforms he outlined, or his insistence that English law needed reform gave Bentham such influence and reputation, but the suggestion implicit in everything he did that political wisdom could be reduced to a technique. This technique would enable men to dispense with experience; it could be put down complete and self-contained in a book, so that anyone could learn it and apply it almost automatically. Unlike Hume, Bentham did not expect political needs to be constantly changing. He was certain of having discovered the key to perfection, to a system of law that would need but minor correction once in a hundred years.

Moreover, Bentham taught his successors to equate political order with one

kind of order. Only in the realm of economic affairs was he content to accept another sort of order, and his interest in mechanisms enabled him to explain, as lucidly as anyone has, how from the self-interested activities of individuals social order could result without recourse to mystical natural harmonies or unseen hands. About law, however, he thought very differently. He denounced the Common Law not only because of its complications and inefficiencies, but because he opposed the whole notion of law as the product of growth, necessarily unpredictable, never complete or perfect. Instead, he advocated another concept of law, as the product of purely logical operations. The issue raised by Bentham was not whether the law was to be reformed, not even whether it ought to be codified, but in what manner it was to be reformed. Bentham did not want slow, limited innovations that would continue to be made always, but one grand sweep. Change was to come not in response to some specific defect, some particular injustice or inconsistency. It was to throw aside what had grown up over the centuries as simply chaos; it was to create a perfect, comprehensive, new design. For Bentham, legislation ought above all to be an activity of invention and logic, free of any need to consider what went before. It should make politics largely a matter of technical skill.

Thereby politics could also, Bentham hoped, be made impersonal. All his suggestions were designed to limit or eliminate the need to make judgements. Whereas the old Whig rulers believed they had something better than brains to rely on, Bentham's politician was to be pure brains. Yet this love of impersonality grew out of the same interest that moved Hume to emphasize personal qualities. Hume argued that motives and character must always be considered because no two men do the same thing for the same reasons; Bentham's sensitivity to the wide variation in human behaviour was expressed in a desire to rule out any question about a man's character or motives even from ethics, and certainly from politics. He would have confined ethical judgements to the impersonal question of how a man's actions affect others, without presuming to say anything about the man himself. In politics, his techniques were designed to make any personal judgement about a politician or the people he ruled irrelevant. He hoped in this way to free men altogether from subjection to anyone else's opinion.

Nevertheless Bentham's sensitivity to the feelings of real people came to haunt his dream of reducing politics to a technique. In the end, for all his preaching, he himself produced mainly a great number of ingenious devices, more nearly gadgets for reform than sweeping panaceas. He opened the door,

however, to a world where politicians need not be men of prudence and taste, but merely qualified technicians.

A more profound change was introduced by John Stuart Mill, who endowed politics with a new meaning. Altered conditions made Bentham's theories seem less relevant, while modifications introduced by disciples gave them a more vulnerable character. At the same time, young intellectuals were being exposed to influences from abroad. All this led Mill to question the central tenet of the British political tradition, never jeopardized by Bentham, that the City of Man has no connection with the City of God. Within a century the protest against puritanism fashioned by Hume became the foundation for the revival of puritanism in a new form. Mill reminds us that puritanism is as permanent a strain in the British temper, at least since the seventeenth century, as is the tolerance opposed to it.

Although Mill's renunciation of his early beliefs is celebrated, he never rejected the puritanical discipline that James Mill had quite unconsciously taught him. It was a secular puritanism, unconnected with God, but just as the older forms did, it dismembered human nature and made repression, rather than harmony, its moral ideal. Like all latter-day puritans, Mill tried to give the emotions their due, but for all his efforts, he could think of them only as naturally hostile to reason, unless curbed by it. Although he cultivated an interest in art and poetry, he never could accept a full, spontaneous reaction to life. Instead he followed the old puritans in trying to draw a detailed picture of what a man ought to be, of how he should order his faculties and all his activities. To Mill, as to the early Christian puritans, man was a corrupt and fallen being, who had to struggle constantly against the sin within him.

But with this he combined an unprecedented optimism in man's ability to save himself through his reason. John Mill was not a man to tolerate doubt about anything, however profound, nor to be amused by confusion. Earnestness, moral certainty, righteousness were more natural to him. His interest in giving emotion its due did not move him to abandon his father's moral spirit, but to reject the prevailing British suspicion of comprehensive views of the universe. The upshot of his personal search for something spiritually more inspiring than Benthamism was an ambition to contain the whole world in a single theory, which constituted his real break with Benthamism. By comparison, Bentham's most grandiose schemes were child's play. Whereas Hume, like Hobbes and Locke, had used philosophy to underscore the limits



of human powers and to advocate more modest aspirations, Mill saw in philosophy the guide to complete and final truth.

Yet he failed to rid himself altogether of the prejudices bred in him by his early training. As a philosopher, he remained within his native tradition. But his flirtation with alien ways of thinking left its mark—his early interest in a comprehensive philosophy turned into an interest in a comprehensive politics and science, animated by a faith in progress. Only those who were cold-hearted or philistines, he came to think, considered politics merely a means to peace and security and liberty. Those who were aware of man's higher potentialities would make politics a means to human perfection. And a new role for science would make this feasible. From his father, Mill had learned the puritan notion that society is best governed by an élite, although they were to be elected by a wide suffrage. He came to identify this élite with those who had scientific knowledge and to believe that a new set of intellectual leaders would conduct men to salvation on earth. The new priesthood were to be sociologists, able to understand the true course of events, and on the basis of this information to tell people how they should live.

But a science of sociology had still to be developed, and while he devoted much thought to it, Mill did not get far beyond suggesting some modifications in classical economics. He persisted in founding his social analysis on individuals, just as Bentham had done, and from such an assumption the results he wanted were difficult to come by. Nor could he ever renounce his allegiance to the traditional liberties even while preaching his new spiritual politics. He marked the birth of the "liberal intellectual," so familiar today, who with one part of him genuinely values liberty and recognizes the equal right of all adults to decide their lives for themselves, but with another wants the government, under the direction of the superior few, to impose what he considers the good life on all his fellows.

Precisely how politics could be based on science and made to serve spiritual ends was proposed in a consistent and clear-cut manner by Beatrice Webb. In her, the urge for improvement was altogether freed of inhibitions inherited from the eighteenth century. That she and Sidney Webb should both have become such important figures in the history of British political practice is in itself significant. For though Beatrice Webb was an impressive and moving figure, and in her way deeply reflective, she cannot be ranked with the greatest among either philosophers or statesmen. Yet she offered most eminently what

her time demanded. Englishmen, even thoughtful ones, had come to care above all for getting results at once. The pressure of social problems and a changed understanding of civilization made them indifferent to discussions of eternal dilemmas and impatient of anything that encouraged them to be undecided or troubled. They were ready to dispense with profundity and elegance, if only they could find some simple directions for improvement. This sort of need Beatrice Webb could satisfy.

Although she was not, like John Mill, strictly born into puritanism, it was easily available to her and early in life she adopted it as her own. In time she learned to equate the triumph of reason over passion with the rule of science over all of human life. For Mill, science still retained the character of a technique, though a very superior and broad technique. For Beatrice Webb, science assumed the quality of a religion. It represented not only man's victory over nature but a superior discipline that could truly purify human life. Diverse influences helped to shape this image of science—the impact of new discoveries in the physical sciences, Darwin's theory of evolution, Spencer's grand synthesis, idealist philosophy, and Evangelical morals. It did not correspond very well to what scientists actually did or believed, but it came closer than anything else to satisfying her emotional and intellectual wants.

Above all, it transformed her image of political activity. Science, Beatrice Webb believed, taught that politics should concern itself with the generations of the future more than with individuals living here and now, that in fact it ought not to deal with persons but with constituents of a social organism. The new politics could depend wholly on impersonal knowledge. For since science taught her, she believed, to think of society as an organic whole, the sociology that Mill had failed to develop seemed ready at hand. It followed that just as with the advancement of medicine, the physician replaced the barber, so politics had now to be taken out of the hands of ordinary men, however well educated or discerning, and turned over to the only ones who could be trusted with it, scientific experts. To the ordinary man was left a greater opportunity to join in public discussion and the joy of dedicating himself to Humanity, an infinite, possibly eternal being, though, happily for a scientific age, not a transcendental being.

Beatrice Webb continued to speak of a mysterious realm of values that neither science nor politics could reach, but doubts about ultimate truth never interfered with her dreams of human perfection through politics. She sanctioned only the usual parliamentary means, but in all other ways her view of

political activity broke profoundly with the British tradition. Politics was at one stroke both destroyed and sanctified. It was destroyed in the old sense because political wisdom, all the skills once considered necessary in politics, even the old moral standards, became irrelevant. In its new sense, politics was no longer one of several human activities and at that not a very noble one; it encompassed all of human life. The City of Man was to be not a means of reaching the City of God, not even a reflection of it, but the Heavenly City itself.

Thus Hume's picture of man as a balanced whole whose object is merely to live decently and enjoyably was replaced by a view of man as essentially sinful, obliged to struggle against the evil within him, and most likely to succeed if he submits himself wholly to reason and puts his life at the service of future generations. In the new picture, man acquired new resources—accurate and very detailed knowledge about how to live, untainted by anyone's prejudices or interests. The earth was no longer peopled by free moral agents deciding their own actions, in a world as far as possible removed from the consistency of a machine because every moral problem was unique. There was no longer merely a great variety of goods, but a coherent, all-inclusive system of life, arranging the things men seek in a clear hierarchy. The old dilemmas of human life, it seemed, could be disposed of, the difference between man and God reduced to a bare minimum, and tragedy translated into inefficiency.

But these are only the bold outlines in the pattern. There is besides a wealth of surprising detail. Apparent affinities hide the widest divergence—Hume uses Newton's method to thwart the scientific spirit; the aversion to magic, that more than any other sentiment unites John Mill to Bentham, leads him to qualify liberty for the sake of progress; the established picture of Benthamite individualism is taken from a Darwinist who cares nothing for individuals. But the real affinities are often no less startling—Hume shares Montaigne's preference for Catholicism; John Mill denounces nature in the same terms as the Scots Presbyterian ministers castigated by Hume; the collectivist, T. H. Huxley, and the Comtist, Frederick Harrison, echo the *Westminster* reviewers on education, art, and science; the same antipathies shape the lives and work of Bentham, Spencer, and Beatrice Webb. The masters rarely teach what they intend—Hume becomes the patron saint of men utterly devoid of the scepticism and irony he had carefully cultivated; Bentham's gadgets for tolerance come to serve as a dogma of the righteous; Locke's psychology, designed to

restrain human ambition, inspires James Mill to believe that men can be remade to order; John Mill's rejection of organic sociology prepares Englishmen to accept it. The same sentiment felt with equal passion and sincerity comes to bear very different connotations—we move from Hume's detached ironic tolerance to Bentham's "gadgeteering" tolerance to John Mill's geometric tolerance. And the anomalies are endless—two model conservatives, who seem to repeat one another's words, are as far apart as heaven and earth; a radical critic of conservatism denies the necessity for change; a leading admirer of Germany preaches against the love of system, while an arch opponent of German metaphysics becomes the most influential purveyor of the German pursuit of system; England's empire is opposed by advocates of capitalism and cherished by those who wish to transform England's social system; the "progressives" choose God, while their opponents choose man.

In short, we are forcibly reminded that names and doctrines collect a variety of associations and hide a limitless stock of temperaments, beliefs, and purposes. These are arranged and rearranged in unforeseeable patterns. And neither affinities nor divisions, in politics as elsewhere, are ever complete or simple.