

2018

# Theorizing About Human Capacity: A View from the Nineteenth Century

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## Recommended Citation

Peart, Sandra J. and Levy, David M., "Theorizing About Human Capacity: A View from the Nineteenth Century" (2018). *Jepson School of Leadership Studies articles, book chapters and other publications*. 261.  
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# Chapter 1. Theorizing about Human Capacity: A View from the Nineteenth Century

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Final copy published in *The Ethics of Ability and Enhancement*, Jessica Flanigan and Terry L. Price (editors), Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, pp. 9-24.

## **1 Introduction**

Discussions of eugenic policy of the nineteenth century are too often isolated from the larger debates in political economy over human capacity. These debates centered on two questions. First, do all people have roughly the same capabilities, or do some groups have a lower capacity than others? Second, capacity for what? In the nineteenth century political economists in the tradition of Adam Smith through John Stuart Mill argued that, as Gordon Tullock would later put it, “people are people” and there are no racial or other distinctions to be made about our capabilities for labor market, family formation, or other decisions.<sup>1</sup> Late in the century, however, a coalition formed between progressives led by Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, and anthropologists and other so-called “scientists” who “demonstrated” the “inferior” capabilities of groups such as the Irish in Great Britain and former West African slaves, in Jamaica. This was the first, necessary “scientific” step towards the rise of eugenic policy-making.

The second required step was the transition from theorizing about capacity for happiness to capacity for something physical and additive, “general good.” For the political economists in the tradition of Smith through Mill, the desideratum was capacity for happiness. For the political economists, anthropologists, and biologists, in the eugenic tradition, the answer was capacity in some physical or intellectual sense. Of course, if the metric of capacity is happiness, then it is straightforward, though not entirely uncontroversial, to argue that individuals are the best judge of this.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Carlyle and his followers argued that, left to their own devices, some, inferior people would make poor choices, reducing the general good. Individuals, in this argument, ought not to be trusted to make the best choices for society-at-large (or, some also argued, for

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<sup>1</sup> Tullock extended the range of analytical egalitarianism to include economists, explaining why differences in institutions make economics more of a racket than a science. (Tullock 1966; Levy and Peart 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Here we set aside consideration of F. Y. Edgeworth’s views. Edgeworth’s eugenic argument rested on the supposition of a differential capacity for happiness. To get around the difficulty noted in the text, he supposed the existence of a hedometer that would enable the expert to measure the time integral of happiness. (Edgeworth 1881; Peart and Levy 2005). As far as we can determine, Edgeworth’s argument was simply too difficult for a popular audience.

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themselves).<sup>3</sup> Of course, the final step in the rise of eugenic policy making, was that they therefore needed the strong hand of the state to intervene in order to obtain the “general good.”

Thus, in our view, the distinction between a metric of happiness, “general happiness,” and physical capacity, “general good” is terribly important.<sup>4</sup> Charles Darwin used the “general good” metric in his 1871 *Descent of Man*. But Darwin was not the first to make this argument. Indeed, in *Descent of Man*, Darwin cited a political economist (W. R. Greg) who carried the burden of the argument in opposition to Mill’s happiness metric and in favor of a physical measure of capacity.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Against Abstract Economic People

As is well known to those who have read our work, we attribute the notion of abstract economic persons to Adam Smith. Formulated most strongly in his 1776 *Wealth of Nations*, Smith there theorized that all observed differences in outcomes were the result of the division of labor. Thus, all people are equally capable and for Smith, specialization, luck and history explain different outcomes. Racial<sup>6</sup> group differences are then simply the result of differential specializations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Carlyle’s “Negro question” (Carlyle 1849) opened the debated between Victorian literary figures and adherents of the “dismal science” (his coinage) over the use of the “beneficent whip” to improve people.

<sup>4</sup> “The term, general good, may be defined as the means by which the greatest possible number of individuals can be reared in full vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under the conditions to which they are exposed. As the social instincts both of man and the lower animals have no doubt been developed by the same steps, it would be advisable, if found practicable, to use the same definition in both cases, and to like as the test of morality, the general good or welfare of the community, rather than the general happiness; but this definition would perhaps require some limitation on account of political ethics (Darwin 1871, p. 94). We have elsewhere stressed the importance of this distinction (Peart and Levy, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Donald Winch’s studies of the period do not notice the significance of Greg (Winch 1965, 2001). As we shall see, Darwin quoted Greg with approbation. Greg was elected a member of the Political Economy Club in 1867.

<sup>6</sup> It will soon become clear that notions of “race” are rather ill-defined at this time but in essence the word is a way to describe a group with so-called lower ability than others. As such, Irish, Jews, Africans, and even women are sometimes included in the analysis. For more on the shifting of the argument, see Peart and Levy (2005).

<sup>7</sup> “The difference of natural talents in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labour. The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education. When they came into the world, and for the first six or eight years of their existence, they were perhaps, very much alike, and neither their parents nor playfellows could perceive any remarkable difference. About that age, or soon after, they come to be employed in very different occupations. The difference of talents comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at last the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarce any resemblance. But without the disposition to truck, barter, and exchange, every man must have procured to himself every necessary and conveniency of life which he wanted. All must have had the same duties to perform,

From Smith's time, through the mid-nineteenth century, this position by-and-large characterized much of political economy. At mid-century, however, it was attacked on all sides, by anthropologists who claimed to have discovered racial differences between the Irish and English, by biologists who sought the "general good", and by progressives who believed that the English were more capable than West Africans, Jews, and the Irish.

We have referred to the doctrine that people are essentially equally capable, as analytical egalitarianism. In what follows we examine how the political economist and co-founder of eugenics, W. R. Greg attacked this doctrine in the course of his forceful opposition to Mill's political economy. The context of the debate between Mill and Greg was whether the Irish were as capable as the English, in which case they possessed the capacity to govern themselves, as Mill argued, or whether they ought to be ruled by their superiors, as Greg maintained.<sup>8</sup> Underlying all of Greg's many essays was the claim that there is no abstract human. Instead, there are humans of different sorts or, to use an older phrase, people with different "national characters."

The most straightforward of Greg's exposition is his response to Mill's reform proposal to encourage peasant proprietorship in Ireland. Mill argued that Ireland's economic woes were the result of institutions and incentives, rather than the fault of some inherent flaw in the Irish character. He abstracted from race and focused instead on property rights, arguing that if well-established property rights were reinstated in Ireland, the Irish would respond accordingly and the Irish "problem" would be resolved. This position, outlined in Mill's 1848 *Principles of Political Economy* and elsewhere was sharply disputed in the decades that followed. Greg objected specifically to the abstract accounts of human beings put forward by Classical economists on the grounds that Mill had neglected that the Irish were simply incapable. In Greg's view, by contrast, if the institutions were changed the Irish would remain impoverished because they simply were less capable—of saving, of producing, of planning—than the English. Mill's account failed because it abstracted from the racial difference:

'Make them peasant-proprietors,' says Mr. Mill. But Mr. Mill forgets that, till you change the character of the Irish cottier, peasant-proprietorship would work no miracles. He would fall behind the instalments of his purchase-money, and would be called upon to surrender his farm. He would often neglect it in idleness, ignorance, jollity and drink, get into debt, and have to sell his property to the newest owner of a great estate. ... Mr. Mill never deigns to consider that an Irishman is an Irishman, and not an average human being—an idiomatic and idiosyncratic [sic], not an abstract, man. (Greg 1869b, p. 78).

Greg published this essay in 1869. Although he was perhaps the most persistent theorist who presupposed that the Irish were inferior, he was by no means the only so-called scientist who made this case. Anthropologists of the time were busy constructing an "index of negresence" by

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and the same work to do, and there could have been no such difference of employment as could alone give occasion to any great difference of talents." (Smith, 1904, Book I, chapter 2.)

<sup>8</sup> We have discussed analytical egalitarianism in several places, e.g., Peart and Levy (2005). In Levy and Peart (2016), we take up Smith's attack on the doctrine of natural character. There we document how Smith uses "race" as a term to describe occupation. The link between his usage and that which would be common in our language community is the caste system in which an occupation is inherited. John Rawls questioned the assumption of roughly natural equality of capacity in the case of caste systems, a consideration that precedes his brief consideration of eugenics (Rawls 1971, p. 107).

which to measure the inferiority of the Irish.<sup>9</sup> That home-rule was at stake is clear from the below cartoon showing John Bright selling quackery medicine to the Irish whose eyes are bulging and whose jaws protrude. According to the artist, John (later Sir John) Tenniel, the principal cartoonist for *Punch* in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Irish men depicted below are incapable of ruling themselves. Since the women are directed by their fathers or husbands, they have not devolved.

**[Insert Fig. 1]**

What was the basis for his view that the Irish were inherently inferior, idle, ignorant, and drunk? Greg expounded that view in an earlier essay that attracted a good deal of contemporary attention.

### **3 The Survival of the Unfit**

In 1868, Greg published his influential essay, “On the Failure of ‘Natural Selection’ in the Case of Man” in *Fraser’s Magazine*. It was here that he argued that those with inferior capabilities, without intervention, would multiply rapidly and thereby interfere with the attainment of the “general good.” To testify to the significance of this essay, consider how Darwin described it in *Descent of Man*:

I have hitherto only considered the advancement of men from a semi-human condition to that of the modern savage. But some remarks on the action of Natural Selection in civilized nations may be worth adding. This subject has been ably discussed by Mr W. R. Greg, and previously by Mr Wallace and Mr Galton. Most of my remarks are taken from these three authors” (Darwin 1871, p. 161).

The context of Greg’s essay is the 1864 paper presented at the Anthropological Society by Alfred Wallace. Wallace described the law of natural selection, and then he argued that human sympathy for one another and the human division of labor both attenuate natural selection.<sup>10</sup> People care about people and they consequently assist the frail and less capable to survive. Further, with the division of labor human strength, intellectual or physical, no longer is required for survival: the strong will take on tasks that require strength while those who are less strong are able to contribute to human happiness in other ways. For Wallace, this attenuation of the law of natural selection provided an interesting example of how humans differ from other species. For Greg, however, this interference with natural selection serves also to interfere with human progress: “The great wise, righteous, and beneficent principle which in all other animals, and in man himself, up to a certain stage of his progress, tends to the improvement and perfection of the race, would appear to be forcibly interfered with and nearly set aside; nay, to be set aside pretty much in direct proportion to the complication, completeness, and culmination of our civilisation.” Greg continued to lament the interference with the survival of the fittest:

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed review of the contemporary literature on this topic, see Peart and Levy (2005).

<sup>10</sup> We discuss the role of sympathy in nineteenth century evolutionary thinking in Levy and Peart (2015).

Our thesis is this: that the indisputable effect of the state of social progress and culture we have reached, of our high civilisation, in a word, is to counteract and suspend the operation of that righteous and salutary law of “natural selection” in virtue of which the best specimens of the race—the strongest, the finest, the worthiest—are those which survive, surmount, become paramount, and take precedence; succeed and triumph in the struggle for existence, become the especial progenitors of future generations, continue the species, and propagate an ever improving and perfecting type of humanity (Greg 1868, p. 356).

In his *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill had advocated for a self-directed Malthusian population restraint as a means to reduce human misery and attain happiness. For Greg, such Malthusian prudential restraint on population growth placed human happiness ahead of the new goal of human “progress” and, as such, Greg eschewed such self-directed choices. More than this, Greg argued that Malthus’s population operated differently on those with different capacities. The “lower classes” multiply relatively quickly, because they are inherently “reckless”, while those in the “improving classes” are more capable of abstention. In the 1868 essay, Greg wrote:

Thus the imprudent, the desperate,—those whose standard is low, those who have no hope, no ambition, no self-denial,—on the one side, and the pampered favourites of fortune on the other, take precedence in the race of fatherhood, to the disadvantage or the exclusion of the prudent, the resolute, the striving and the self-restrained. The very men whom a philosophic statesman, or a guide of some superior race would select as most qualified and deserving to continue the race, are precisely those who do so in the scantiest measure. Those who have no need for exertion, and those who have no opportunities for culture, those whose frames are damaged by indulgence, and those whose frames are weakened by privation, breed ad libitum; while those whose minds and bodies have been hardened, strengthened and purified by temperance and toil, are elbowed quietly aside in the unequal press. Surely the ‘selection’ is no longer ‘natural’ (1868, p. 123).

Greg then provides a description for how the inferior Celts eventually out-populate the superior Saxon race:

The careless, squalid, unambitious Irishman, fed on potatoes, living in a pig-stye, doting on a superstition, multiplies like rabbits or ephemera:—the frugal, foreseeing, self-respecting, ambitious Scot, stern in his morality, spiritual in his faith, sagacious and disciplined in his intelligence, passes his best years in struggle and in celibacy, marries late, and leaves few behind him. Given a land originally peopled by a thousand Saxons and a thousand Celts,—and in a dozen generations, five sixths of the population would be Celts, but five sixths of the property, of the power, of the intellect, would belong to the one sixth of Saxons that remained. In the eternal ‘struggle for existence,’ it would be the inferior and less favoured race that had prevailed,—and prevailed by virtue not of its qualities but of its faults, by reason not of its stronger vitality but of its weaker reticence and its narrower brain (1868, p.123-4).

It is worthy of note that Darwin quoted, inexactly, this view of the Irish in *Descent of Man* (Darwin 1871, p. 167). For Greg, and those who endorsed this view, there was no point in suggesting, as Mill had, that the Irish would make different, more prudential choices, in the wake of new institutions. Nothing short of direction by their betters or a negative eugenic policy would improve the situation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In terms that the eugenicists employed, “positive” eugenics encouraged births from the desired part of the distribution of the population whereas “negative” eugenics discouraged births from the

The debate over the effects of Malthus's prudential restraint culminated in the 1877 Trial of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant for the crime of distributing contraceptive information at a cost that poor people might afford.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary reports in the *Times*, described the case as a conflict between the views of Mill and Darwin. It was, indeed, in this context that Darwin clarified his views on contraception, in a direction that surprised some, including Bradlaugh himself. Before the trial Bradlaugh wrote to Darwin to ask whether the biologist might testify on Bradlaugh's behalf. Darwin responded to say that his failing health made travel to a trial a hardship, but that in any event if he were to testify he would oppose the widespread availability of such information because it would be used in such a way as to interfere with the attainment of the general good. At the trial, Annie Besant read widely from Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* in her defense, arguing that a law of selection entailing human misery and premature death is anything but "natural."

#### 4 Against Happiness as Norm

A fundamental issue that separated Millian-style political economists from the racists such as Carlyle and Greg, was whether individuals were to be allowed to select their own goals or whether their goals were to be determined exogenously in service of the "general good". In the former case, individuals are trusted to make choices that on balance lead to their individual satisfaction, or happiness. In the latter, a goal of human good is set and then experts determine the means by which the goal is attained. The means may entail individual sacrifice in service to the goal, general good.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of this divide occurred in the context of colonial policy, in particular, the Governor Eyre Controversy (Semmel 1962, Peart and Levy 2005). The controversy surrounded the response by Governor Eyre to a minor uprising amongst former slaves in Jamaica; and whether the rule of law applied to former slaves, as to everyone else. For those who took the view that some are more capable than others, it would be appropriate to respond to the riots using piano wire as whips and murdering rebels without benefit of trial. For those, like Mill, who held to the analytical egalitarian view, Eyre's response was entirely unwarranted. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mill was elected, in his absence, as the head of the group that sought to bring the Governor to trial for his crimes, while Carlyle's disciple, the artist John Ruskin headed the movement to defend Governor Eyre.

Greg chose the occasion of the Eyre controversy to publish an essay in an 1866 issue of *Fraser's Magazine* —the periodical that in 1849 published Carlyle's "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question"— on the issue of race and economic development (Greg 1866). The essay is particularly illuminating because Greg began with a statement of the orthodox race-blind account, that culture is endogenous to material incentives.

Greg begins by pointing out that it is too early to have an informed opinion on the events in Jamaica since the official inquiry had not been released. However, in his view it was not too early to ask whether emancipation has succeeded. He remarked, first, that emancipation had harmed the planters, who were "irretrievably ruined" and "leaving the island." Yet all that might

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undesired part. In Levy and Peart (2015) we trace negative eugenics to an 1874 essay by George Darwin in which he criticized Francis Galton's "positive" proposals as insufficient to attain the "general good." Darwin criticized Greg's unwillingness to put his concerns into legislation.

<sup>12</sup> In Peart and Levy (2005) we discuss the secondary accounts of Darwin's letter; we publish the letter in Peart and Levy (2008).

be “little in our minds if the coloured population were growing prosperous, moral, educated, and contented.” Greg next addressed this question. He first confronted the thesis of cultural endogeneity articulated in foundational form in the *Wealth of Nations*. Smith’s central claim was that “all men” are predisposed to idleness:

It will not, however, do to say, as some cynics and disappointed philanthropists are beginning to say, “Never mind if the negro is idle. All men, even Anglo-Saxons, will be idle under a tropical sun. Why should the negro work, if he can live without work? If the climate predisposes him to indolence and languor—if nature is so bountiful that she furnishes him gratuitously with all that is indispensable for comfortable existence—if his wants are few, and easily supplied, why seek to multiply them artificially, and thus to render life more difficult? If he prefers contentment with the bare necessities of life, it may be that he is a truer philosopher than we who reprove him and would stimulate him. If he chooses to be lazy, he has a right to be so. It is sufficient that he is free, and that we have secured to him his rights” (1866, p. 279).

Against this Smithian thesis, Greg argues for an exogenously determined hierarchy of culture. Absent slavery, the Jamaicans have sunk into indolence. Greg is entirely clear that material output is critical:

In our judgment it is *not* sufficient. It was not for this that we purchased his liberty and sacrificed his master. If this be the result, emancipation must be admitted to have failed. It may be assumed, and must be conceded, that content with the minimum that suffices for bare life, naked inaction, basking indolence, the animal enjoyment and dreary vacuity of barbaric ease, were not the purposes for which even Africans were created, or in which they were designed by Providence to remain; that savage existence—mere existence, vegetable life, life amid yams and plantains, with a cloth round them loins and a thatch over their heads—is not a condition into which England can or ought to allow half a million of her subjects, whom she has taken in hand, to sink; that if this be the result of our work, we have done our work very ill, and must set to work at once to do it better (1866, p. 279).

Unsurprisingly, Greg does not stop with this conclusion. He continues to argue that, lacking capacity and inclination, the former slaves must be forced to civilize, to work, to prevent a “relapse into savagery”:

The negro must be civilised—brought up, that is, to such a stage of civilisation as he is capable of reaching, and to a higher and higher stage as years roll on and generation succeeds to generation. We cannot acquiesce without great guilt in his relapse into savagery. He has no right to be a savage; God made him and all men for advance; he must improve, or die out; ... If the negro can rise and civilise, however slowly, by himself and under his own guidance, by all means leave him to himself, and give him time; if he cannot, then help him, guide him, control him, compel him; but never dream of sitting down helplessly content with a failure of hopes and prophecies and duties so signal—so fatal to him, so discreditable to ourselves (1866, p. 279).

Since self-direction apparently failed to yield the largest physical output, Greg favors the path expounded by Thomas Carlyle, removing self-direction, placing Jamaicans under supervision:

under supervision and direction, and perhaps under contract, and thus develop in them the habits of industry, subordination, regularity, and discipline, which belong to what Mr. Carlyle calls



‘regimented labour’ and the moral virtues which directly or indirectly spring from the relation between employers and employed ;— (1866, p. 299).

Thus, for Greg, stationarity of output presents a justification for the direction of others. J. S. Mill had earlier, taken up the issue of stationarity, and came to a very different conclusion. Indeed, in his *Principles of Political Economy* Mill examined, and defended, stationarity. For Mill, growth of material output is not an end in itself; rather as people’s choices evolve over time they may well substitute into non-material output and enjoy more leisure with stable levels of material goods:.

I cannot, therefore, regard the stationary state of capital and wealth with the unaffected aversion so generally manifested towards it by political economists of the old school. I am inclined to believe that it would be, on the whole, a very considerable improvement on our present condition. I confess I am not charmed with the with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind, or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress. It may be a necessary stage in the progress of civilization, and those European nations which have hitherto been so fortunate as to be preserved from it, may have it yet to undergo (Mill 1965, pp. 753-74).

At the end of the day, for Mill work is instrumental and people of all races (though, as noted above, perhaps not all cultures) are best able to make decisions about how much to work. The key for Mill is that those in what he thought of as “backward” cultures will acquire habits of decision making as education and experience enables them to do so.

## 5 A Concluding Image

The danger of focusing on the writings of one forgotten political economist is that it is all too easy to believe that Greg did not have much influence. Indeed, it may be well be that Greg was simply articulating the commonplace of one ideological faction. We close not by defending Greg’s importance but by reproducing an image by Charles Bennett (“Slavey”), which depicts the theme that without direction, those who pursue happiness are doomed to devolve.<sup>13</sup> In the below image a woman makes a self-directed choice to enter the labor market and earn wages. In so doing she, like the former slaves in Jamaica, devolves into an inferior creature. To cement the comparison between Slavey and the former slaves, the caption to the image, contained in a book entitled *Shadow and Substance*, refers to Carlyle’s 1849 article about the former slaves in Jamaica.

[Insert Fig. 2]

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<sup>13</sup> The theme of without direction, devolution, is systematically laid out by Charles Kingsley (Levy and Peart 2006). Kingsley, as far as we know, never attacked Mill’s positions. Kingsley, however, did offer a theological interpretation of natural selection that Darwin was very quick to seize upon in the second (and in all later) editions.

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