

HUMAN PERFECTIBILITY AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION:
A STUDY OF WILLIAM GODWIN'S *POLITICAL JUSTICE*

by

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ABSTRACT

British philosopher William Godwin (1756-1836), in the tradition of the French Enlightenment, held a supreme faith in the power of reason and truth to improve society and the human condition. In an *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Happiness and Morals*, Godwin searched for the most effective method of attaining the general happiness. His investigation included both public and political forms of society. Through these inquiries he concluded that the improvement of individuals offered the best hope for improving society itself. Moreover, Godwin linked the prospect for individual improvement with a communicative practice based on sincere and rational conversation.

In this thesis, I reconstruct Godwin's theory of human perfectibility and social communication and argue that his account is both coherent and plausible. I consider objections that claim Godwin overemphasized the role of reason in improvement and that suggest his communicative ideal is unworkable. I also present Godwin in the social / historical context of 1790's England so that we might gain valuable insight into his proposals for social change.

To Everyone

The Man
Of virtuous soul commands not, nor
obeys.
Power, like a desolating pestilence,
Pollutes whate'er it touches; and
obedience,
Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom,
truth,
Makes slaves of men, and, of the human
frame,
A mechanized automation.

Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 1812

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT, *iii*
DEDICATION, *iv*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, *v*

INTRODUCTION, *1*

CHAPTER

- I. A VIEW OF GODWIN'S PERFECTIBILITY AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION IN 1790'S ENGLAND, *3*
The Debate on France: Price, Burke, Paine, and Godwin, *4*
Reflections on the Revolution in France, *7*
Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, *12*
Practical Philosophy: Godwin, the Reform Movement and Pitt's Repression, *21*
Cursory Strictures, *26*
Considerations, *31*
Godwin's Fall from Popularity, *33*
Thoughts, *34*
- II. HUMAN PERFECTIBILITY, *43*
Basis of Perfectibility, *47*
The Characters of Men Originate in their External Circumstances, *48*
The Actions of Men are Necessary, *55*
The Voluntary Actions of Men Originate in their Opinions, *62*
- III. SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, *74*
Positive Institution, *74*
Revolution, *76*
Political Associations, *79*
Open Communication, *82*
Sincerity, *84*

IV. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES: GODWIN'S PERFECTIBILITY AND
SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, 88

Part One-Perfectibility, 88

Psychological Egoism, 89

Benevolent Disinterest, 92

Part Two-Social Communication (Open Communication), 98

Censure, 98

Sincerity, 104

CONCLUSION, 108

BIBLIOGRAPHY, 110

VITA AUCTORIS, 114

INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the prospects of bettering the human condition from a moral standpoint. It asks, are human beings capable of improving their conduct, *i.e.*, of adopting a more benevolent manner, or, are we constituted in such a way that makes this sort of change unthinkable? Furthermore, if improvement is possible, what is the best method of ensuring steady progress? In an *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, British philosopher William Godwin (1756-1836) attempted to answer these questions with a theory about human perfectibility and social communication. However, someone might ask, what is the relevance or interest in a theory that is now two centuries old? Indeed, we are on the brink of a new millennium and in the midst of unprecedented technological progress. Global communication and information networks, space travel, and even virtual reality have become our reality. Why, then, should we examine the ideas of yet another social theorist who lived in an era so different from our own?

The answer is that the same questions that motivated Godwin are perhaps even more relevant today. Few would dispute the fact that in this century, humankind's worst enemy is itself. Our most efficient killing-machine is war, and through its practice governments have annihilated hundreds of millions of people. Also, starvation continues to be a world-wide phenomenon. Yet, in nations with access to means of subsistence, extravagance and luxury reign as supreme values over and above simplicity and generosity. Do these facts indicate that as a species we are incapable of improving in a moral sense? I believe the question of human improvement is worthy of consideration.

Godwin, in the tradition of Enlightenment philosophy, thought that human beings by their nature are capable of indefinite moral improvement. Moreover, he believed that there is a vital connection between communication practices and the prospects for such improvement. He argued that the best way to improve society is by strengthening the

intellectual independence of individuals through a system of open communication. The idea is that as people increase their understanding, they gradually come to see what is truly good / desirable. My task in this essay is to reconstruct Godwin's theory of human perfectibility and social communication and to demonstrate that his account is both coherent and plausible.

In the first chapter, I introduce Godwin by showing his place and relevance within the field of social / political philosophy. I situate him historically so that we might gain a better understanding of his views about perfectibility and communication. In the second chapter, I present the theoretical principles of Godwin's perfectibility. This involves an explication of each principle, a presentation of Godwin's arguments in support of them, and an explanation of how they form a coherent theory.

In the third chapter, I focus on the practical aspects of perfectibility found in Godwin's theory of social communication. I present his conversational ideal, which I call "open communication," in comparison with the type of mass communication found in political parties or "political associations." I also present Godwin's arguments against government-directed change and change forced through revolution. In the final chapter, I show how Godwin can respond to objections against the role of reason in perfectibility, and against charges that open communication is unworkable. My hope is that these responses will further clarify Godwin's ideas and their plausibility.

Chapter I

A View of Godwin's Perfectibility and Social Communication in 1790's England

This chapter presents Godwin in the social / historical context of 1790's England. Here we can gain valuable insight into his views about human perfectibility and social communication.

First, by locating Godwin and his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in the ideological debate on the French Revolution, we can compare his views with other key players, namely: Price (*The Love of our Country*); Burke (*The Reflections on the Revolution in France*); and Paine (*The Rights of Man*). For instance, what are the best means towards societal / human improvement? Is centralized government the proper vehicle from which to initiate change or should individuals take more responsibility? Is revolution acceptable in the face of poor government or is it better to rely on the process of gradual change?

Second, by looking at Godwin's practical writing in the *Cursory Strictures* and the *Considerations* we are able to see his unique position on the battle between England's radical reform movement and the government's policy of repression. The former proposes means of popular agitation to promote radical change and the latter restricts basic freedoms to quiet the protest. Finally, in Godwin's fall from popularity, we see his emphasis on sincere communication in the face of insincere critics.

1. *The Debate on France: Price, Burke, Paine, and Godwin*

Late eighteenth century Europe provides a background of events that exemplify the connection between ideology and social change. One could argue, for instance, that the American Revolution (1775-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1799) were significantly influenced by the ideas of the French Enlightenment.¹ Known as the *philosophes*, Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Condorcet, d'Holbach and others, "challenged traditional modes of thought concerning religion, governments, and morality" (Stumpf 290). They held that "reason provides the most reliable guide to man's destiny" (*ibid.*). The *philosophes* contributed to *The Encyclopedia* which was published between 1751-1772 and consisted of twenty-eight volumes and nearly eighteen-thousand articles. The set represented "the accumulated knowledge and rationalist, secularist views of the French Enlightenment and prescribed economic, social, and political reforms" (Seban 225). Its influence was extensive and is attributed to helping "crystallize the confidence of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie in the capacity of reason to dispel the shadows of ignorance and improve society" (Seban 226). Indeed, the Enlightenment helped popularize the study of politics which was directly linked to improvement; specifically, the idea of constituting "organized societies based on elective representation" (Kropotkin 6).

The American Revolution, according to Enlightenment thinking, was a strong sign of political improvement for it demonstrated to both French and "British radicals that it was possible to erect a government according to the will of the people and in defence of their sovereignty and their natural rights" (Dickinson 6). Furthermore, the Americans "provided empirical evidence that a fairer representation of the people did not necessarily lead to social anarchy" (*ibid.*). With the events of the revolution in France, "a country long regarded as the prime example of absolute monarchy" (Dickinson 7), came the final "proof that a new age of liberty was at hand" (*ibid.*).

¹ "Practically all the philosophers who founded their philosophical positions upon Locke's Empiricism may be regarded as philosophers of the French Enlightenment" (Sahakian 165).

In fact:

[t]he revolution was sudden and surprising: it produced a political earthquake sending seismic shocks throughout Europe. The impact on Britain was profound and was widely diffused throughout the whole of society. Within a few short months the strongest monarch in Europe was humbled by his subjects, the entrenched privileges of the aristocracy were condemned, the church was placed under secular control, the inalienable rights of man were proclaimed, and a representative assembly was charged with drawing up a new constitution. (*Ibid.*)

Of course, not everyone saw the French Revolution as an “unequaled triumph of theory” (Brown 34) or as proof of the “doctrine that reason had enormous power over the actions of man” (*ibid.*). In England, an intense ideological debate took shape following the revolution. The immediate reaction was favourable since “it seemed that France had at last decided to share in the glorious constitutional liberty characteristic of England since 1688” (*ibid.*).² Dickinson says:

British reformers of all shades of opinion were galvanized into action. John Cartwright³ declared: “[t]he French, Sir, are not only asserting their own rights, but they are advancing the general liberties of mankind.” Richard Price proclaimed: “what an eventful period is this! I am thankful that I have lived to see . . . the rights of men better understood than ever: and nations panting for liberty, which seemed to have lost the idea of it . . . I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs.” (Dickinson 7)

Price’s speech to the London Revolution Society, *On the Love of our Country*, was made in November 1789 at the Old Jewry and marked the beginning of the debate on France.⁴ Price proclaimed the rights that were supposed to have been established in 1688, namely: “the right of the people to worship as they chose, to resist power when abused, and to choose their rulers, dismiss them for misconduct and form a government for themselves” (Brown 35). The publication of Price’s speech generated considerable

² 1688 marks the date of the Glorious Revolution in England.

³ John Cartwright was the spokesman for the revived Society of Constitutional Information (SCI) and Dr. Richard Price was the spokesman for the London Revolution Society.

⁴ Mark Philp cautions us that the debate on France consisted of many levels “from the gentle reasonings of the philomaths to the insurrectionary activities of the later radicals, and from masterpieces of literature and rhetoric to blatantly scurrilous attacks on both Paine and Burke” (Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* 67). I focus mainly on the ideological aspects of the debate in conjunction with the battle to control public opinion.

interest in the already excited communicative atmosphere induced by the events in France.⁵ Reform was the topic of the day: the London Revolution Society forged ahead with a new intensity, the revived Society of Constitutional Information (SCI) “resumed its dissemination of radical publications” (Dickinson 7), and a “minority of opposition Whigs” (Dickinson 8) decided “to dedicate themselves to moderate political reform” (*ibid.*). The conservative element of the debate was yet to surface fully. However, with the build-up of such a politically charged atmosphere it was only a matter of time. As Dickinson recounted:

[o]n 14 July 1790 the Whig Club organized a monster reform banquet to celebrate Bastille Day. Over 650 friends of liberty attended. Resolutions were passed rejoicing at the establishment of Liberty in France and pledging support for parliamentary reform at home. Although this meeting alarmed Edmund Burke, and helped drive a wedge between conservative and liberal Whigs, some of the latter continued their support for political change. (*ibid.*)

Despite the renewed enthusiasm in England for a “Gallic Republicanism” (Marshall, *William Godwin* 37), Edmund Burke came forward in the debate and stood as a pillar of conservatism and a defender of the existing order. He “declared that France, in a political view, was very low and had lost everything, even to her name” (Mahoney xix). His opposition to having the Test and Corporation acts repealed was also indicative of his overall stance.⁶ Price and the London Revolution Society had been “waging the campaign for repeal, in press and parliament” (Dickinson 6). Burke, however, felt it prudent,

⁵ In the latter half of the Eighteenth-century the middle class had established “their own independent organizations to inform themselves about public affairs and to develop advanced notions of their political rights and liberties. Clubs and societies enabled the middling orders to combine in mutual support and to organize themselves independently of the patrician elite. The members of these associations learned to organize their own activities without resorting to aristocratic leadership. They gradually became critical of the governing elite and ultimately used these institutions as vehicles for co-ordinating campaigns to challenge the political influence of their social superiors” (Dickinson 2).

⁶ The Test and Corporation Acts “restricted offices in central and local government to Anglicans. In waging the campaign for repeal, in press and Parliament, from 1787 to 1790 the dissenters and their allies among the liberal Anglicans argued that liberty of conscience was a natural and inalienable right and therefore the state had no legitimate authority to impose civil disabilities on particular religious opinions. In demanding religious equality these men were led into a campaign for political liberty as the best means of securing all their natural rights” (Dickinson 6).

especially at the time (1790), to defend the authority of the Church of England even if just to set an example. His main interest was “to keep the distemper of France from the least countenance in England” (Mahoney xx).

Reflections on The Revolution in France

Although Burke’s conservatism was initially drowned in the “great swelling sentiments of Liberty” (Brown 35) immediately following the events in France, the subsequent publication of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* secured his position as “chief foe of the Enlightenment” (Mahoney xv). The *Reflections* was published in November 1790 and although it assumed the form of a letter to one of Burke’s correspondents, it was actually a reply to Price’s sermon, *On the Love of our Country*.⁷ Burke argued with Price over “what exactly had been settled by the revolution of 1688” (Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* 67) and attacked the London Revolution Society for relying “on the false and seditious language of rights” in an attempt to threaten “the security of the established church and the state.” He also condemned the French for replacing “a tolerable monarchy with a despotic democracy with few redeeming features” (*ibid.*).

Part of Burke’s strategy in the *Reflections* was to differentiate the basis on which both the English and French Revolutions took place; the former being acceptable because it maintained a respect for the past, while the latter was intolerable because its goal was to cut all ties with tradition and begin anew. Indeed, Burke

endeavors to demonstrate in the *Reflections* that the English liberties praised by Dr. Price in his sermon were not produced by the Glorious Revolution of 1688, but that they were an English inheritance preserved by the Revolution, an essentially defensive revolution which maintained the institution of the monarchy and “the same ranks, the same orders, the same privileges, the same franchises, the same rules for property, the

⁷ Burke’s *Reflections* originally cost five shillings. The first edition sold without delay and within the year ten more additions appeared.

same subordinations." There was a vast difference between the orderly manner in which this revolution was effected and the unruly way the French were staging theirs, which was characterized by violence, destruction, anarchy, and terror. (Mahoney xxii)

Burke's position hinged on an appeal to tradition in that he ascribed "a kind of hereditary wisdom to hereditary political and social rights" (Hook xv). Thus, he rejected the French experiment because it undermined the authority of the past and destroyed its foundations, based on "a revolution of doctrine and theoretic dogma" (Mahoney xxii). Instead of destroying the work of generations, Burke argued, "[y]ou might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those old foundations" (Burke 40). However, "you chose to act as if you had never been molded into civil society and had everything to begin anew." Consequently, "[y]ou began ill, because you began by despising everything that belonged to you" (*ibid.*). Burke's arguments, although criticized by his opponents as emotional and therefore "designed to appeal to men's prejudices rather than to their reason" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 68), nonetheless carried great weight in terms of rousing public support:

[t]he reaction was amazing. The apathy, the amused indifference, and the positive approval with which the majority of Englishmen had previously viewed the French Revolution gave way to a new feeling of deep concern and an awakening to the potential danger. (Mahoney xxi)

Indeed, Burke's *Reflections* had, according to plan, significantly contributed to the awakening of conservative concerns, especially among the propertied and ruling class. The conservative element from this point on became more alert to what they perceived to be the danger that the growth of British radicalism represented.

The Rights of Man

The liberal reaction to Burke's *Reflections* came quickly. The first was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* in 1790, which was followed in 1791 by Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* and James Mackintosh's *Vindicae Gallicae*.⁸ It was Paine's answer to Burke that generated the most interest: "[p]ublished in many cheap editions it reached tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of readers" (Dickinson 20). Paine supported the events in France as a man of reason "rather than tradition" (Thomis & Holt 6), and, basing his argument on the doctrine of natural rights, stated "that each age had the right to establish any political system which would fit its own needs" (Dickinson 14). The French monarchy had failed to meet the needs of the people. The people, then, in exercising their natural rights, chose to rebel in order that they might secure a governing body to act on their behalf. Mackintosh also claimed that utility provides reason to exercise one's natural or civil rights.⁹ He suggested that "government 'may be made to be respected, not because it is ancient, or because it is sacred, not because it has been established by Barons, or applauded by Priests, but because it is useful'" (Thomis & Holt 6). In other words, when government becomes counterproductive to the needs of the people it is not to be respected.

Burke's view, on the other hand, was based on a "historic utilitarianism" whereby through the "re-interpretation of the Revolution of 1688" he opposed the "doctrine of inherent natural rights" (*ibid.*) and warned that it is in the common interest to uphold the sanctity and wisdom of the past. In the *Reflections* he rejected Price's claim that "the

⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft was also the author of the pioneer feminist tract, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792.

⁹ "In the late eighteenth century, except in the pages of Bentham [and Godwin] whose readership was very limited, utility was by no means a single principle by which to judge all acts; to appeal to utility was merely to claim that if an institution was to be justified it had to be shown that it furthered people's interests. The vagueness with which such terms were used in much of the writing of the late eighteenth century should not be taken as incoherence, but as an indication that the radicals were appealing to terms in common use in everyday language rather than to rigorously specified philosophical terms of art" (Philp. *Godwin's Political Justice* 72).

Glorious Revolution had proclaimed the most important rights inherent in the nature of free men” (Dickinson 6), namely: the right “to chuse our own governors; to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves” (*ibid.*). Burke argued “that if the people of England possessed such a right before the Revolution . . . the English nation did, at the time of the Revolution, most solemnly renounce and abdicate it, for themselves, and for all their posterity, for ever” (Paine 127-8). Paine challenged Burke’s reasoning by suggesting that he confused the right by delegation with the right by assumption. The idea is that government, while in power, has a right to amend, create, or abolish laws in accordance with the proper procedures (delegation). However, if government creates a law that cannot be amended or abolished from that point on, then this is what Paine referred to as a right by assumption. In his view the English parliament, at that time, had the right to forsake the rights in question. However, “in addition to this right, which they possessed by delegation, *they set up another right by assumption*, that of binding and controuling [sic] posterity to the end of time” (Paine 128). Paine admitted the former right but rejected the latter. He argued that no government, or body of men, can ever possess the right to control posterity for all time. Rather:

[e]very age and generation must be as free to act for itself in all cases as the ages and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies. (*Ibid.*)

Paine attempted to show that Burke’s position was arbitrary since it places more power in the hands of the dead than the living. It makes more sense, in Paine’s view, that the “[r]evolution settlement in Britain . . . should only be accepted so long as the people regarded its terms beneficial” (Dickinson 14).

Burke, though, argued that it is wise to trust in a system that works, as opposed to risking changes based on little more than abstract reasoning, that might initiate the kind of social upheaval seen in France.¹⁰

Paine's arguments, like those of other radicals of his time, were based on the idea that all men possess natural rights or "those which appertain to man in right of his existence" (Paine 151) such as "intellectual rights or rights of the mind, and also all those rights of acting as an individual for his own comfort and happiness, which are not injurious to the natural rights of others" (*ibid.*). His appeal to the natural rights of man directly opposed Burke's view, according to which rights are "always special, or partial, historical, and limited" (Hook xiv). For Burke, rights are granted via the authority of men, whereas for Paine, every man from birth possesses natural rights which no authority can transgress.

Paine's ideas "crystallized extreme opinion on one side of the controversy, as Burke did on the other" (Cobban 16). Paine, if you will, was the prototype for the new radicalism, while Burke was the ultra conservative skeptic. However, the extreme opposition in views was not surprising, especially in what was considered a pamphlet war. Political pamphlets such as the *Reflections* or *The Rights of Man* were commonly used to generate public opinion in Eighteenth-century culture. The general aim of pamphlet writing "was not to produce a finely-honed philosophical argument to be discussed objectively and dispassionately" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 72). Rather, it was "to appeal to the common sense and common traditions of the reader to secure his support." Consequently, the successful pamphleteer for the most part used "everyday language" (*ibid.*) and tempered extensive argumentation with appeals to emotion. Clearly, Paine and Burke were masters of the art.

¹⁰ "If Burke's criticisms were unfair to the idealists who began the Revolution, events, leading through the Reign of Terror and the corrupt oligarchy of the Directory to the tyranny of a Bonaparte, justified him in the end. If accurate prophecy is the test of a political thinker, Burke stands supreme" (Cobban 9).

Enquiry Concerning Political Justice

Just as Burke's *Reflections* had incited numerous replies from the radical wing, so too did Paine's *Rights of Man* stir up a conservative reaction, seen in pamphlets such as John Bowles's *A Protest against T. Paine's Rights of Man* (1792), William Playfair's *Inevitable Consequences of Reform in Parliament* (1792), William Vincent's *Short Hints Upon Levelling* (1792), and others (Dickinson 30). However, there was one significant work that appeared in 1793 which would not easily fit into the categories that Burke and Paine had established. William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* proposed an "argument about the sanctity of private judgment and the conditions for the emergence of truth" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 78). Godwin's radicalism argued against the coercive change found in both violent revolution and in "positive institution."¹¹ He also rejected the type of mass communication found in political associations in favour of a communicative practice based on contemplative discussion. Although his place in the debate on France is by no means evident, we can say that his sympathies, for the most part, were with the radical movement.¹²

The events in France certainly "had been a revelation, an intoxication" (Locke, Don 50) and "an inspiration" (*ibid.*) for Godwin and the origins of *Political Justice*:

[o]f the desirableness of a government in the utmost degree simple¹³ he was not persuaded but in consequence of ideas suggested by the French Revolution. To the

¹¹ 'Positive institution' refers to systems of government and or law.

¹² Godwin, like most Enlightenment radicals, shared a belief in an "unbounded freedom for the individual, or a freedom limited only by such duties as were imposed by the universal fraternity" (Dowden 14). He had "extensive contacts with some of the old guard of the SCI [Society of Constitutional Information], and he had acquaintances throughout the radical sectors of the publishing industry" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 75). Godwin, Holcroft and a few others had helped Paine publish the first part of the *Rights of Man* in 1791. Godwin "thus knew many people with radical sympathies, some of whom were members of radical organizations. But he was not at the centre of the stage of the practical political struggle" (*ibid.*).

¹³ Note that when Godwin began writing his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* that he had not yet arrived at his anarchist conclusions. He was still inclined to support positive institution, albeit, a minimal form. He sympathized with the notion of a return to nature or simplicity; "[t]he return to nature signified a simplification in social life in contrast with the artificialities and conventions which had accumulated in

same event he owes the determination of mind which gave birth to the present work.
(Godwin. *PJ* 69-70)

He began writing his political treatise in September 1791 after proposing the work to the publisher Robinson in June. Godwin then left his job at the *New Annual Register*, and, with Robinson's financial support, spent the next sixteen months writing. Godwin's project differed from that of either Paine or Burke by the fact that *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* was a book. Pamphlets, in order "to reach as wide an audience as possible as quickly as possible sold at a low price" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 74). Books, on the other hand, were much more expensive and so were not "intended to capture a mass market" (*ibid.*). *Political Justice* was therefore not directly implicated in the "struggle to secure the allegiance of an increasingly wide audience on one side or another of what Burke had successfully turned into a polarised debate" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 73). Furthermore, Godwin did not offer any detailed argument about the events in France, and so there is no outward intent to persuade us to one side or the other. Rather, his book "is above all an intellectual project--a piece of philosophy--and this in itself places it beyond the parameters set by the polemical objectives pursued by the pamphleteers" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 75). As far as Godwin may be said to contribute to the debate "he does discuss many of the principles to which the pamphleteers referred in support of their claims" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 73). However, "he does not merely invoke them or allude to them; he tries to provide a much more philosophically serious account of political society and moral principles" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 75). Moreover, unlike the pamphleteers, Godwin did not appeal to "terms in common use in everyday language" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 72). Instead, *Political Justice* employed philosophical terminology and relied on extensive argumentation to achieve its objectives. Nevertheless, Godwin

a highly complex age" (Dowden 14).

worked with the utmost care and thoroughness, taking extraordinary pains to make what he had to say as clear and vigorous as he could make it. "It has been my lot," he wrote some time later, "to have occasional intercourse with some of those who consider themselves as profound, who deliver their oracles in obscure phraseology, and who make it their boast that few men can understand them, and those few only through a process of abstract reflection and by means of unwearied application." This was undoubtedly an account of the method of his friend Coleridge. His own was the opposite. "I felt that I had nothing to say, that it should be very difficult to understand. I resolved, if I could help it, not to 'darken counsel by words without knowledge.'" (Brown 38)

Godwin stated that *Political Justice* "is an investigation concerning that form of public or political society, that system of intercourse and reciprocal action, extending beyond the bounds of a single family, which shall be found most to conduce" (Godwin, *PJ* 79) to the general good. Notice that Godwin did not limit his enquiry to the realm of political society but included in his investigation public life as well. Indeed, he conceived politics to "be the proper vehicle of a liberal morality" (Godwin, *PJ* 68). Godwin "anticipates the idea that the 'political is the personal'" (Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible* 218) with the assertion that the general improvement hinges on individual improvement, and, the latter, therefore, was a main consideration of his project:

[t]hat description of ethics will be found perhaps to be worthy of slight estimation which confines itself to petty detail and the offices of private life, instead of designing the combined and simultaneous improvement of communities and nations. But, if individual correction ought not to be the grand purpose of ethics, neither ought it by any means to be overlooked. It appeared sufficiently practicable to make of such a treatise, exclusively of its direct political use, an advantageous vehicle for this subordinate purpose. The author was accordingly desirous of producing a work from the perusal of which no man should rise without being strengthened in habits of sincerity, fortitude and justice. (Godwin, *PJ* 68)

Godwin's focus on individual improvement stemmed from his belief in the perfectibility of man, *i.e.*, in our ability to continually improve the human condition.¹⁴ I focus on the

¹⁴ Note that the meaning of the term "perfectibility" is not as it sounds, *i.e.*, it sounds like we are capable of being brought to perfection, but it means we are capable of continual improvement. Godwin borrows the term "perfectibility" from the French philosophe, Rousseau. For Rousseau, "perfectibility" refers to "the faculty of self-improvement, which by the help of circumstances, gradually develops all the rest of our faculties, and is inherent in the species as in the individual" (Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The Discourses* 60). *Political Justice* also was directly inspired by the writings of Holbach and Helvetius.

theoretical foundation of Godwin's perfectibility in Chapter Two and on the practical aspects involving communication in Chapter Three. The theoretical basis of perfectibility attempts to show that human improvement is possible, given human nature. The practical aspect of perfectibility, or the means of improvement, involves a process of "individual correction" (*ibid.*) whereby participants engage in candid and unreserved conversation in order to strengthen their mental independence and, thus, private judgment.¹⁵ Vice, resulting from errors of judgment, is then more able to be detected and corrected. Indeed, Godwin thought that "argument and persuasion are the true means of bringing about a change in sentiments and dispositions" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 76) for "truth always emerges in free and unrestricted discussion" (*ibid.*). Godwin's radicalism, then, did not rely on the practice of politics *per se*, nor did it prescribe any sort of violent change. Rather, it employed "enquiry, communication, and discussion" (Kramnick 34) in the pursuit of truth.

Hence, Godwin departed from Paine, Mackintosh and other radical pamphleteers who justified violence from the point of view that the end justifies the means (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 77). Revolution, according to Godwin, is in almost every instance an unjust and precarious practice.¹⁶ He maintained:

[t]he most sacred of all privileges is that by which each man has a certain sphere, relative to the government of his own actions, and the exercise of his discretion, not liable to be trenched upon by the intemperate zeal or dictatorial temper of his neighbour. To dragoon men into the adoption of what we think is right is an intolerable tyranny. It leads to unlimited disorder and injustice. Every man thinks himself in the right; and, if such a proceeding were universally introduced, the destiny of mankind would be no longer a question of argument, but of strength, presumption or intrigue. (Godwin, *PJ* 262)

¹⁵ "The ideal of an independent, reflective judgment directing the will reworks material taken from the *philosophes*, radicalism, Dissent, and the works of Swift, particularly *Gulliver's Travels*" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 78).

¹⁶ Revolution is acceptable only under the condition of a unanimous public opinion; however, in such an instance there will be little need for violence since "there is as little reason to expect that any usurper will be so mad as to contend with it. If ever it appear to be otherwise, it is because . . . we deceive ourselves with the term majority" (Godwin, *PJ* 259-60).

For Godwin, social change is acceptable only insofar as the level of public understanding corresponds to that change; “in the machine of human society” (Godwin, *PJ* 251) he affirmed that “all the wheels must move together” (*ibid.*). Social improvement therefore requires an increase in the level of public understanding. Godwin argued that the proper method of imparting knowledge is through reason, not coercion, since argument and persuasion, as opposed to violence, are more likely to improve understanding.

Accordingly, the communication of truth is not a forced process but a gradual one:

[t]he interests of the human species requires a gradual, but uninterrupted change. He who should make these principles the regulators of his conduct would not rashly insist upon instant abolition of all existing abuses [t]ruth, however unreserved be the mode of its enunciation, will be sufficiently gradual in its progress. It will be fully comprehended only by slow degrees, by its most assiduous votaries; and the degrees will be still more temperate by which it will pervade so considerable a portion of the community as to render them mature for a change of their common institutions . . . we shall have many reforms, but no revolutions [r]evolutions are the produce of passion, not of sober and tranquil reason. (Quoted by Kramnick 34)

Godwin’s *Political Justice* carefully warned “the friends of innovation” against the inherent danger of prematurely goading mankind “into a position, however abstractly excellent, for which they are in no degree prepared” (Godwin, *PJ* 262) and that the only acceptable revolution is one of opinion. However, as much as it looks like Godwin was joining Burke and “the friends of antiquity,” it must be said that *Political Justice* in no way defended the perpetuation of the existing institutions. Rather:

[j]ust as Burke’s work is an attempt to recreate the world he fears is being lost, Godwin’s also offers a model for the utopia he anticipates. . . .

. . .
. . .

[w]here Burke defends the sublime obscurity of forms of government, Godwin begins by assuming that government is an object of scientific study to be taken apart and analyzed rationally. (Kilgour 52 & 47)

Indeed, Godwin’s aim was to foster the mental independence of individuals through candid conversation, or what he called “the freedom of social communication” (Godwin, *PJ* 289) so that eventually they will be capable of morally guiding and constraining each other

without the interference of positive institution. Godwin believed that “in proportion as weakness and ignorance shall diminish, the basis of government will also decay. That will be its true euthanasia” (Brailsford 115). Positive institution, although a necessary evil in Godwin’s time and our own, damages intellectual independence and thus slows social improvement. Godwin claimed:

where I make the voluntary surrender of my understanding, and commit my conscience to another man’s keeping, the consequence is clear. I then become the most mischievous and pernicious of animals. I annihilate my individuality as a man, and dispose of my force as an animal to him among my neighbours who shall happen to excel in imposture and artifice, and to be least under restraint from the scruples of integrity and justice. I put an end, as to my own share, to that happy collision of understandings upon which the hopes of human improvement depend. (Godwin, *PJ* 243-4)

Thus, he argued that positive institution ultimately rejects individual reasoning and understanding in favour of blind obedience. However, hopes of improvement depend upon the communication of ideas whereby, through the process of argument, knowledge / truth ultimately spreads.

Burke might have very well agreed with Godwin that government stresses compliance rather than independent thinking, but, for Burke, this is what works best. He argued that “that which in the first instance is prejudicial may be excellent in its remoter operation, and its excellence may arise even from the ill effects it produces in the beginning” (Burke 69). Burke cautioned political theorists that the “science of government” (*ibid.*) is above all else a practical endeavor. Certainly, a detached and systematic analysis of political systems may reveal “general prejudices” (Burke 99); still, one should “employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails” (*ibid.*) in them. Burke argued that we should cherish all our old prejudices because they have lasted, and because they have shown us what works. The new thinking, on the other hand, proposed ideas for the general improvement, all of which lack the test of experience. For instance, the idea of simple government appears “infinitely captivating” (Burke 70) only if we “contemplate society in but one point of view.” Experience, however, tells us that “the

nature of man is intricate” and “the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity (*ibid.*).” Thus, for government, “it is better that the whole should be imperfectly and anomalously answered than that, while some parts are provided for with great exactness, others might be totally neglected” (*ibid.*).

Burke’s stance on the “impractical nature” of Enlightenment thinking also applies to his lack of faith in the reasoning power of individuals. He stated:

[w]e are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and ages. (Burke 99)

Burke, as opposed to Godwin, suggested that the individual and his understanding are relatively unimportant. He thought that experience has not shown that people can improve society by thinking for themselves. Instead, it has shown that people can expect improvement by implicitly trusting the inherited experience, wisdom and authority of the state and its apparatus.

Godwin’s *Political Justice*, in direct opposition to Burke, encouraged intellectual independence and subjected government to rational scrutiny. According to Burke’s thinking, however, Godwin, in true Enlightenment fashion, reduced “things concrete to speculative abstractions” (Dowden 102). For instance, Godwin’s conversational ideal challenges popular conceptions of human communicative interaction. Consider his basic guidelines for constructive conversation:

no one has a right to go against reason, no one has a right to coerce another’s judgment, and every individual has a right--indeed, a duty--to call to another’s attention his faults and his failings. . . . [t]ruth progresses through debate and discussion and from each submitting his beliefs and reasoning to the scrutiny of others. (Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* 128)

Godwin’s prescriptions might provide for a “highly democratic discourse” (*ibid.*), but is the theory practical? Does it make sense in light of experience, or, does Godwin arrive at his conclusions *a priori*?

Burke, as a philosopher and “a practical statesman” (Dowden 102), argued that good theory always bridges the gap between speculation and practice. Godwin’s *Political Justice*, by way of its radical conclusions linking communication and future society, represented the archetypal object of Burke’s criticism. Yet at the same time, it was at least in part empirically grounded. For instance, the ideal Godwin promoted “is actually also a description of his own milieu in 1790’s London” (Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* 127):

[o]nce he had concluded his morning’s work Godwin’s day was free and he generally spent it in company—talking and debating while eating, drinking and socialising. His peers’ behaviour was essentially similar: they lived in a round of debate and discussion, in clubs, associations, debating societies, salons, taverns, coffee houses, bookshops, publishing houses and in the street. And conversation ranged through philosophy, morality, religion, literature and poetry, to the political events of the day. Members of these circles were tied together in the ongoing practice of debate. (Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* 127-8)

Godwin based his conversational theory on his own experience, *i.e.*, “on a view of society as a continual round of debate . . . where advances are made through a dialectic of individual reflection and group discussion” (Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* 128). However, is it reasonable to assert that people can adopt this form of communication on a large scale? And if so, will it eventually lead to an open society governed by reason alone? These are questions that Godwin cannot answer in relation to his own experience and thus, represent the type of speculation Burke condemns. At the same time, however, Burke’s criterion of “good theory” by no means constitutes a universal standard. For instance, Coleridge, in *The Friend*, pointed out that “an erroneous system is best confuted, not by an abuse in theory in general, nor by an absurd opposition of theory to practice, but by a detection of the errors in the particular theory” (Dowden 100). Mackintosh, in a similar vein, suggested that “from a more elevated position” (Dowden 101) Burke might have seen that inferior systems “were as unphilosophical as they were impracticable, and that ‘the error consisted not in their being metaphysical, but in their being false’” (*ibid.*).

In consistency with his own principles, Burke incorporated all of his experience into theory: he “brings his total self to bear upon the subject of his enquiry” (Dowden 104). In Burke’s case, his “nature, complete in all its parts and passions of manhood, was profoundly religious” (*ibid.*), and he held both nature and society “to be a divinely instituted order” (Dowden 106). For Burke:

there was an element of mystery in the cohesion of men in societies, in political obedience, in the sanctity of contract; in all that fabric of law and charter and obligation, whether written or unwritten, which is the sheltering bulwark between civilization and barbarism. (*Ibid.*)

Ultimately, the foundation of Burke’s own theory is metaphysical / mystical. Thus, in a sense, like those he criticized, Burke too reduced “things concrete to speculative abstractions.” For instance, his defence of the “sublime obscurity” (Kilgour 47) of government rendering it beyond the understanding of “any person” (Burke 70) no matter how “sagacious and observing he may be” (*ibid.*), according to Enlightenment thinkers was merely an appeal to mysticism. The Age of Reason was at hand, and people in the late Eighteenth-Century were more than ever “conscious of their political rights” (Dickinson 3). They no longer bought into the cult of the expert or to political mysticism. Instead, they had developed critical views of “the power and policies of the aristocratic elite” (Dickinson 1) and communicated their ideas through a “flourishing urban political culture and an active press” (Dickinson 3). The debate on theory had manifested itself into a political reality. Radical political associations had begun springing up in England in the early 1790’s to initiate popular reform and the general political climate was bustling. Burke’s conservative stance did not allow for the sort of radical changes that the movement proposed yet he was not opposed to political associations in general. His *Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Discontents* (1770) was partly devoted to the defence of the Rockingham Whigs, whom he had worked for. Godwin also did not support rapid change, or any formal political association, for that matter. However, he argued against the extreme measures government employed to repress the movement.

2. *Practical Philosophy: Godwin, the Reform Movement and Pitt's Repression*

By 1792 the political atmosphere in London had intensified. On January 25 the London Corresponding Society (L.C.S.) came into being with shoemaker Thomas Hardy as its secretary. The society consisted mostly of middle class tradesmen and craftsmen. It quickly gained influence in London and established connections with similar associations throughout England and Scotland. In the tradition of Paine's doctrine of the natural inalienable rights of man, the L.C.S. did not accept the Burkean notion that "power could only be entrusted to the propertied elite" (Dickinson 26). They believed that social and economic abuses could most effectively be dealt with by reforming the present system. A more equal representation in parliament, for instance, would help secure the general interest, and not merely the interests of the few land owners who dominated the system. The L.C.S. and other similar societies were extra-parliamentary bodies that relied on influencing public opinion to achieve their goals. As political discussion clubs, they attempted to educate the people about their political rights and to gain their support for reform. They did so by publishing petitions and pamphlets, soliciting the press, holding regular meetings and arranging conventions, all of which were considered acceptable means of gaining public support. However, by 1792 moderate opinion in England experienced a shift from its former support of the French Revolution. Burke's *Reflections* had been the initial catalyst, but it was the confirmation of Burke's objections by an increasingly bloody revolution that was well beyond its early stages that changed more minds:

[r]evolutionary principles became indissolubly connected in the public mind with mob violence, and the combination only required a name to constitute a fully-formed political stereotype. The name was provided by Jacobinism, in which was summed up everything that was feared and hated in revolution. (Cobban 19)

The conservative ruling class in England had become increasingly fearful of the radical movement on their own side of the channel and launched a concerted effort to quiet the protest. Over the next decade, government exercised a vigorous policy of repression to effectively silence the reform movement. Its objective was also to convince the public in general, and any moderate parliamentary reformers such as the Friends of the People, that the British radical movement (often referred to as the British Jacobins), like the French revolutionaries, aimed to tear down the existing social / political order.

On May 21, 1792 Pitt's government began its reign of repression with the Royal Proclamation against seditious writings.¹⁷ Church and King clubs throughout England supported the proclamation at their meetings and through the newspapers. By June, Paine was charged with sedition on account of his second volume of *The Rights of Man* and by December he was convicted *in absentia* and sentenced to death.¹⁸ Apparently his first volume was tolerated the previous year because of its higher price; the second volume, however, was considerably more affordable, and, thus, offered the potential for an increased circulation. Paine supported the efforts of the radical movement and argued that “the constitutional method (of gaining reform) would be by a general convention elected for the purpose” (Thomis & Holt 9). Indeed, the reform movement made full use of convention-style tactics short of drawing up their own constitution as Paine and also Joseph Gerrald had suggested. The aim of the convention was to unite the radical societies into a general program of reform, since in unity their prescriptions would carry more weight in securing public and governmental support. In December 1792, delegates from eighty radical associations met in Edinburgh to discuss proposals for universal

¹⁷ “The Royal Proclamation against seditious writings . . . called on all loyal subjects to resist attempts to subvert regular government and called on magistrates to make diligent enquiries to discover the authors, printers and disseminators of seditious writings. Contemporaries believed that the proclamation had been precipitated by, and was specifically directed against, the Association of the Friends of the People; at the same time the decision was taken to prosecute Paine for seditious libel” (Philp, *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin* 71).

¹⁸ In 1792 Paine fled to France.

suffrage and annual parliaments. However, Thomas Muir, one of the leading delegates, delivered an address from the United Irishmen in Dublin that was arguably seditious, and, also, the convention's protocol was strikingly similar to that of the French assemblies. Despite these events, the convention reiterated that its stance was strictly reform-oriented. But on November 15, 1793 Muir and a delegate from the Friends of the People, Reverend Thomas Palmer, were transported to Botany Bay after having been convicted of sedition. Palmer was sentenced to seven years; Muir received fourteen years.

When Godwin heard of the sentences handed down to Muir and Palmer he was indignant. He wrote to the *Morning Chronicle* that "a punishment the purpose of which is to inflict on such men slavery, degradation of soul, a lingering decay and final imbecility--can do nothing but exasperate men's minds, and wind up their nerves to decisive action" (Marshall, *William Godwin* 134). In his statement, Godwin pointed out that the punishment of Muir and Palmer, instead of serving the public's advantage, can only serve to further aggravate the already unstable political atmosphere. A few weeks prior to Godwin's letter to the *Chronicle*, the Anglo-Scottish convention had reassembled at Edinburgh (November 19, 1793). Key representatives from both the L.C.S. and the Society of Constitutional Information (S.C.I.) were present. Hardy sent Joseph Gerrald and Maurice Margarot as the L.C.S. representatives; Charles Sinclair and Henry Yorke represented the S.C.I.. The convictions of Muir and Palmer were still fresh in everyone's minds and it was evident that more arrests might occur. Nevertheless, the convention stood united and resolute. The delegates protested the recent government repression, argued for universal suffrage, and proposed the need for a secret assembly if government tried to restrict meetings. On December 6, the convention was broken up by Scottish officials and its secretary, William Skirving from Kirkcaldy, along with Gerrald, Margarot, and Sinclair were charged with sedition. Skirving and Margarot later received fourteen years' transportation, Sinclair was discharged, and Gerrald managed to secure bail with trial pending.

One month after the break-up of the convention in Edinburgh, Godwin finished revising *Political Justice*. The book was in shops by February 1793 (which was poor timing considering England had just declared war on France weeks earlier). The Pitt administration did not react harshly to Godwin's treatise mainly because of its price. Indeed, Pitt reportedly commented that "a three guinea book could not do much harm in the class which was dangerous, precisely for want of guineas" (Smith & Smith 51). By way of comparison, Burke's *Reflections* had sold for about one tenth the cost of *Political Justice* and Paine's *Rights of Man* for even less. Also, Godwin wrote for a highly educated audience and so presumably his influence was limited to the intelligentsia. Yet, despite its high price and sophisticated / visionary content, *Political Justice* made its mark for Godwin almost instantaneously: "[w]ithin a few weeks of the appearance of that work . . . [h]e was not merely made known to the public, but was ranked at once among men of the highest genius and attainments" (Brown 43). William Hazlitt described Godwin's influence by stating that "[n]o work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*" (Smith & Smith 51). Indeed, Godwin "blazed as a sun in the firmament of reputation; no one was more talked of, more looked up to, more sought after, and wherever liberty, truth, and justice was the theme, his name was not far off" (Smith & Smith 53). Crabb Robinson, a young playwright at the time, wrote retrospectively that he entered "fully into the spirit" (Kramnick 12) of *Political Justice* and that he "was willing even to become a martyr for it" (*ibid.*). At least 4000 copies of Godwin's book sold initially and many of the purchases were reportedly a group effort. Godwin enjoyed his sudden popularity and wrote in his diary that "I was nowhere a stranger . . . I was everywhere received with curiosity and kindness" (Kramnick 11-12). Gerrald, whose trial was set for March 1794, had also read *Political Justice* and after he contacted Godwin in the summer of 1793 the two men became friends. Godwin helped Gerrald prepare his defence for the upcoming trial; however, it was of no use. Gerrald's argument for the constitutional right to agitate public

opinion for reform and his appeal to “universal reason” was turned down by the notorious Judge Braxfield. Gerrald became yet another example for the radical movement to dwell on. He was sentenced to fourteen years’ transportation in Botany Bay where he died five months after his arrival. Moreover, Pitt’s repression, instead of quieting agitation for reform, served once again only to further strengthen the convictions of the radicals.

The rationale of the established order and of the radical movement were such that both sides fervently believed themselves in the right. The radicals “denied revolutionary intent and they eschewed revolutionary means, believing that what they sought could be achieved by an agitation of public opinion” (Thomis & Holt 11) and that in accordance to these tenets they were acting within their constitutional rights. On the other hand, the government believed that its own rationale for supporting repressive measures was completely justified. One view is that the intense political atmosphere in these times “provoked Pitt’s government into the mistaken assumption that ideas which were revolutionary in their implications must be supported by organizations with revolutionary designs” (Thomis & Holt 13). Like the French revolutionaries, the English radicals argued for universal suffrage and natural rights. They also conducted their meetings in the style of the French assemblies. It is at least conceivable, therefore, that government truly believed a revolution was imminent. However, it is more likely that government operated from the rationale that the reform movement had revolutionary potential. Indeed, “open-air meetings demanding parliamentary reform were both a threat to the established political order and the precursors of revolutionary mobs demanding blood” (Thomis & Holt 12). In any case, the Pitt administration was not content to sit and watch which way the tide was flowing; the stakes were simply too high. The government was anxious in these times and its policy was understandably pro-active. However, justifying a pro-active policy that was also extremely repressive meant convincing the public that the radicals had revolutionary intent. And so when Pitt introduced measures to suspend *Habeas Corpus*, he also had Thomas Hardy, the secretary of the L.C.S., and several others arrested on charges of high

treason.¹⁹ The trials that followed became a “landmark in the history of English liberty” (Marken xvii). Godwin’s *Cursory Strictures* played a significant role in altering public opinion on the charges, and, therefore, in the eventual outcome.

Cursory Strictures

After Gerrald’s transportation on May 2, 1794, the L.C.S. once again attempted to consolidate. In early April they organized a meeting at Chalk Farm to “protest against the sentences on Gerrald and the others; three hundred members of the Constitutional Society expressed similar views” (Locke, Don 77). Plans for another convention were discussed but it was not going to happen; Pitt reacted on May 12 by suspending *Habeas Corpus* and arresting Hardy for high treason. Soon after, John Horne Tooke, John Thelwall and eight others were also arrested. The majority of the prisoners were held at the Tower of London to await further proceedings; a charge had to be drawn up and presented to the Grand Jury to determine if the case would go to trial or not. The penalty for high treason was death. On October 2, 1794 the “Right Honourable Sir James Eyre, delivered a charge to this jury in which he provided them with an interpretation of the statute, 25 Edward III, under which such a charge could be brought. The Grand Jury agreed that the accused had a case to answer” (Philp, *Political and Philosophical Works of William Godwin* 65). Godwin’s good friend Thomas Holcroft also turned himself in after hearing that he had been added to the list of conspirators.

Eyre’s charge was published in various newspapers and was also issued as a pamphlet. He argued that the radicals had conspired “to bring the people together in convention in imitation of those National Conventions which we have heard of in France in order to usurp the government of the country” (Eyre 140). Godwin had been away in

¹⁹ Suspending *Habeas Corpus* “allowed the government to hold the prisoners without charge for an indefinite period” (Woodcock, *William Godwin* 108).

Warwickshire visiting his friend Dr. Parr when he learned of Holcroft's arrest, but he immediately returned to London to be of service. After closely studying Eyre's charge, he wrote the *Cursory Strictures*, which was published anonymously in the *Morning Chronicle* on October 21. The work was then reprinted in other newspapers and released as a pamphlet.

Godwin focused on Eyre's interpretation of the law of high treason found in act 25 Edward III. The law was defined as "levying war against the king within the realm, and the compassing or imagining the death of the king" (Godwin, *Cursory Strictures* 148). Furthermore, a conviction required that "such compassing and imagination be manifested by some act or acts (proved by two witnesses) to have been done by the party accused" (Eyre 132). Godwin argued that Eyre's description of the supposed crime, "a conspiracy to subvert the monarchy" (Eyre 135), did not "come within the letter of 25 Edward III" (Godwin, *Cursory Strictures* 151) nor did it "come within the remoter instances 'upon which there have been adjudged cases'" (*ibid.*). In his charge Eyre admitted that "the statute of Edward III, by which we are governed, hath not/declared this (which in all just Theory of Treason is the greatest of all Treasons) to be High Treason" (Eyre 135-6), nor has any "lawgiver . . . ever ventured to contemplate it in its whole extent" (Eyre 136). However, Eyre attempted to justify his charge by arguing that it necessarily contained within it "the compassing and imagining the death of the king." In other words, if someone "conspires to subvert the monarchy" then it should be obvious that one must also "compass and imagine the death of the king." Godwin's point was that Eyre had simply created "a new and portentous treason" (Godwin, *Cursory Strictures* 155) which he referred to as "a conspiracy to subvert the monarchy." Godwin argued, via Judge Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, that the main objective of act 25

Edward III was by means of statutory definition to prevent former inconveniences found in “ancient common law” (Godwin, *Cursory Strictures* 156), whereby there “was a great latitude left in the breast of judges, to determine what was treason, or not so.” In ancient times, rulers had the occasion to produce an “abundance of constructive treasons; that is, to raise, by forced and arbitrary constructions, offences into the crime and punishment of treason, which were never expected to be such” (*ibid.*). Godwin effectively raised doubts as to whether Eyre’s charge was acceptable under the statute of Edward III.

Furthermore, beyond the acceptability of the interpretive charge, Chief Justice Eyre also had to establish that there actually was a conspiracy. Eyre argued that a political association is subject to the law of high treason when “other purposes, besides those of Parliamentary Reform, and of the most traitorous nature, are hidden under this veil” (*ibid.*). Godwin stated:

[t]he purposes he may be supposed to mean, are those of his new-fangled treason, of “conspiring to subvert the Monarchy.” Thus, in the first place, we have an innocent purpose constituting the professed object of this supposed association; and behind that the Grand Jury are to discover, if they can, a secret purpose, totally unlike that which the associators profess; and this purpose Chief Justice Eyre declares to be treason, contrary, as he avowedly confesses, to all law, precedent, and adjudicated cases. (Godwin, *Cursory Strictures* 156-7)

Godwin further declared that the “Chief Justice knows, for no man is ignorant, that there is not the shadow of evidence of such a conspiracy” (Godwin, *Cursory Strictures* 158) and that the “authors of the present prosecution probably hope, that the mere names of Jacobin and Republican will answer their purposes” (*ibid.*).

The *Cursory Strictures* provided an argument that attempted to demonstrate the constructive nature of Eyre’s charge of high treason. In Godwin’s view, the charge “was made up of ‘hypothesis, presumption, prejudication, and conjecture’” (Marshall, *William Godwin* 136). Indeed, the public was swayed by Godwin’s arguments, and “instead of the guilt of the accused, little was heard of but the flagrancy of the charge” (*ibid.*). Although

Godwin himself did not belong to any political association and argued in *Political Justice* that they are counter-productive to the advance of truth, he realized that the Treason Trials were less a debate about popular reform than about individual freedom. For instance:

[i]f the new doctrine of constructive treason were accepted for the convenience of Government, it would be the end of judicial independence and no man would be safe from hypothetical crimes. It was not the prisoners who were on trial, but a system of government. (Grylls 20)

On October 25 a reply to the *Cursory Strictures* was published in *The Times*, most likely by Sir Francis Buller, in an attempt to regain public support for the Crown. The pamphlet in general restated Eyre's position and labeled the author of the *Cursory Strictures* as an "“officious and unprincipled scribler' who dared to raise objections, and finally called for his prosecution" (Marshall, *William Godwin* 137). Interestingly enough, Godwin restated his arguments in a reply to Buller's article (released only as a pamphlet) and also wrote to Chief Justice Eyre apologizing for the "“intemperate tone of some remarks in the *Cursory Strictures*" (Locke, Don 83). In steadfast adherence to the tenets of *Political Justice* Godwin explained that his remarks "“would have been more moderate . . . had he had more time for reflection for 'I cannot believe that truth will ever be injured by a sober and benevolent style'" (Locke, Don 83-4). He in no way withdrew his arguments in the letter to Eyre, but admitted that his terminology was at times excessive, and, thus, not well appointed. Godwin realized that he was fortunate to escape sedition charges for *Political Justice* and he knew there was risk in writing the *Cursory Strictures*. However, he believed that in comparison to the good that might result, the risks were minimal. Godwin said before Gerrald's trial that it was an opportunity "“of converting thousands, and, progressively, millions, to the cause of reason and public justice"” (Marshall, *William Godwin* 134); the Treason Trials were another opportunity for doing the same.

The Trials began on October 28, 1794. Thomas Erskine, who previously defended Paine, represented the accused. The proceedings, although drawn out, ran smoothly, and

by November 5 the first decision was handed down by the jury. The L.C.S. founder and secretary, Hardy, was found not guilty. The possibility for a successful conviction after this point was unlikely since the prosecution's evidence was marginal in each case. On November 22 the jury deliberated for under ten minutes in rendering a verdict of not guilty for the founder of the Constitutional Society, John Horne Tooke. Holcroft, to his disappointment, missed the opportunity to deliver a victory speech in court when he was discharged without trial on December 1. Finally, Thelwall, the last of the accused made to stand trial, was discharged on December 5. Needless to say, there was much celebration among the reformers in their victory. The crown had misjudged the strength of its evidence in the attempt to secure convictions under the charge of high treason. Nonetheless, the shift in momentum on the side of the reformers was short-lived. The Constitutional Society broke up shortly after the Treason Trials and the Friends of the People disbanded roughly a year later. The most persistent association was the L.C.S., which remained intact and continued to forge ahead with its open-air meetings. Thelwall, in place of Gerrald, was now the most able practical theorist and driving force of popular reform. On October 26, 1795 record crowds gathered to hear the speeches of both Thelwall and Binns in Copenhagen Fields. The L.C.S. took full advantage of King George's growing unpopularity due to food shortages and an unwanted recruiting policy and as many as 150,000 people amassed to join the protest. On the way to parliament a few days later, the King's coach was intercepted by a throng of protesters chanting "[d]own with Pitt! 'No War!' 'No King!'" (Marshall, *William Godwin* 141). A window of the coach was broken by a stone, which George III at first thought was gunfire. Afterwards the empty vehicle was "destroyed by a mob calling for peace and bread" (Philp, *Political and Philosophical Works of William Godwin* 123). The government responded immediately with the notorious Gagging Acts which were designed "to crush all dangerous manifestations of dissent" (Dickinson 40) once and for all. Pitt introduced the Seditious Meetings Act and Grenville the Treasonable and Seditious Practices Act that

together “abrogated the freedom of speech, of assembly, and of the press. *Habeas Corpus* was suspended for the next eight years” (Marshall, *William Godwin* 141).

Considerations

Godwin wrote the *Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bill's, concerning Treasonable and Seditious Practices, and Unlawful Assemblies* between November 16-19 in an attempt to ward off the government's repressive measures and also to censure the activities of the L.C.S. The pamphlet was published on November 21, 1795 and was signed by 'A Lover of Order.' Godwin focused on Grenville's bill which enacted “new treasons, or definitions of treason” (Godwin, *Considerations* 218) and provided “against seditious practices under the denomination of misdemeanours” (*ibid.*). He warned the public that “there is no case to which this bill may not be stretched; there is no offence, present or future, definite or indefinite, real or fictitious, that it may not be made to include” (Godwin, *Considerations* 223). For instance, a seditious writing was now one that had a tendency “to incite or stir up the people to hatred or dislike” (Godwin, *Considerations* 220). Godwin declared that the word ‘dislike’ is a “sweeping term, that may mean anything or every thing that the prosecutor shall be pleased to understand by it!” (*ibid.*). He asserted that “the words of the bill are expressly calculated to afford the widest field for sophistry, and the most convenient recipe for quieting the awakened conscience of a delinquent jury or judge” (Godwin, *Considerations* 222).

Godwin also criticized the L.C.S. for their method of reform. He argued that “[i]t is not, for the most part, in crowded audiences, that truth is successively investigated” (Godwin, *Considerations* 211). First of all, lecturers do not exercise intellectual independence. Godwin argued that “though they may begin with the intention of communicating to their auditors the tone of their own minds, they finish with the reality of bartering this tone for the tone of the auditors” (Godwin, *Considerations* 213). Second, he argued that the loud and passionate atmospheres of assemblies are not conducive to

reason. Presenting and examining arguments requires a more sober atmosphere in which one is able to maintain an active and laborious attention. Thelwall, the foremost lecturer of the L.C.S., was surprised and angered by Godwin's public criticism. The two were friends and during the previous year Godwin's *Cursory Strictures* had helped to secure Thelwall's acquittal. This was not the first time that Thelwall had heard Godwin's arguments: "he has frequently endeavoured to dissuade me from continuing my lectures, by arguments strong and convincing I suppose to him, though to me they appeared visionary and futile" (Locke, Don 102). However, Thelwall should not have been surprised at the *Considerations*, for Godwin was being consistent with his principles. In *Political Justice* he argued that individuals, friends or not, ought to be sincere in their criticism, and he also argued against political associations; "true to his teaching, Godwin was obliged to censor his neighbour, to show his shortcomings, and thus to contribute to the formation of a more virtuous character" (Kramnick 47). Godwin argued that the public mind cannot be enlightened in a swarming assembly led by an "impatient and headlong reformer" (Godwin, *Considerations* 211). Instead, reform "must be carried on by slow, almost insensible steps, and by just degrees" (*ibid.*). Perpetual communication via discussion, reading and enquiry were Godwin's favourite methods. However, Thelwall was an intense activist who believed that moderation was simply "[a] compromise between right and wrong" (Kramnick 42) and "that effective reform cannot be achieved by writing quarto volumes and conversing with a few speculative philosophers" (Marshall, *William Godwin* 142).

Despite their opposing views Godwin and Thelwall became friends again the following year (1796). Godwin's practical involvement in politics had for all intents and purposes ended with the *Considerations* and, unlike the *Cursory Strictures*, it failed to generate any significant public response. The Gagging Acts went into effect by December 1795 and the radical movement in England went into its final decline. The L.C.S. continued on sporadically in 1796 but the infiltration of government spies and the constant threat of prosecution greatly impeded its activity. Godwinian philosophy, despite its acute

separation from the ideas of the popular movement, was by and large associated with it and, in proportion to the conservatives' gaining of control, Godwin more and more "became a creature of abhorrence" (Marken xviii-xix).

3. *Godwin's Fall from Popularity*

Godwin's general adherence to his own principles as the tide of opinion shifted encouraged his critics to new heights. The second edition of *Political Justice* came out in 1796, and, despite some modifications, he claimed that "the spirit and great outlines of the work . . . remain untouched" (Godwin, *PJ* 72). Burke's incensed reaction to the work was not surprising. He labeled *Political Justice* as "[p]ure defecated Atheism, the brood of that putrid carcase [sic] of the French Revolution" (Smith & Smith 53). Indeed, among conservatives Godwin "stood condemned as the pre-eminent English philosophical disciple of Rousseau and Helvetius who were by now accepted as" the ideological instigators of "the terror" (Kramnick 13). In Paine's absence, Godwin became the target of conservative "counter-revolutionary propaganda" (Dickinson 30). Anti-Jacobin newspapers and magazines, in order to discredit the radical movement, unjustly linked reform objectives to Godwin's visionary schemes (Kramnick 13). Of course, in *Political Justice*, Godwin had argued against revolution and against political associations. *The Anti-Jacobin Review* also scurrilously attacked Godwin's open relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft by satirizing "the promiscuous intercourse of the sexes, as one of the highest improvements to result from *Political Justice*" (Kramnick 14). The "liberated couple" (Kramnick 13), to the further delight of critics, eventually succumbed to convention when Wollstonecraft became pregnant and married Godwin. However, pointing out his failure to link theory with practice on the marriage issue was valid criticism and not merely a cheap shot. Godwin was rarely inconsistent with his doctrine and so this deviation is well noted.

In a letter to Thomas Wedgwood, he attempted to justify the contradiction by explaining:

[t]he doctrine of my 'Political Justice' is, that an attachment in some degree permanent, between two persons of the opposite sexes is right, but that marriage, as practised in European countries, is wrong. I still adhere to that opinion. Nothing but a regard for the happiness of the individual, which I had no right to injure, could have induced me to submit to an institution which I wish to see abolished, and which I would recommend to my fellow-men, never to practise, but with the greatest caution. (Quoted by Wardle 287)

Godwin re-affirmed his explanation in the *Memoirs* of Mary Wollstonecraft when he said that it was for Mary's sake that he submitted to the institution as she was "unwilling, and perhaps with reason, to incur that exclusion from the society of many valuable and excellent individuals, which custom awards in cases of this sort" (Wardle 286).

Unfortunately, the marriage was short-lived, for Wollstonecraft died from complications shortly after giving birth to their daughter, Mary.²⁰ The *Memoirs* came out the following year in 1798 and was immediately derided by the Anti-Jacobins "as a 'convenient Manual of speculative debauchery'" (Marshall, *Anarchist Writings* 20). Godwin, for the most part, ignored the blatant jabs of his conservative critics. However, it is difficult to imagine that he was not genuinely affected by the defection of friends.

Thoughts

Godwin's *Thoughts Occasioned By The Perusal of Dr. Parr's Spital Sermon* (1801) is a reply to Reverend Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Mackintosh's *The Law of Nature and Nations* (1799) and *Dr. Parr's Spital Sermon* (1800). All three argued against *Political Justice*, but according to Godwin Malthus was the only one interested in the investigation of truth, and, thus, the process of argument.

²⁰ Mary Godwin, in the tradition of her parents, grew up to be a powerful writer herself. In 1814 she eloped with the young Godwinian poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Shelley had written to William Godwin in 1812 with hopes of meeting the long lost author of *Political Justice*. As their relationship developed, Shelley also became interested in Godwin's daughter. Mary Godwin eventually married Shelley in 1816 and at age 21 published her first novel, *Frankenstein*.

Mackintosh's *Vindicae Gallicae* had been one of the more thoughtful replies to Burke's *Reflections*, but before Burke died in 1797 Mackintosh personally retracted his former arguments. After his reconciliation to Burke he reportedly said that "never again could he think of revolution without a shudder" (Locke, Don 161). In February 1799, Mackintosh began a series of lectures entitled *The Law of Nature and Nations* in which he leveled an insincere and abusive attack on his friend Godwin. To begin, he did not name Godwin in his attacks yet "everyone knew how closely the 1799 lectures of which the first 'Discourse' only was ever published, applied to Godwin" (Pollin xx). Godwin stated that "Mr. Mackintosh's plan, it seems, did not admit of his naming specifically any individual political writer of the present day" (Godwin, *Thoughts* 306). Since Godwinian "sincerity" stresses the importance of honest communication, he thought Mackintosh should have been sincere in bringing the charges forward. Also, Godwin asserted that Mackintosh's attack was couched in abusive generalities that referred to "men who, in the pursuit of a transient popularity, have exerted their art to disguise the most miserable common-places in the shape of paradox" (Godwin, *Thoughts* 302) or to "the promulgators of absurd and monstrous systems" or of "shallow metaphysicians--sophists swelled with insolent conceit" (*ibid.*). In replying to Mackintosh, Godwin asked for basic argumentative consideration:

I should really be happy to meet you as a literary antagonist; for I should rejoice to have the mistakes into which I may have fallen corrected, and I know no man so competent to the task as yourself. But, if you condescend to refute my errors, I should very earnestly wish that you would console me, by the liberality and generosity of your manner, for the philosophical patience which the task of seeing his systems demolished would require from any human being. It would be a consolation, not to my personal feelings merely, but upon general principles. (Godwin, *Thoughts* 303-4)

Godwin was hurt and surprised by the unphilosophical and personal nature of Mackintosh's attack. The author of *Vindicae Gallicae* had become "the prince of the

apostates" (Locke, Don 162) and he was well-rewarded with "a government appointment in India and a consequent knighthood" (*ibid.*). It is interesting to note that "Mackintosh's memoirs of 1835 confessed that his 1799 lectures had 'approached immorality'" (Pollin xx).

Before the end of 1799 another anti-Godwinian emerged, by the name of Reverend Robert Hall, whose sermon entitled *Modern Infidelity Considered* attacked "at least by implication . . . the Godless morality of Godwin and Hume" (Locke, Don 163).²¹ Most surprising, however, was Parr's attack. In January of 1800 Godwin had sent a copy of his recently published *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* to Parr, and with it a letter speaking of Mackintosh's apostasy. In the *St. Leon* preface Godwin incorporated the "domestic affections"--a person's attachments to family and friends, or other acquaintances he cares about--into what Parr called Godwin's system of "universal philanthropy" (Godwin, *Thoughts* 312) and what Godwin referred to as utility or justice (the greatest general good).

In *Political Justice* Godwin recommended "the impartial treatment of every man in matters that relate to his happiness" (Marshall, *Anarchist Writings* 67), and, furthermore, that because we are not connected with one or two beings but "with a society, a nation, and in some sense the with the whole family of mankind" (Marshall, *Anarchist Writings* 68) our duty binds us to do everything in our power to promote the general well being short of weakening ourselves in the task itself. Parr agreed with Godwin's basic principle of justice / utility. However, the danger of Godwin's system, Parr argued, is that it requires that we put ourselves "in the place of an impartial spectator" (Godwin, *Thoughts* 361) in which we are free "and uninfluenced by our prejudices" (*ibid.*).

²¹ At age 44 Godwin gave up Atheism in favour of a vague theism inspired through conversations with his friend Coleridge. Godwin's theism "consists in a reverent and soothing contemplation of all that is beautiful, grand, or mysterious in the system of the universe, and in a certain conscious intercourse and correspondence with the principles of these attributes, without attempting the idle task of developing and defining it" (Smith & Smith 57).

For instance, if the opportunity arose to help a large group of strangers in need at the expense of neglecting an individual family member, then the principle of justice says one ought to help the strangers. Parr criticized “universal philanthropy” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 312) as a threat to the moral order.

Godwin admitted in the preface to *St. Leon* that *Political Justice* had treated the domestic affections or the ordinary and “most practicable, motives of virtue” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 320) “with no degree of indulgence or favour” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 314) and that upon further examination he realized that “they are not incompatible with a profound and active sense of justice in the mind of him that cherishes them” (*ibid.*). He pointed to his *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) for further clarification. He stated:

[a] sound morality requires that *nothing human should be regarded by us as indifferent*; but it is impossible we should not feel the strongest interest for those persons whom we know most intimately, and whose welfare and sympathies are united to our own. True wisdom will recommend to us individual attachments; for with them our minds are more thoroughly maintained in activity and life than they can be under the privation of them, and it is better that man should be a living being, than a stock or a stone. True virtue will sanction this recommendation; since it is the object of virtue to produce happiness; and since the man who lives in the midst of domestic relations, will have many opportunities of conferring pleasure, minute in detail, yet not trivial in amount, without interfering with the purposes of general benevolence. Nay, by kindling his sensibility, and harmonizing his soul, they may be expected, if he is endowed with a liberal and manly spirit, to render him more prompt in the service of strangers and the public. (Godwin, *Thoughts* 314-5)

Thus Godwin recognized the claim of the domestic affections and argued that their acceptance does not alter the principle of justice / utility but is beneficial to its practice. Of course, he qualified the extent of influence that the domestic affections should have and warned that they “are liable to excess. Each must be kept within its bounds, and have rigorous limits assigned it. I must take care not to love, or so to obey my love to my parent or child, as to intrench upon an important and paramount public good” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 321). Parr returned the copy of *St. Leon* to Godwin and in a note mentioned that he had not bothered to read it.

Godwin had been aware of Parr's criticism that a sound morality must recognize the domestic affections. In *Political Justice* he had downplayed them and so thought that Parr would approve of and support the revisions in *St. Leon*. However, he was mistaken. Parr's reply came about in public before the Lord Mayor of London on April 15, 1800, when, in his *Spital Sermon*, he attacked Godwin on his ideas of "universal philanthropy." Once again, Godwin was attacked by a former friend. Parr had not criticized *Political Justice* during its four year stretch of popularity and celebration. Rather, it seems that only after the barrage of criticism had begun was Parr able to join the ranks, or, as Godwin said, "he has condescended to join a cry, after it had already become loud and numerous" (Godwin, *Thoughts* 311).

Malthus's *Essay on Population* was more well-received by Godwin than either Mackintosh's or Parr's criticisms since it was not engendered by any personal dislike or political bias; rather, it was offered in the spirit of sincere communication:

I approach . . . the author of the *Essay on Population* with a sentiment of unfeigned approbation and respect. The general strain of his argument does the highest honour to the liberality of his mind. He has neither laboured to excite hatred nor contempt against me or my tenets: he has argued the questions between us, just as if they had never been made a theme for political party and the intrigues of faction: he has argued, just as if he had no end in view, but the investigation of evidence, and the development of truth. (Godwin, *Thoughts* 345)

Malthus advanced the view, based on an empirical study, that population naturally advances more rapidly than the means of its subsistence. What keeps population in check is inequality and the "vice and misery" (Godwin, *Thoughts* 349) which necessarily accompanies it. In other words, the only sufficient check to a state of severe over-population, and thus mass suffering, is a certain smaller but necessary degree of suffering. Godwin's perfectibility and "every attempt . . . to improve the condition of mankind is" (Godwin, *Thoughts* 350) thus "to be viewed with an eye of jealousy" for its tendency to "drive all vice and misery from the face of the earth, would, if it could be realised, prove to be one of the most intolerable calamities with which the human species

can be afflicted” (*ibid.*). Godwin accepted Malthus’s “ratios of population and subsistence” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 368) and was encouraged by the “valuable acquisition to the science of political economy” that they bring. However, he disagreed with Malthus’s conclusions “that vice and misery are the only sufficient checks upon increasing population” and that therefore “there is an obstacle of such a nature in the way to any extraordinary improvement in society, as we can never entertain the hope to overcome” (*ibid.*).

Godwin argued that prudence will increasingly act as a significant check to overpopulation. For instance, consider a future society “in which a great degree of equality and an ardent spirit of benevolence are assumed to prevail” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 365). At this stage of development, citizens “understand the interests of the community” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 366) and “conceive of the whole society as one extensive household” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 367). With a full realization of the dangers of overpopulation, these citizens will moderate their sexual activities in order that reproduction rates are healthy for the public at large. Or, they will have devised other acceptable means of controlling procreation. Godwin stated:

[i]f I look to the future, I cannot so despair of the virtues of man to submit to the most obvious rules of prudence, or of the faculties of man to strike out remedies as yet unknown, as to conceive me that we ought to sit down for ever contented with all the oppression, abuses and inequality, which we now find fastened on the necks, and withering hearts, of so great a portion of our species. (Godwin, *Thoughts* 368-9)

Godwin’s belief in the “progressive nature of man, in knowledge, in virtuous propensities, and in social institutions” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 336) did not allow him to conceive that the principle of population was enough to render improvement impossible. Indeed, “Malthus ultimately adopted Godwin’s check of prudence as counterbalance of the ‘vice and misery’ that his first edition of the *Essay on the Principle of Population* proposed as inevitable” (Pollin xxi).

Malthus' second edition incorporated "moral restraint" as a plausible preventative measure. He said:

[h]owever powerful may be the impulses of passion, they are generally in some degree modified by reason. And it does not seem entirely visionary to suppose that, if the true and permanent causes of poverty were clearly explained and forcibly brought home to each man's bosom, it would have some and perhaps not an inconsiderable influence on his conduct. (quoted in Locke, Don 288)

Yet despite the concession to Godwin's argument, Malthus was not ready to give up his original thesis; plus, his *Essay* was increasingly gaining popularity. The ruling class "found in Malthus's phase of the 'dismal science' an excuse for ruthlessly discountenancing all improvement in the condition of the working classes" (Pollin xxi). Moreover, Godwin, who had not "exhausted the subject which the author of the *Essay on Population*" (Godwin, *Thoughts* 367) had led him to consider, later devoted considerable time writing *Of Population*, which appeared in 1820. In this work he questioned the validity of Malthus's ratios without using his earlier argument about prudence. The work never gained any real momentum and was largely passed over.

Perhaps the most relevant points in Godwin's *Thoughts*, at least in relation to this thesis, which focuses on Godwin's perfectibility and communication theory, are his concluding remarks. He said:

[i]n these sheets, among other topics, I have thought proper to develop the personalities which have been directed against me, and the treatment I have endured. But I am fully aware that there is nothing singular in my case. It is part of a great plan. It is on this account the more fitting in me to have called the public attention to it. (Godwin, *Thoughts* 369)

Godwin was referring to the nature of the attacks from both Mackintosh and Parr, and consistent with his principles, seized the opportunity for improvement by offering a brief but poignant critique of their communication. He criticized Parr and Mackintosh for "placing a barrier against discussion" and thus, for being "adversaries of the progressive nature of man (*ibid.*)"

Indeed:

[t]he maxims, upon the discovery and establishment of which our fathers of the last century prided themselves, are reversed. Discussion is no longer regarded as one of the great sources of benefit to man. The principles and practices of toleration among us hang by a very slender thread. All declamation, and all licensed argument, must be on one side. The questions now proposed to a reasoner, are not, Do you argue well? Are the principles on which your theory rests sound? Do your premises sufficiently sustain and make your conclusions? But, are your arguments cast in the mould of Aristotle, Bacon and Hooker, of Grotius, Puffendorff and Vattel. (*Ibid.*)

Godwin stressed that “poor communication” impedes the advancement of intellect and declamation removes the opportunity for a balanced interchange of ideas. Also, instead of analyzing doctrines in order to offer sincere criticism, the practice had been to lump arguments into a common mold and to either approve or disprove of them according to the creed of which they belong. Parr, and especially Mackintosh, according to Godwin, showed themselves in their separate essays to be practitioners of this sort of “poor communication.” Without a good understanding of his arguments and with little or no reference to them, Godwin was pigeonholed and depicted as “a wretch, who only wanted the power, in order to prove himself as infernal as Robespierre” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 308). However, as stated earlier, *Political Justice* did not easily admit of classification, especially in reference to the categories established by Burke and Paine. Godwin was merely guilty by association; he had fallen “in one common grave with the cause and the love of liberty” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 284). The ideas of the French *philosophes*, which had influenced both the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution, were now looked upon with disdain. *Political Justice*, which was heavily influenced by the writings of Swift and the *philosophes*, was experiencing the same plight. Philosophical “theories and innovation” (Godwin, *Thoughts* 298) relating to the improvement of institutions and society had become a feared and increasingly banned topic.

However, despite his unpopularity Godwin maintained his belief in the perfectibility of man. He stated in the final remarks of *Thoughts*:

[f]or myself I firmly believe that days of greater virtue and more ample justice will descend upon the earth; and in the mean time, I will not hold it for my consolation and luxury, fondly to imagine the throne of ignorance and vice is placed on so firm a basis that it can never be removed. (Godwin, *Thoughts* 374)

I have attempted in this first chapter to situate Godwin historically so that we might gain some insight into his proposals for change and improvement. We have seen that his position within the debate on France was unique for he did not support revolution, nor did he believe that government could lead the way toward social improvement. Rather, he thought that sincere and rational communication among small groups of people offered the best hope for improving individuals so that institutions in turn could advance in accordance to the level of public understanding. I now wish to proceed to a more philosophical enquiry in Chapter Two, and focus specifically on Godwin's theoretical foundations for perfectibility.

Chapter II

Human Perfectibility

The main task of Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* is to find the best means of improving society. Godwin asks, "[h]ow may the individuals of the human species be made to contribute most substantially to the general improvement and happiness?" (Godwin, *PJ* 79). According to Godwin, there are two ways of affecting change in society: either by reason or by coercion. He argues against the latter, which refers to change enforced by the state through a system of law (positive institution), or to change forced by the people through revolution, and in favour of the former, which relates to his belief in the perfectibility of man, that is, in our ability to continually improve the human understanding and thus, our general condition. The following is a gloss of Godwin's overall position / arguments on coercion vs. reason (which are presented in Chapter III in detail), along with a brief explanation of his understanding of human perfectibility which leads us into the specific aspects of the theory.

Positive Institution

Godwin argues against change enforced by positive institutions for they "do not content themselves with requiring my assent to certain propositions" (Godwin, *PJ* 203). Rather, it is "in the very nature of these institutions that there is included a sanction, a motive either of punishment or reward, to induce me to obedience" (*ibid.*). In other words, "[g]overnment is nothing but regulated force" (Godwin, *PJ* 242), and "force is its appropriate claim upon your attention" (*ibid.*). Thus, the state determines what is best for society and enforces its rule. The result, Godwin argues, is a system that damages the moral independence of individuals since they are continually "exposed to the perpetual interference of decrees, instead of arguments" (Godwin, *PJ* 205). And so acting in

accordance with government teaches people ultimately to neglect the dictates of their own understanding and to obey commands based on the threat of punishment or the desire for reward.

Revolution

Godwin argues against change forced by violent revolution for although it “is engendered by an indignation against tyranny, [it] is itself ever more pregnant with tyranny” (Godwin, *PJ* 269). He claims that revolution is self-contradictory since it prescribes precisely what it condemns, *i.e.*, the use of force as opposed to reason, or simply the imposition of will upon one party by another. Godwin believes revolution not only discourages hope for social improvement but inflames the “mutual animosity and variance” (Godwin, *PJ* 272) already existing between the opposing parties. He argues that there are few conditions as ill-suited to the “cultivation of justice and the diffusion of benevolence” (*ibid.*) as violent revolution.

Reason - Open Communication

Godwin believes that the alternative to coercive change depends on the cultivation of reason. He argues that improving the human understanding offers us the best hope of improving our general condition. Thus, his account relies on the process of human perfectibility. The main idea is that improved reasoning will foster the moral development of individuals by better equipping them with an understanding of what is truly good / desirable. Godwin argues that his conversational theory of social communication is the best vehicle upon which the improvement of reason, and thus morality, depends. The theory asserts, in opposition to communication in mass assemblies, that sincere conversation among small groups of people (open communication) encourages reasoning and independent thought; first, because open communication promotes contemplation, impartial criticism and personal judgment; and second, because sincere conversers can

more accurately assess each other's opinions when every man is told "the truth, regardless of the dictates of worldly prudence and custom" (Godwin, *PJ* 312).

Indeed, Godwin envisions a society of individuals who through the practice of open communication learn to morally guide and constrain each other. The continual improvement of morality among individuals noted in their "more fully autonomous, rational and benevolent" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 1) behaviour will ultimately lead to a society managed according to the dictates of reason and the best argument. At such time there will no longer be a need for coercive institutions.

Perfectibility

Godwin's ideas appear to embody the prototype of Enlightenment philosophy which held that "reason could achieve all knowledge, supplant organized religion and ensure progress towards happiness and perfection" (Saul 40). It is Godwin's faith in the power of reason and in the perfectibility of man that leads him to speculate that beyond the cessation of government, we will eventually live in Utopia:

[t]here will be no war, no crimes, no administration of justice, as it is called, and no government. Beside this, there will be neither disease, anguish, melancholy, nor resentment. Every man will seek, with ineffable ardour, the good of all. Mind will be active and eager, yet never disappointed. Men will see the progressive advancement of virtue and good, and feel that, if things occasionally happen contrary to their hopes, the miscarriage itself was a necessary part of that progress. (Godwin, *PJ* 777)

It is important to note that Godwin's depiction of Utopia, found near the end of *Political Justice*, is "given only as a matter of probable conjecture" (*ibid.*) and exists apart from the main arguments of the work. However, his Utopian notions provide the opportunity to clarify the meaning of perfectibility in his philosophy. The influence Swift had on Godwin in relation to perfectibility is apparent, for Godwin's vision of humanity's distant future closely resembles Swift's Utopian society in the Fourth Voyage of *Gulliver's Travels*.

In this work, “Lemuel Gulliver . . . on his final journey of discovery, had found himself in the land of the Houyhnhnms, a race of intelligent horses living the life of reason” (Locke, Don 8). Resembling Godwinian individuals, they too believe that “our institutions of government and law were plainly owing to our grave defects in reason, and by consequence in virtue; because reason alone is sufficient to govern a rational creature” (*ibid.*). Wedel’s interpretation of Swift’s tale is that Gulliver occupies a position somewhere between the Houyhnhnm, a perfectly rational creature, and the Yahoo, a creature anatomically similar to human beings but characterized as predominantly irrational and as driven by the basest of appetites. In other words, humanity is characterized by its dual nature in Swift’s portrayal; we are complex creatures of both reason and appetite. We are “*rationis capax*” (Wedel 91).

The reason for digressing into interpretations of Swift is to bring out an important distinction between his and Godwin’s conception of perfectibility. While it is true that the Houyhnhnms provide a striking resemblance to the enlightened Godwinian individual, there is one key difference between the two. Humans, according to Godwin, are not perfect creatures. Rather, they are perfectible, “or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement” (Marshall, *Anarchist Writings* 61). In contrast, Houyhnhnms by their very nature are perfectly rational beings. We are even told that the etymology of the word *Houyhnhnm* means the perfection of nature (Swift 255):

[a]s these noble Houyhnhnms are endowed by nature with a general disposition to all virtues, and have no conceptions or ideas of what is evil in a rational creature, so their grand maxim is to cultivate reason, and to be wholly governed by it. Neither is reason among them a point problematical as with us, where men can argue with plausibility on both sides of the question; but strikes you with immediate conviction; as it must needs do where it is not mingled, obscured, or discoloured by passion and interest. (Swift 288)

Hence, both Houyhnhnms and Godwinian individuals share the “grand maxim” of cultivating reason. The Houyhnhnms, however, exhibit no improvement toward becoming rational and thus moral, for they are created passionless; they already are perfectly rational. Don Locke believes that Godwin’s conclusions suggest “[p]olitical justice is not just

imaginable, it is inescapable. Men may be Yahoos now, but one day they will--indeed must--become Houyhnhnms" (Locke, Don 99). Locke's strict equation of the Houyhnhnms with Godwinian individuals suggests that humans themselves are perfectible in the sense that we are "capable of being brought to perfection" (Marshall, *Anarchist Writings* 61). However, perfectibility for Godwin means that we are capable of being "continually made better and receiving perpetual improvement; If we could arrive at perfection, there would be an end to our improvement" (Marshall, *Anarchist Writings* 61-2). Thus, Godwinian individuals share reason as a grand maxim with Swift's Houyhnhnms not because humanity will eventually evolve into a completely rational nature devoid of the passions, but because in time and through the cultivation of our rational individuality we will become aware of what is truly good / desirable. I now present Godwin's theory of human perfectibility in greater detail.

Basis of Perfectibility

Godwin's belief in the perfectibility of man provides an ideal view of the future. Because we are able to improve, we will eventually create a more just world, a world, according to Godwin, where individuals are motivated by a concern for the general good. His belief in human perfectibility is supported by three theoretical principles:

- I. The characters of men originate in their external circumstances.*
- II. The actions of men are necessary [the doctrine of necessity].*
- III. The voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions.*

Before analyzing each of these principles, I will first consider them in a broader context or within the "big picture" of perfectibility.

The first principle suggests that our moral character is determined by external circumstances, or, in other terms, our character is a product of what we learn through experience. Godwin claims “that there are no innate principles, that we are at birth neither virtuous nor vicious” (Locke, *Don* 54). Second, the doctrine of necessity states that our actions could not have happened in any other ways than those in which they did; necessity “moves out of the area of caprice and accident (free will), into the area of sure causation” (Smith & Smith 29). The doctrine of necessity complements Godwin’s first theoretical premise, for it supports that a given set of external circumstances must necessarily cause the formation of a specific character. Therefore, “necessity leads us to the greatest efforts to influence for good the formation of men’s characters” (*ibid.*) via the provision of the appropriate external circumstances. Third, in accordance with principles 1 and 2, if we provide external circumstances that are conducive to the necessary generation of a good character, then it follows that the opinions of that character must also be good. Godwin’s third principle states that the voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions; therefore, if their opinions are good then so too must be their conduct.²² I now discuss each principle in more depth.

I. The Characters of Men Originate in their External Circumstances

Before discussing the opening principle it is of benefit first to look at Godwin’s definition of mind. Godwin borrows his conception of mind from the tradition of British Empiricism, chiefly from Locke and Hume. Briefly, Godwin refers to mind as a series of thoughts “linked together so as to produce the complex notion of unity or personal identity” (Godwin, *PJ* 97). Whether or not thought exists within any particular substratum remains questionable for “[w]e know nothing of the substance or substratum of matter, or

²² It seems inconsistent to hold that the actions of men are necessary and that they are voluntary. I hope to take some of the strangeness out of this claim later by differentiating Godwin’s necessity from what he calls Hartley’s “material automatism.”

of that which is the recipient of thought and perception” (*ibid.*). However, if there is one thing that “we know more certainly than another, it is the existence of our own thoughts, ideas, perceptions or sensations (by whatever term we may choose to express them)” (*ibid.*).

Like Hume, Godwin is a skeptic; we are familiar with our thoughts but the exact nature of what causes them is unknown. Godwin states that “[w]e are indeed wholly uncertain whether the causes of our sensations, heat, colour, hardness and extension . . . be in any respect similar to the ideas they produce” (*ibid.*). Like Locke, Godwin believes that the “mind” prior to experience is a “blank slate” or *tabula rasa*. The theory asserts that all ideas come from experience: “[o]ur understanding receives ideas in the same way that a blackboard receives chalk marks imprinted upon it” (Sahakian 154).

Godwin’s first theoretical principle, based on Locke’s *tabula rasa*, is that the development of moral character originates in external circumstance as opposed to developing from ideas that exist prior to experience. He argues “that there are no innate principles” (Locke, Don 54) and thus “we are at birth neither virtuous nor vicious” (*ibid.*). Godwin states:

the actions and dispositions of men are not the offspring of any original bias that they bring into the world in favour of one sentiment or character rather than another, but flow entirely from the operation of circumstances and events acting upon a faculty of receiving sensible impressions. (Godwin, *PJ* 98)

Godwin’s aim in saying that our moral character is not formed prior to experience is to establish a key point in support of perfectibility. His claim is that a change in a person’s external circumstance should also produce a change in his or her character. Furthermore, a change in the external circumstances for the better should produce a change in his or her character for the better. Thus, the seeds of human improvement are sown.

In dealing with objections to the *tabula rasa* premise, Godwin’s focus is on the following two alternatives: innate principles of judgment and original differences in animal structure. Each alternative contends with perfectibility in its own way. First, if innate

principles exist, then possibly the moral character of individuals, and thus their actions, are the result of an original bias that they bring into the world with them. Godwin's perfectibility relies on the belief that individual moral character is not fixed but malleable. Second, the idea that there are original differences in our structure presents difficulty for Godwin because perfectibility depends upon the development of reason in everyone. If only certain individuals are born vigorous and intelligent due to the original differences of our structure, then the potential for all to develop reason, and, therefore, virtue, is limited.

Innate Principles of Judgment

The doctrine of innate principles suggests that the mind somehow contains certain concepts or general truths prior to experience. For instance, moral principles such as the Golden Rule or general truths in the form of logic such as the principle of identity, "[w]hatsoever is, is" (Locke, John 10), or contradiction, "[i]t is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be" (*ibid.*) are held by some to be innate. Godwin argues that the deficiency in this sort of speculation is that "[i]t turns entirely upon an appeal to our ignorance" (Godwin, *PJ* 98). and, therefore, is a matter of poor reasoning:

there cannot be a sounder maxim of reasoning than that which points out to us the error of admitting into our hypotheses unnecessary principles, or referring the phenomena that occur to remote and extraordinary sources, when they may with equal facility be referred to sources which obviously exist, and the results of which we daily observe. (Godwin, *PJ* 99)

Godwin's argument attempts to show that the doctrine of innate principles is overly speculative and that the most sound explanation lies within the "infinitely various causes by which the human mind is perceptibly modified" (*ibid.*). Godwin asks us to consider the different principles of "argument, imitation, inclination, early prejudice and imaginary interest" (*ibid.*) by which opinion is generated. He argues that we may more

reasonably attribute the moral characters of men to causes and principles we can observe than to assert the existence of innate principles through an appeal to ignorance.

The second argument against the doctrine of innate principles is the “principles are also propositions” argument:

[e]very principle is a proposition: either it affirms, or it denies. Every proposition consists in the connection of at least two distinct ideas, which are affirmed to agree or disagree with each other. It is impossible that the proposition can be innate, unless the ideas to which it relates be also innate. A connection where there is nothing to be connected, a proposition where there is neither subject nor conclusion, is the most incoherent of all suppositions. (Godwin, *PJ* 100)

To help explain the argument, Godwin provides an example. He says, “[l]et the innate principle be that ‘virtue is a rule to which we are obliged to conform’” (*ibid.*). In this example there are three main ideas that are represented by the words ‘virtue,’ ‘rule,’ and ‘obliged.’ If one of the main ideas is shown not to be innate then it follows that the principle itself cannot be innate for “[a] connection where there is nothing to be connected, a proposition where there is neither subject nor conclusion, is the most incoherent of all suppositions” (*ibid.*). Godwin asserts that the term ‘virtue’ cannot possibly be innate, since the “most impartial and laborious enquirers are not yet agreed respecting” (*ibid.*) its meaning. If ‘virtue’ were innate then there should be agreement on the precise meaning of the term. Once again, Godwin uses Lockean thought in support of the claim that the moral characters of men are not innate. Locke too had argued that “moral principles require reasoning and discourse, and some exercise of the mind, to discover the certainty of their truth” (Locke, *John* 25-6). If moral principles were innate then they would be known and agreed upon universally for “[t]o say a notion is imprinted on the mind, and yet at the same time to say that the mind is ignorant of it, and never yet took notice of it, is to make this impression nothing” (Locke, *John* 11).

Differences in Animal Structure

It is well-known that at birth there are many physical differences between children, *e.g.*, their size, weight, and general condition of health. These factors are unique for each individual and will remain so throughout his or her life. The question is: do these original differences in our structure have bearing on our moral character? According to Godwin, the development of moral character depends first on the cultivation of reason. Like Socrates, Godwin links virtue with knowledge and vice with error. In order to become virtuous, therefore, we must increase our knowledge. However, if only some people are physically equipped to develop their reason and attain virtue then Godwin's perfectibility is problematic.

He argues that the differences in animal structure at birth, although real, are not significant enough to keep individuals from cultivating reason and virtue, on the ground that "it is impression that makes the man, and, compared with the empire of impression, the mere differences in animal structure are inexpressibly unimportant and powerless" (Godwin, *PJ* 107). Godwin realizes that there will be infants who are less robust than others and that they will require more attention and care. However, with the proper external circumstances there is no reason that they should not become wise and virtuous beings.

The principle of charity should be extended to Godwin in his discussion of infants and the original differences in their structure. He does not mean to compare the mentally retarded child with the child with normal brain development. The relatively healthy child has a far greater chance of developing reason than the child who is mentally handicapped. Godwin's comparison is among "normal" infants, give or take the common differences in strength, size, weight, appetite, and degree of health. His belief is that these differences alone do not largely affect the outcome of the individual. Rather, the unique set of external circumstances that each individual encounters is the main factor.

Godwin states:

[t]here is for the most part no essential difference between the child of the lord and of the porter. Provided he do not come into the world infected with any ruinous distemper, the child of the lord, if changed in the cradle, would scarcely find any greater difficulty than the other in learning the trade of his softer father, and becoming a carrier of burthens. (Godwin. *PJ* 105)

Thus, according to Godwin, the exercise of our faculties produces results. The children of the lord and of the porter for all intents and purposes share equal potential for development. If we exercise our muscles then they will increase in strength; if we exercise our minds through education and argument, then so too will the intellectual faculty prosper.

In this section I have shown some of Godwin's key reasons for asserting that the characters of men originate in their external circumstances. As I mentioned, Godwin argues this position in hopes of showing that moral character is not fixed but malleable. First, he argues that there are no innate principles which determine moral character; and second, he argues that original differences in vigour and intelligence are not significant enough to keep all from developing reason. However, if either of these assumptions is wrong then Godwin's perfectibility must answer.

It should be noted that since Godwin's time there have been significant advances in science, specifically in the field of genetics. Godwin's belief that the mind prior to experience is a blank slate has been shown to be false. However, it is not false in the sense that the mind possesses innate principles at birth; rather, there are aspects of our character that are genetically determined. Research in the fields of "molecular biology and neuroscience shows that many core personality traits are inherited at birth" (Hamer & Copeland 6). This "inborn dimension of personality" (Hamer & Copeland 7) is what psychologists refer to as temperament. Temperament is revealed very early in life and is observed in a person's level of activity, *i.e.*, excitability or tranquillity; response, *i.e.*, reactions to various situations; and general frame of mind, *i.e.*, being happy, upset or even-

tempered most of the time. These are all factors which are to an extent determined genetically. Equally important, however, is that “temperament does not come fully formed with a new baby. Instead, the baby is born with the potential to acquire a temperament in response to the environment” (Hamer & Copeland 14). Thus, parents can provide stimuli which can help control certain aspects of temperament.

Most importantly, at least in relation to Godwin’s account, is the other aspect of personality known as character. Character is considered the more flexible dimension of the human personality because of its relation to the cerebral cortex:

[t]he memories that form character are mediated by the cerebral cortex, which remembers people, places, and things and allows us to calculate, compare, judge, and plan. The reason that character is the most distinctly human aspect of personality is that the cerebral cortex underwent a dramatic burst in size and complexity in recent evolutionary history and is much larger and more advanced than in primates and lower ancestors. The cortex is the manager for the rest of the brain, analyzing the world and deciding how to respond. (Hamer & Copeland 16)

The “wonderful thing about character” is its “ability to modify temperament” so that people can “take advantage of the useful parts of temperament and downplay the less desirable biological tendencies” (*ibid.*). Thus,

[a]lthough the initial responses to stimuli are determined by the largely inherited temperament, the way people interpret and act on those responses depends on the acquired character. (Hamer & Copeland 17)

Godwin’s belief that the moral character of individuals is not fixed but malleable appears to hold up in light of modern genetics. We may not be born as a blank slate or *tabula rasa*, but neither are we genetically endowed with innate principles of virtue. At most, it may be said that a person’s basic temperament is inherited, although it is not fully developed at birth and is susceptible to outside influence. Moreover, a person’s temperament can be modified by his character, so that certain tendencies he has can be controlled and also changed. In sum, basic temperament cannot be said to define moral character. Being naturally hyper or shy does not suggest in any way that a person is more likely to become a murderer or that he is inclined to help the general good.

Also, the issue of inherited intelligence does not seem to pose a threat to Godwin's perfectibility. There is evidence that aspects of intelligence are genetically determined and so there are differences between individuals. For instance, "some genes determine how quickly the brain can process information. Others may control particular circuits, such as those for mathematical calculation or perfect pitch" (Hamer & Copeland 12). However, being genetically predisposed to certain intellectual activities does not preclude the possibility of becoming adept at any one activity, *e.g.*, a person without perfect pitch can still become an exceptional musician. The difference is merely that certain activities may require more effort from certain individuals than others. Nonetheless, in relation to Godwin's message, the point remains the same. If we exercise our minds through education and argument, then so too will the intellectual faculty prosper.

II. The Actions of Men are Necessary

The doctrine of necessity, according to Godwin, places morality on the sure footing of a science by removing it from the realm of free will and mere accident and locating it within the necessary mode of a type of causal determinism.²³ Indeed:

[t]his view of things presents us with an idea of the universe, as of a body of events in systematical arrangement, nothing in the boundless progress of things interrupting this system, or breaking in upon the experienced succession of antecedents and consequents. In the life of every human being there is a chain of events, generated in the lapse of ages which preceded his birth, and going on in regular procession through the whole period of his existence, in consequence of which it was impossible for him to act in any instance otherwise than he has acted. (Godwin, *PJ* 351)

Godwin's view of necessity suggests that all events in the universe are part of an endless chain of antecedents and consequents. The universe is a closed system in the sense that every event is determined by an antecedent set of events, and each of those events by yet

²³ Godwin adopts his theory of necessity from thinkers such as J. Priestly's *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated, being an appendix to the disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit* (London, 1777); D. Hartley's *Observations on man, his frame, his duty and expectations* (London, 1749); A. Collins' *A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty* (London, 1717); and from Jonathan Edward's *Enquiry into the Freedom of the Will* (1754).

another antecedent set of events and so on. Godwin claims that it is impossible that anything break in upon this chain of events. Therefore, all events are determined, for they have occurred in the only way that was possible for them to occur. Godwin draws two essential inferences from the doctrine of necessity in relation to human action. First, because all events in the universe are necessary, then human action must also be necessary. It is therefore impossible that upon any given instance we could have acted in any other way than we did.

Second, because the actions of men are necessary, we have the potential to predict these actions with as much certainty as we predict the occurrence of other events in the material universe. Godwin argues that morality, like the material universe, is governed by laws based on “an observed similarity in the succession of events” (Godwin, *PJ* 337) which in turn provides us with “a ground for future expectation” (*ibid.*). For instance, each day the sun comes up and provides us with daylight. This event has happened consistently throughout our lives, and thus we expect with the greatest confidence that the sun will rise again tomorrow. Indeed:

[t]he nature of the human mind is such as to oblige us, after having seen two events perpetually conjoined, to pass, as soon as one of them occurs, to the recollection of the other: and, in cases where this transition never misleads us, but the ideal succession is always found to be an exact copy of the future event, it is impossible that this species of foresight should not be converted into a general foundation of inference and reasoning. (Godwin, *PJ* 339)

Simply put, the observation of repeated events allows us to make predictions about future events, *e.g.*, “[t]ill we have been led to consider the rising of the sun tomorrow as an incident of the same species as its rising today, we cannot deduce from it similar consequences” (Godwin, *PJ* 339-40).²⁴

²⁴ Like Hume, Godwin argues that “we never see any principle or virtue by which one event is conjoined to, or made antecedent of another” (Godwin, *PJ* 337) as there is nothing which we can observe that will show any principle of causation. However, “this observation does not, in the slightest degree, invalidate our inference from one event to another” (Godwin, *PJ* 338). Our prediction of future events is based on the observation of past events. The business of science is to study the uniformity of events that occur in the universe and to reduce them “to a small number of original principles” (Godwin, *PJ* 340).

In addition, Godwin attempts to connect morality with science by arguing that our reasoning about the material universe also applies to our reasoning about the human mind. In both cases we make predictions based on a uniformity of events. For instance, through observation we learn about the movement of material objects and also about human conduct, for “mind, as well as matter, exhibits a constant conjunction of events” (Godwin, *PJ* 340). Just as there is order within the material universe there is also an order from “moral antecedents to their consequents” (*ibid.*). We may therefore predict with some degree of certainty the actions of men in a way that is similar to the prediction of, say, movement in matter. For example:

[w]hen a ball upon a billiard-board is struck by the mace, and afterwards impinges upon a second ball, the ball which was first in motion is said to act upon the second, though the results are in the strictest conformity to the impression received, and the motion it communicates is precisely determined by the circumstances of the case. (Godwin, *PJ* 351-2)

In the same way, the actions of the human being (conduct) are also said to be predictable.

Consider the idea of moral discipline:

[i]f I carefully persuade, exhort, and exhibit motives to another, it is because I believe that motives have a tendency to influence his conduct. If I reward or punish him, either with a view to his own improvement, or as an example to others, it is because I have been led to believe that rewards and punishments are calculated to affect the dispositions and practices of mankind. (Godwin, *PJ* 342)

Thus, our expecting the billiard ball to move when struck is similar to our expectation that there is an “essential conjunction between motives and actions” (Godwin, *PJ* 341) in human conduct.²⁵ Godwin here explains that people act in ways that show they believe we are governed by universal laws, even if they are not aware of this fact. Consider further:

all the schemes of policy in consequence of which men propose to themselves, by a certain plan of conduct, to prevail upon others to become the tools and instruments of their purposes. All the arts of courtship and flattery, of playing upon men’s hopes and

²⁵ Motive is the hope or fear of a future event which in turn determines action.

fears, proceed upon the supposition, that mind is subject to certain laws, and that, provided we be skilful and assiduous enough in applying the motive, the action will inevitably follow. (*Ibid.*)

Not only is Godwin arguing that actions follow necessarily from motives, but, even further, that if we are skillful enough in applying the motive then we can predict, with a reasonable degree of certainty, the action to necessarily follow. Thus, the doctrine of necessity affords us the potential to predict the actions of men as accurately as we predict events in the material universe. Making accurate predictions requires only that a person be experienced in that particular field of knowledge. For instance, when a billiard ball is struck and does not move in the intended direction it is because of a miscalculation on the part of the player. Perhaps his mistake exists in a poor understanding of angles and thus a lack of knowledge keeps him from making accurate shots. However, with more experience the player becomes better acquainted with angles, and, henceforth, his accuracy improves. Players learn that if a ball is struck at a certain point it will of necessity travel in a certain direction. Now consider Godwin's example whereby someone attempts to convince his neighbour through argument and persuasion to adopt some new species of conduct. Godwin argues that if he fails to persuade his neighbour's opinion, it is because he is somehow missing relevant knowledge. For instance:

[a] philosophical experiment which has succeeded a hundred times may altogether fail in the next trial. But what does the philosopher conclude from this? Not that there is a liberty of choice in his retort and his materials; by which they baffle the best-formed expectations. Not that the established order of antecedents and consequents is imperfect, and that part of the consequent happens without an antecedent. But that there was some other antecedent concerned, to which at the time he failed to advert, but which a fresh investigation will probably lay open to him. (Godwin, *PJ* 342)

Godwin argues that where "I see a part only of the premises," I "therefore can pronounce only with uncertainty upon the conclusion" (*ibid.*). However, upon going back over the argument and reflecting upon its grounds, it is possible that a premise was overlooked. Just as the billiard player's flaw in accuracy was due to a lack of knowledge, so too does the arguer fail in his goal to persuade his neighbour because of a lack of knowledge.

Godwin's claim is contentious for it denies the idea of free will, which is the obvious objection to the doctrine of necessity. Given that free will exists, our neighbour can choose to accept arguments whether they are true or not. There may indeed still be a link between motives and action. However, the link does not have to be necessary, in which case "the mind still retains an inherent activity, by which it can at pleasure supersede and dissolve it" (*ibid.*). Godwin has two main arguments against free will. As already discussed, the "argument from experience," suggests that everything in the universe operates according to necessity. That is, it is observable that there is a "uniformity of conjunction of antecedents and consequents" (Godwin, *PJ* 345) in both the operation of mind and matter. The more we study the events in the universe, the more we suspect that all things are governed by necessity.

Godwin's second argument against free will is the "voluntary action" argument. Consider two types of action, voluntary and involuntary. The former "is where the event is foreseen, previously to its occurrence, and the hope or fear of that event, forms the excitement [motive], prompting our effort to forward or retard it" (*ibid.*). For instance, if thirsty, a person might decide to drink cold water as opposed to milk. The decision is based upon foreseeing the consequences of the action. In this case, water is foreseen as a better thirst quencher than milk, so he chooses water. Involuntary action "takes place in us without foresight on our part, or contrary to the full bent of our inclinations" (Godwin, *PJ* 119). If a child, for example, "burst into tears though his pride or any other principle make him exert every effort to restrain them, this action is involuntary" (*ibid.*).

Godwin argues that advocates of free will must attribute the "imperfect conjunction of antecedents and consequents" (Godwin, *PJ* 345) to either involuntary or voluntary actions. He thinks the idea of attributing intellectual liberty to involuntary action is contradictory for it makes little sense to suppose that we can freely choose to do something involuntary. Also, he says, "[m]an would not be in any degree more an agent or

an accountable being, though it could be proved that all his involuntary motions sprung up in a fortuitous and capricious manner” (*ibid.*).

The crux of Godwin’s argument opposes the idea that our voluntary actions are based on freedom. Consider external actions, that is, actions observable by others. For external actions to be free they must be controlled by a self-determined intellect. For internal acts or volitions to be free “‘the mind in adopting them’ must be ‘self-determined’” (Godwin, *PJ* 346) and “nothing can be more evident than that in which the mind exercises its freedom must be an act of the mind.” Based on this hypothesis, the idea of liberty asserts “that every choice we make has been chosen by us, and every act of the mind been preceded and produced by an act of the mind” (*ibid.*). Godwin concludes that the concept of liberty as so defined is contradictory. He states:

[t]he ultimate act resulted completely from the determination that was its precursor. It was itself necessary; and, if we would look for freedom, it must be to that preceding act. But, in that proceeding act also, if the mind were free, it was self-determined, that is, this volition was chosen by a proceeding volition, and, by the same reasoning, this also by another antecedent to itself. All the acts, except the first, were necessary, and followed each other as inevitably as the links of a chain do when the first link is drawn forward. But then neither was this first act free, unless the mind in adopting it were self-determined, that is, unless this act were chosen by a preceding act. Trace back the chain as far as you please, every act at which you arrive is necessary. That act, which gives the character of freedom to the whole, can never be discovered; and, if it could, in its own nature includes a contradiction. (Godwin, *PJ* 346-7)

If Godwin’s argument holds and advocates of free will find it difficult to show that there is an imperfect conjunction between antecedents and consequents, they may still assert that there is choice in moving from antecedent to consequent, or, in other words “that the mind is not necessarily inclined this way or that, by the motives which are presented to it” (Godwin, *PJ* 347) and that “by its inherent activity, it is equally capable of proceeding either way, and passes to its determination from a previous state of absolute indifference” (*ibid.*).

Godwin attempts to refute the “free choice” claim by asserting that motives must have a fixed and certain relation to their consequences or none at all. He argues for the necessary connection between motive and action, meaning that mind cannot choose between opposite motives by converting the motive ““which is weak and insufficient in comparison into the strongest”” (*ibid.*). Rather, the stronger motive always compels volition. Godwin states that the reason for any event is due to the circumstances ““which precede that event”” (Godwin, *PJ* 348): “[t]here is a motive on one side and a motive on the other: and between these lie the true ground and reason of preference” (*ibid.*). He likens the process of weighing motives to that of a scale or balance with weights on either side. The stronger motive, like the heavier weight, will of necessity tip the scale; there is no choice in the matter. Godwin’s account, that the stronger motive always compels volition, at first glance appears completely mechanistic; however, his emphasis on reason counteracts this assumption.

It is important not to confuse Godwin’s necessity with what he calls Hartley’s “material automatism,” whereby people are “like machines in which physiological mechanisms are sufficient to explain all action--thought plays no part in the process” (Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* 90). Rather, Godwin encourages the development of independent thought and believes that it fully accords with necessity, for “[w]hile every action is determined by a motive, reason enables us to choose what motive to act upon” (Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible* 202). The choice we make still accords to necessary laws, that is, we will always choose the stronger motive. What is perceived as the strongest motive, however, depends on reason. Even though the mind can never escape the endless chain of causal relations it finds itself within, it still has an effect on circumstances. Godwin maintains that the mind ““is in no case a first cause”” (Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* 92); in fact, it is ““a real and efficient cause”” and a ““medium through which operations are produced”” (*ibid.*). As reasoning improves via the provision of the appropriate external circumstances, *e.g.*, education, debate and so on, then it

becomes possible to change opinions and, ultimately, the behaviour of people, for the better. Godwin is assuming that improved reasoning and knowledge bring us closer to truth, and thus, to virtue and happiness. It is the task of the next section, therefore, to explore the connection between reason and truth.

III. The Voluntary Actions of Men Originate in their Opinions

Godwin's third theoretical principle in support of perfectibility claims that the voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions. He argues that "[v]oluntary action is accompanied with foresight" (Godwin, *PJ* 119) and "the hope or fear of a certain event is its motive" (*ibid.*). Thus, voluntary action includes a consideration of consequences, which implies that "there is comparison and judgment" (Godwin, *PJ* 120). In making a judgment, the mind decides that one motive is more desirable than another. Therefore, the judgment leads to action.

Crucial to Godwin's account is the means of determining that one motive is more desirable than another. He claims that reason, "though it cannot excite us to action, is calculated to regulate our conduct, according to the comparative worth it ascribes to different excitements" (Godwin, *PJ* 77). Godwin believes that if he can show reason to be the gauge of opinion, and, therefore, action, then it only remains for us to improve reason in order to improve conduct.

There is, however, contention over reason being the proper and sufficient instrument for regulating human conduct. One view (at the time) suggests that human conduct is determined not only by reason, but by "immediate and irresistible impression" (Godwin, *PJ* 116). Supporters of this theory assert that reason and sensation exist as two distinct principles within us. The idea is that there will be constant opposition between the two powers. At times reason will "subdue all the allurements of sense" (Godwin, *PJ* 117), at other times, "the headlong impulses of sense" (*ibid.*) will determine action.

In response to this objection, Godwin attempts to prove that “in all cases of volition we act, not from impulse, but opinion” (Godwin, *PJ* 128). He introduces a third type of action in order to support his argument. He has already defined involuntary action as that action “which takes place in us either without foresight on our part, or contrary to the full bent of our inclinations” (Godwin, *PJ* 119). He has also defined voluntary action as that “where the event is foreseen previously to its occurrence, and the hope or fear of that event forms the excitement” (*ibid.*), or motive. The third type of action is what Godwin calls “imperfectly voluntary.” It “belongs to neither” (Godwin, *PJ* 124) of the first two types of action “yet partakes of the nature of both” (*ibid.*).

To illustrate imperfectly voluntary action, Godwin cites a common event, in this case, of a man proceeding to church:

[h]e has been accustomed, suppose, to a certain routine of this kind from his childhood. Most undoubtedly then, in performing this function today, his motive does not singly consist of inducements present to his understanding. His feelings are not the same nature as those of a man who should be persuaded by a train of reasoning to perform that function for the first time in his life. His case is partly similar to that of a scholar who has gone through a course of geometry, and who now believes the truth of the propositions upon the testimony of his memory, though the proofs are by no means present to his understanding. (Godwin, *PJ* 126)

Godwin wants to show here the role that habit plays in our actions. He claims that the man going to church acts from motives both directly apprehended by the mind and from motives not present to his understanding. The latter refers to “reasons which once appeared sufficient to his understanding” for going to church but “are now forgotten, or at least not continually recollected.” For instance, as a boy his parents brought him to church, and later he went for the “sake of decorum, character, and to secure the good will of his neighbours” (*ibid.*). However, once these reasons are recognized by the understanding there is little need for the understanding to recollect them time and time again. Habitually, the man continues to go to church.

Godwin argues that when the mind “comes to perceive a considerable similarity between situation and situation” (Godwin, *PJ* 125) that it “feels inclined to abridge the

process of deliberation, and to act today conformably to the determinations of yesterday” (*ibid.*). Thus, in going to church the man acts on both directly apprehended motives that represent the specific reasons present to his understanding, for going to church that day (perfectly voluntary action), and on habit, or “reasons which once appeared sufficient to his understanding, and the effects of which remain” (imperfectly voluntary action) (Godwin, *PJ* 126).

It is Godwin’s argument that habit, or imperfectly voluntary action, “retains something of the nature of voluntariness” (Godwin, *PJ* 127), and, thus, still originates in opinion because it involves a judgment (apprehended motives), despite the fact that the reasons for that judgment may now be missed, because the action was originally perfectly voluntary. And so, with the introduction of imperfectly voluntary action Godwin argues that “in all cases of volition we act, not from impulse, but opinion” (Godwin, *PJ* 128).

Aside from the argument that attributes human conduct to immediate impression or impulse, there is yet another argument against Godwin’s position. It suggests that even if it is true that our voluntary actions originate in opinion, there is nothing to prove that the “perturbations of sense” (Godwin, *PJ* 129) will not “frequently seduce the judgment, and that the ideas and temporary notions they produce are too strong for any force that can be brought against them” (*ibid.*). If the understanding is continually influenced by base appetite as opposed to the higher pleasures of reason and virtue, then improvement in the sense that Godwin suggests is problematic. Godwin argues in response that the “pleasures of sense” (Godwin, *PJ* 130) do not necessarily possess as much power over our conduct as we might imagine. He attempts to illustrate the power that a simple proposition can have in comparison to the appetite:

let us suppose a man to be engaged in the progressive voluptuousness of the most sensual scene. Here, if ever, we may expect sensation to be triumphant. Passion is in this case in its full career. . . . Alas in this situation, nothing is so easy as to extinguish his sensuality! Tell him at this moment his father is dead, that he has lost or gained a considerable sum of money, or even that his favourite horse is stolen from the meadow, and his whole passion shall be instantly

annihilated: So vast is the power which a mere proposition possesses over the mind of man. (Godwin, *PJ* 130-31)

The above example intends to show that the most sensual of situations can be overridden by a mere idea. Godwin wants to stress the sheer power that propositions have over the mind. He argues further, that in situations of “sensual allurements, which must be carefully kept alive, and which the slightest accident overthrows” (Godwin, *PJ* 131) that “the most irresistible considerations of justice, interest and happiness” (*ibid.*) will provide the preferred motive. In other words, if it is true that appetite can be overridden by the comprehension of a proposition, then it is probable that the most important ideas which relate to our own interest and happiness will have superior influence, providing that our understanding grasps these concepts.

Perhaps what Godwin says is true, and it is the case that various ideas can intrude and influence the enjoyment of the appetite. However, this in itself does not necessarily mean that the “pleasures of external sense” (Godwin, *PJ* 132) are not “more genuine than any other pleasure” (*ibid.*). Consider that if we reverse Godwin’s previous example involving the interruption of a sensuous moment by the introduction of a proposition, and replace it with the interruption of a proposition with a sensuous influence, we may still get the same results. For instance, a person could be in the midst of reading the most sublime of poems, or, perhaps engaged in the virtuous act of helping another. But if at precisely this moment we place a select piece of hot iron against the skin of this person, then in all probability the intellectual or virtuous moment would also suffer a severe interruption. Godwin admits that “pain is probably more formidable in its attacks on us” (Godwin, *PJ* 135); yet, he is not prepared to grant its superior influence. He argues:

all history affords us examples where pain has been contemned and defied by the energies of intellectual resolution. Do we not read of Mutius Scaevola who suffered his hand to be destroyed by fire without betraying any symptom of emotion, and archbishop Cranmer who endured the same trial two hundred years ago in our country? Is it not recorded of Anaxarchus that, while suffering the most excruciating tortures, he exclaimed, ‘Beat on, Tyrant! Thou mayest destroy the shell of Anaxarchus, but thou canst not touch Anaxarchus himself?’ (*Ibid.*)

Of course these examples are rare, and so all that can be concluded from Godwin's previous argument is that propositions can and do have a powerful influence over the mind, but perhaps no more than certain sensory influences might have.

Godwin's argument now must incorporate some further proof that the pleasure of virtue and intellect outweigh those of the appetite. He approaches the appetite vs. senses objection in much the same way as philosophers before and after him have done. Like Plato, Aristotle, and Mill, he argues that along with the development of the understanding comes the realization that moral and intellectual pleasures outrank the simple pleasures of the body. As Mill says "[i]t is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied" (Mill 121). The idea is that through increased experience and the broadening of understanding we become better acquainted with moral and intellectual pleasures, so that in turn we are able to see their superiority in comparison to all other types of pleasure.

Indeed:

[n]o man ever performed an act of exalted benevolence without having sufficient reason to know, at least so long as the sensation was present to his mind, that all the gratifications of appetite were contemptible in the comparison. That which gives the last zest to our enjoyments is the approbation of our own minds, the consciousness that the exertion we have made was such as was called for by impartial justice and reason; and this consciousness will be clear and satisfying in proportion as our decision in that respect is unmixed with error. Our perceptions can never be so luminous and accurate in the belief of falsehood as of truth. (Godwin, *PJ* 133)

Like Aristotle and Mill, Godwin believes in a hierarchical system of pleasures, and, like Plato, he believes that we can discover moral and intellectual pleasure only in the presence of understanding. Godwin supports the notion that "[e]very sensation is, by its very nature, accompanied with the idea of pleasure or pain in a vigorous or feeble degree" (Godwin, *PJ* 132) and that, at least initially,²⁶ the only object of desire is pleasure

²⁶ I will explain in Chapter IV why this qualification is needed.

(Godwin, *PJ*, 379). People who perform acts of “exalted generosity”(Godwin, *PJ* 395), according to Godwin, become aware “that there is no sensation of corporeal or intellectual taste to be compared.” They ascend “to the highest of human pleasures, the pleasures of disinterestedness” wherein seeing that others are benefited becomes its own reward (*ibid.*). However, Godwin must show why the pleasures of benevolence are superior to other intellectual or appetitive pleasures if he wants to make a solid case. It is not enough to simply say they are the highest for we are complex creatures that desire “agreeable sensation” (Godwin, *PJ* 132) and “agreeable sensation” comes in many forms.

Godwin asserts that we can only discover the value of the moral and intellectual pleasures (benevolence) in the presence of understanding. Like Plato, he argues that if “ideas of virtue, benevolence and justice, or whatever it is that ought to restrain me from an improper leaning to the pleasures of sense, be now less definite and precise, they may be gradually and unlimitedly improved” (Godwin, *PJ* 134). Thus, if ideas produced via sensation appear more vivid to some, it is because they lack knowledge. However, error is not a permanent condition and can be corrected for truths are capable of being communicated and recognized. Hence, the continual improvement of our condition hinges on the “proper subject of education and persuasion” (Godwin, *PJ* 135). Godwin sums up the theoretical basis for perfectibility with five propositions:

[s]ound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated, must always be victorious over error: [s]ound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated: [t]ruth is omnipotent: [t]he vices and moral weakness of man are not invincible: [m]an is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement. (Godwin, *PJ* 140)

The above propositions “will be found in part synonymous with each other” (*ibid.*) and largely are meant to encapsulate Godwin’s third theoretical principle that the voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions. Also, they serve as a brief introduction to Godwin’s communication theory which I present in Chapter III. I now present each proposition in more detail.

1. Sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated, must always be victorious over error.

In the first proposition Godwin asserts that sound argument, given that it is adequately communicated, will always be victorious over sophistry. Godwin claims that it is “one of the prerogatives of truth to follow [sophistry] in its mazes and strip it of its disguise” (*ibid.*). The idea is that given the proper time and examination, what is false can never stand in contention with what is true. Further, truth when adequately communicated is also “distinctly apprehended” (*ibid.*) by the receiver, or in other words is “brought home to the conviction of the understanding” (Godwin, *PJ* 135). Error, on the other hand, is the result of poor communication or of accepting judgments at face value without a true understanding. Subsequently, Godwin stresses the importance of mental independence (private judgment) as a sort of truth-finder. Developing mental independence accustoms people to make judgments based on evidence and to accept little on the basis of what they are merely told is true. Like Descartes, Godwin believes that what cannot be adequately demonstrated, also cannot be adequately understood, and, therefore, should not be accepted as fact (Locke, *Don* 94-5).

2. Sound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated.

Godwin claims that if someone has a truth then, it is possible for it to be communicated from person to person by restating the arguments that support it. He does not suggest that the process is immediate. Rather, it is often “of long duration or repeated recurrence” (Godwin, *PJ* 141), for “[w]e do not always know how to communicate all the evidence we are capable of commanding in a single conversation, and much less in a single instant” (*ibid.*). However, if the communicator is knowledgeable about his subject, and is desirous of achieving his goal, then with careful attention and patience the knowledge will be transferred.

Godwin also suggests that the communication of truth requires an opportunity for the interchange or transmission of ideas. In his era, as we saw in Chapter I, communication was in the midst of its own revolution. The emergence of altruistic social criticism in France, for example, was seen at the Palais Royal where its gardens and cafes had turned into an open air club, and thousands of people circulated each day “to exchange news, to discuss the pamphlets of the hour” (Kropotkin 61) and to better “know and . . . understand one another” (*ibid.*). In England, and in the tradition of the French clubs and associations, a similar network also took root. However, the government’s fear of public protest and social criticism grew strong in England due to the French Revolution. As a result, Pitt’s government introduced measures that would hinder the communication of ideas, and thus, allow government to more effectively control public opinion. The opportunity for free discussion was reduced through repressive laws such as the Gagging Acts (1795), “which abrogated the freedom of speech, assembly, and of the press” (Marshall, *Anarchist Writings* 18). However, in Chapter III we will see that Godwin’s communicative ideal (open communication) is more likely to avoid government restrictions than mass communication forms such as political associations. The reason is that open communication, because of its intimate and contemplative nature, avoids the passionate atmospheres generated by associations. Thus, by calmly and gradually informing the public as opposed to exciting it, open communication is more apt to keep the lines of communication open.

Another criterion for the successful communication of truth, one Godwin does not explicitly state, is that the receiver of knowledge must be willing to listen, otherwise, there is no possibility of transferring truth. At the outset of Plato’s *Republic*, Polemarchus addresses Socrates:

Polemarchus said, Socrates, you appear to have turned your faces toward and to be going to leave us.

Not a bad guess, said I.

But you see how many we are? he said.

Surely.

You must either then prove yourselves the better men or stay here.

Why, is there not left, said I, the alternative of our persuading you that you ought to let us go?

But *could* you persuade us, said he, if we refused to listen?

Nohow, said Glaucon.

Well, we won't listen, and you might as well make up your minds to it. (Plato 327c)

In this bit of dialogue, Socrates' wish is to continue on toward Athens by persuading Polemarchus to let them go. However, Polemarchus simply refuses to listen and reduces the conflict to the dictates of brute power (Couture 2). Thus, not only must the communicator have ample opportunity to deliver his message but he also requires a willing listener; otherwise, there is no chance of communicating truth. Godwin's account relies on the fact that human beings are communicative by nature.²⁷ It is true that there will be those who refuse to listen but there will be just as many who will:

[e]very new convert that is made to its cause [truth], if he be taught its excellence as well as its reality, is a fresh apostle to extend its illuminations through a wider sphere. In this respect it resembles the motion of a falling body, which increases its rapidity in proportion to the squares of the distances. Add to which that when a convert to truth has been adequately informed it is barely possible that he should ever fail in its adherence; whereas error contains in it the principle of its own mortality. Thus the advocates of falsehood and mistake must continually diminish, and the well informed adherents of truth incessantly multiply. (Godwin, *PJ* 142)

Godwin speaks here of disseminating knowledge through networks of communicators who are genuinely interested in attaining truths. (I will discuss his communication ideal in more depth in Chapter III.) He is concerned about communication because he believes that certain forms are more conducive to the generation of truth than others. For instance, he asserts that it is common, for questions even under the heaviest examination, to be answered falsely. Godwin attributes the victory of error in these instances, not to the infirmity of truth, but, rather, to the communication itself:

[i]t has sometimes been affirmed that, whenever a question is ably brought forward for examination, the decisions of the human species must ultimately be on the right side.

²⁷ Godwin "retains as a central component of his philosophy the view that man lives naturally in society and that natural society is essentially discursive" (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 128).

But this proposition is to be understood with allowances. Civil policy, magnificent emoluments and sinister motives may upon many occasions, by distracting the attention, cause the worse reason to pass as if it were the better. (Godwin, *PJ* 142-3)

Indeed, Godwin suggests that there are many occasions when falsehood is victorious over truth. However, his first and second propositions do not deny this fact. They merely state that when truth is adequately communicated, it will be victorious over error, and that given the proper communicative atmosphere, it can and will be communicated.

3. *Truth is Omnipotent.*

Godwin cautions us that his third proposition “must be understood with limitations” (Godwin, *PJ* 143). In order that truth have meaning, he claims, it must be accompanied by the evidence which supports it. Thus, if the evidence is poorly or partially stated then truth will not attend it. Also, Godwin does not rule out the possibility that there are truths expressed in propositions which we do not yet grasp, and will not grasp, until we have sufficient evidence to back up these propositions; “they are not truths to us,” he amends, though they might be “true in themselves” (*ibid.*).

Godwin derives his conception of truth from a Lockean epistemology. Truth “refers to an accurate perception of states of affairs” (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 208) or to “those propositions . . . which describe the real relations of things” (Godwin, *PJ* 117): “[t]he [k]nowledge of truth’, writes Godwin in words which are almost those of John Locke, ‘lies in the perceived agreement or disagreement of the terms of a proposition’” (Locke, *Don* 94). Consequently, as human beings our animal structure limits what we are capable of knowing. Godwin says that “we cannot penetrate into the essences of things, or rather we have no sound and satisfactory knowledge of things external to ourselves, but merely of our own sensations” (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* 155). Thus his epistemology, in line here with Humean empiricism, suggests that there are limits to what we can know, and also, that what we do know is based on greater or lesser

probability. Hence, truth must be accompanied by the evidence which supports it, is understood strictly in relation to this evidence, and is based on probability.

Godwin's third proposition, truth is omnipotent, should flow logically from the first two propositions. A quick review, then: (1) sound reasoning and truth if adequately communicated must always be victorious over error: (2) sound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated; thus, when adequately communicated, (3) truth is omnipotent, or "so far as [it] relates to the conviction of the understanding [is] irresistible" (Godwin, *PJ* 143). As Godwin's "contemporary Blake held . . . '[t]ruth can never be told so as to be understood, and not believed'" (Locke, *Don* 94).

The above proposition, deduced from the first two propositions, besides being an obvious move, is not quite complete. Godwin's key move is to take this conclusion one step further by saying that "[e]very principle which can be brought home to the conviction of the mind will infallibly produce a correspondent effect upon the conduct" (Godwin, *PJ* 145). The idea is that if we are convinced of the truth of a proposition, *e.g.*, that it is always our duty to give to those less fortunate than ourselves, then the proposition upon being brought home to the conviction of the understanding necessarily produces a change in our voluntary action. Thus, the meaning of the omnipotence of truth is found in its "undisputed empire over the conduct" (Godwin, *PJ* 144) which is the crux of Godwin's third theoretical principle in support of perfectibility, that "the voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions" (Godwin, *PJ* 116).

4. The vices and moral weakness of man are not invincible.

This proposition, according to Godwin, varies just slightly from the third proposition, that truth is omnipotent. If our voluntary actions originate in opinion and vice is "founded upon ignorance and error" (Godwin, *PJ* 144), then it is inevitable that truth, when adequately communicated, "has the faculty of expelling weakness and vice, and

placing nobler and more beneficent principles in their stead" (*ibid.*). Therefore, man is perfectible, or, in other words, susceptible of perpetual improvement.

In this chapter I have presented the theoretical components of Godwin's idea of perfectibility. His account stresses that the improvement of reason in individuals is necessary for the improvement of conduct. There is hope for such improvement, according to Godwin, because people are sufficiently equipped to learn and communicate truths. With the improvement of intellect comes the perception of, and the desire for, the higher pleasures (benevolence). I next present in Chapter III Godwin's practical proposal for the communication of truth and the general improvement. In Chapter IV, I deal with some key objections to Godwin's "perfectibility" in order to further clarify and demonstrate that his account is coherent and plausible.

Chapter III

Social Communication

In the last chapter, I laid out Godwin's theoretical foundations in support of the perfectibility of man. If these ideas support the notion that we are capable of perpetual improvement, then we only need find the best practical means of ensuring a steady progress. In this chapter, I present Godwin's theory that social communication, as he defines it, is the best instrument of social change compared to other means such as "positive institution," revolution and reform through political associations. Godwin believes social change is necessary, but he argues against government taking the lead, and also against violent revolution as a means of effecting it. He thinks the solution lies in social communication, but not just any form of social communication. He opposes interest groups, such as political parties, what he calls "political associations," as vehicles of social change. Instead, he thinks that unrestricted, open, and frank discussion in small groups of citizens is the best way to bring about social change.

Positive Institution

Godwin argues against the coercive forms of social change found in both positive institution and in violent revolution. He claims that positive institution damages the mental independence of individuals by modifying their character through the use of external motivation, *i.e.*, the offer of reward or the threat of punishment for their actions. As a result, conduct is no longer based solely on the intrinsic merits of a particular case but is modified in accordance with government sanction. Furthermore, individuals lose the ability to evaluate critically what is genuinely in their best interest, since decisions about their conduct are ultimately made by others.

Godwin asserts that it is the tendency of government to "inform the understanding as to what actions are right and what actions are wrong" (Godwin, *PJ* 201). It is the very

nature of government to teach its subjects obedience and compliance with its decrees but not examination of the validity of such decrees. Indeed:

[p]ositive institutions do not content themselves with requiring my assent to certain propositions, in consideration of the testimony by which they are enforced. . . . But in the very nature of these institutions there is included a sanction, a motive either of punishment or reward, to induce me to obedience. (Godwin, *PJ* 203)

Thus, although the state is useful in protecting individuals from harm, it “always involves one group imposing their controversial moral conclusions on another group of a different opinion” (Couture 4). We comply with the rule of government by acting in response to external motivation, meaning that government furnishes individuals with “an additional motive to the practice of virtue or right” (Godwin, *PJ* 201) by sanctioning their behaviour. In turn, our reasoning process is modified, and, along with it, our character. For instance:

I have an opportunity of essentially contributing to the advantage of twenty individuals; they will be benefited, and no other persons will sustain a material injury. I ought to embrace this opportunity. Here let us suppose positive institution to interfere, and to annex some great personal reward to the discharge of my duty. This immediately changes the nature of the action. Before, I preferred it for its intrinsic excellence. Now, so far as the positive institution operates, I prefer it because some person has arbitrarily annexed to it a great weight of self-interest. (Godwin, *PJ* 201-2)

Godwin argues that in attaching an external motive to the act of helping other people, positive institution alters the intention in performing the act. In the present example, the virtuous act loses its virtuous character when it is performed merely out of self-interest. For Godwin, virtue depends on more than just consequences but also “upon the disposition with which the action is accompanied” (Godwin, *PJ* 202). Other utilitarians of the time, such as Bentham, believed that intention was not a necessary component of virtue and that the “sole criterion is the action’s consequences” (Boss 268). I do not wish to enter a debate between types of utilitarianism at this juncture. Rather, the point I wish to stress, in accordance with Godwin’s argument, is that government’s tendency to attach additional motives (reward and punishment) to conduct accustoms people to ignore the intrinsic merits of any one case in favour of immediate self-interest. Consequently,

government-directed change effectively reduces individuals to a common standard characterized by “pusillanimity of temper, and a frigid indifference to right and wrong” (Godwin, *PJ* 206). Positive institution is “inimical to the improvement of mind” (Godwin, *PJ* 201) for it eschews the practice of critical evaluation amongst citizens and applauds blind obedience. It damages moral independence since it “constitutes other men the arbitrators of my actions, and the ultimate disposers of my destiny” (Godwin, *PJ* 238). What is in the best interest of the public remains a question for the specialized ruling class.

In summary, positive institution relies more on coercion or manipulation than on moral reasons for affecting change, and, consequently, damages the mental independence of individuals, and creates an environment that is adverse to the improvement of mind.

Revolution

Godwin opposes violent revolution as an effective means of social improvement because it is self-contradictory, involves rapid change, and is unpredictable in outcome.

First, revolution is self-contradictory for it is “engendered by an indignation against tyranny, yet is itself even more pregnant with tyranny” (Godwin, *PJ* 269). It opposes force with force itself. Like government-directed change, revolution always “involves one group imposing their controversial moral conclusions on another group of a different opinion” (Couture 4). Thus, revolution attempts to force its tenets upon the established order through violence and violence becomes the sole reason why the overthrown are “obliged to change their creed, precisely at the time at which I see reason to alter mine” (Godwin, *PJ* 269).

Second, revolution is self-contradictory because it creates a communicative atmosphere similar to the one it fights against. For instance, those who speak out with arguments against revolution suffer ill regard in such passionate times. Godwin states that “[a]n attempt to scrutinize men’s thoughts, and punish their opinions, is of all kinds of

despotism the most odious; yet this attempt is peculiarly characteristic of a period of revolution” (Godwin, *PJ* 270).

Lastly, even if successful, revolution is self-contradictory because a violent revolution does not alter the resentment that the opposing parties have for each other. Godwin asks, “[w]hat [is] more unavoidable than that men should entertain some discontent at being violently stripped of their wealth and their privileges” (Godwin, *PJ* 269) and of the attachment “to the sentiments in which they were educated” (*ibid.*)? The point here is that violence may change someone’s behaviour temporarily but it is not likely to change his or her sentiments. Rather, it may only increase his original conviction. Changing ideas is better accomplished through reason and argument than force.

In summary, revolution is self-contradictory because it uses force to support its claims, threatens open communication and enquiry, and creates a political climate filled with “mutual animosity and variance” (Godwin, *PJ* 272).

Godwin also opposes revolution because it proposes to rapidly force society into extreme change. According to Godwin, society is ill-prepared for such change. He claims that revolution interrupts the gradual advancement and communication of political knowledge by relying on force instead of argument. Consequently, the impetuous nature of revolution turns the most important subject of human inquiry, the advancement of the general condition of human beings, into a game of chance.

Let us examine the risks involved in revolution with a few plausible consequences. One risk of initiating rapid and violent change is that many will be unaware of the reasons and consequences of such action. Godwin argues that the advancement of scientific knowledge is a gradual process and that political science is still in its infancy. The chance of a majority being fully acquainted with political truth is unlikely. Rather, “it is to be feared that the greater part of this majority are often mere parrots who have been taught a

lesson of the subject of which they understand little or nothing” (Godwin, *PJ* 260). Thus, if the majority do not “truly understand the object of their professed wishes”(Godwin, *PJ* 261), then it is doubtful “whether they be ripe for its reception, and competent to its assertion” (*ibid.*).

Another consequence applies to the revolution that has the true support of the majority; that is, the majority of people support the cause and are fully acquainted with the reasons and consequences for such action. In this scenario the political vanguard is not forcing supporters into a position for which they are unprepared. Thus, it appears that the only force required at this stage is what is needed to remove the existing power structure. However, Godwin argues that the overwhelming strength of public opinion alone will be sufficient to complete the social transformation without any need for violence:

[i]n a word, either the people are unenlightened and unprepared for a state of freedom, and then the struggle and the consequences of the struggle will be truly perilous; or the progress of political knowledge among them is decisive, and then everyone will see how futile and short-lived will be the attempt to hold them in subjection, The party attached to liberty is, upon that supposition, the numerous one; they are the persons of true energy, and who have an object worthy of their zeal. Their oppressors, few in number, and degraded to the rank of lifeless machines, wander with no certain destination or prospect over the vast surface, and are objects of pity rather than serious alarm. Every hour diminishes their number and their resources; while, on the other hand, every moment’s delay gives new strength to the cause, and fortitude to the champions, of liberty. (Godwin, *PJ* 259)

Godwin argues in support of the power of public opinion to affect change. With true majority support, he believes, a successful social transformation is possible, because “the improvement of our institutions” (Godwin, *PJ* 273) now “advances in a just proportion to the illumination of the public understanding” (*ibid.*) as opposed to every other scenario we have hitherto examined.

Godwin does allow for revolutionary action as an absolutely last course of action. This exception, however, has only the remotest chance for use. For instance, if an overwhelming public opinion fails to alter the power structure, then that power structure must be a dictatorship, for any other system would yield to pressure. However, an

enlightened nation is, out of necessity, already in possession of a free and extensive communication network, and this type of development could probably never exist under a dictatorship in the first place. Thus, the exception that would allow for the case of revolution seems remote at best.

We now know the key reasons for Godwin's rejection of social change caused by the coercive tendencies of the state and its legal system, and by violence and revolution. We also know that Godwin believes public opinion to be the proper source of change within society. Thus, for Godwin, the best way to change and improve our condition is to create a sound public opinion. Political associations in his time were effective communication vehicles whereby large bodies of people could be quickly and effectively influenced. Yet Godwin argues against political associations in favor of an open communication network based on sincere discussion. I now examine these two modes of communication designed to influence public understanding through reason as alternatives to coercion: political associations and open communication.

Political Associations

As a means of mass communication, political associations attempt to assess and generate public opinion. They draw large numbers of people to their meetings and appear to be "the most useful means for generating a sound public opinion" (Godwin, *PJ* 282) and for "diffusing, in the most rapid and effectual manner, political information" (*ibid.*) for the purpose of reform. Yet, Godwin rejects political associations. He claims that they tend to replace reason and argument with the "Shibboleth of a party" (Godwin, *PJ* 284), "harangue and declamation" (Godwin, *PJ* 285), and "disorder and tumult" (Godwin, *PJ* 288).

Godwin also argues that political science, and the discovery of truths within this field, require patient and "laborious enquiry" (Godwin, *PJ* 283), whereby "we must suffer nothing but arguments to bear sway in the discussion" (Godwin, *PJ* 284). Furthermore, he

claims that our chances of discovering truths increase as each man learns to “enquire and think for himself” (*ibid.*). Thus, in accordance with the Enlightenment, Godwin places an extreme emphasis on the ability of reason to lead us from error. The more that people learn to think, argue, and reason for themselves, the more our chances increase for gaining knowledge.

However, Godwin claims that the nature of political associations discourages individuality, since members experience commonality through sharing the same political views. He says:

in political associations, the object of each man is to identify his creed with that of his neighbour. We learn the Shibboleth of a party. We dare not leave our minds at large in the field of enquiry; lest we should arrive at some tenet disrelished by our party. We have no temptation to enquire. Party has a more powerful tendency than perhaps any other circumstance in human affairs to render the mind quiescent and stationary. Instead of making each man an individual, which the interest of the whole requires, it resolves all understandings into one common mass, and subtracts from each the varieties that could alone distinguish him from a brute machine. (Godwin, *PJ* 284-85)

Godwin argues that learning the “Shibboleth of a party” damages individuality by neatly packaging people’s views into a common mold. The urge to inquire is stifled by the identification with other party members. Consequently, people determine their opinions by “compulsion or sympathy” (Godwin, *PJ* 284) instead of basing them on the “conclusions suggested by the reason of the thing” (*ibid.*). The result of identifying with the creed of a party is not only that its members tend to overlook its errors but also that “we have no longer any employment for those faculties which might lead us to detect its errors” (Godwin, *PJ* 285).

A second problem attendant on political associations is their tendency toward “harangues and declamation.” Godwin contends that just as identifying with the creed of one’s party can take the emphasis away from arguments, “harangues and declamation” create a communicative atmosphere based on passion, not reason. Consequently, the “memory of the hearer is crowded with pompous nothings, with images and not arguments.” Godwin explains that orators communicate to the crowds in such a way as to

avoid detail, rush what is said, and build the hearers' excitement to the point of applause. Communicating in such passionate atmospheres does not permit the hearer to be "sober enough to weigh things with an unshaken hand" (*ibid.*). Godwin argues that the communication of truth is more likely to occur in a calmer atmosphere where arguments can be fully explored and considered.

Also, in environments where orators compete for the support of partisans, there is apt to be a certain conformity to popularity. Godwin states:

[i]n the propositions they bring forward, in the subjects they discuss, in the side they espouse of these subjects, they will inevitably be biassed by the consideration of what will be most acceptable to their partisans, and popular with their hearers. (Godwin, *PJ* 286)

Godwin's point is that concessions are made in reasoning merely for the gain of support and the interests of political truth are clouded by the personal interests of the speakers.

Finally, Godwin rejects political associations for their tendency to "disorder and tumult." He claims that the passionate atmosphere of associations often engenders mobs and riots. As excitement builds, "the sympathy of opinion catches from man to man" and is fuelled by "a bitter and personal detestation of their oppressors" (*ibid.*) until at last the proceedings degenerate into riot. Consequently, such bold and violent atmospheres do little more than confound the process of debate and "increase public impatience for action" (Couture 5) without good reason. Godwin rejects political associations as an effective communication form because their tendency is to excite, and confuse the process of investigating politics through the "Shibboleth of party," "harangue and declamation," and "disorder and tumult." The result is that associations are capable of rapidly generating unsound political information which in turn fosters an unsound public opinion and stymies the process of political reform.

Open Communication

Godwin argues that his communicative ideal increases the intellectual independence of individuals by encouraging contemplation, impartial criticism, and personal judgment, and, thus, affords the best chance of generating a sound public opinion. The practice of open communication involves sincere and friendly discussion in small groups for the purpose of social criticism, as opposed to the large scale mass meetings of political associations. Open communication, as a vehicle of social change, leaves "positive institution" intact and promotes peaceful and gradual change in accordance to the level of public understanding.

Open communication avoids the problems associated with the passionate atmospheres of noisy assemblies. There is no occasion for "harangues and declamation," nor for "disorder and tumult," to intrude upon contemplation and the advancement of truth. Godwin states:

[t]ruth dwells with contemplation. We can seldom make much progress in the business of disentangling error and delusion but in sequestered privacy, or in the tranquil interchange of sentiments that takes place between two persons. (Godwin, *PJ* 286)

Godwin's claim is straightforward. Open communication supports contemplative practice for calm atmospheres, which in turn allow participants to weigh and consider arguments in a sober fashion. Thus, Godwin's ideal well suits the cultivation of truth.

Furthermore, Godwin argues that open communication increases the chances of achieving impartiality, for there is no incentive to adopt the "Shibboleth of a party." Instead, a person will acquaint himself with a broad range of ideas and opinions, since

[h]e will mix at large among his species; he will converse with men of all orders and parties; he will fear to attach himself in his intercourse to any particular set of men, lest his thoughts should become insensibly warped, and he should make to himself a world of petty dimensions, instead of that liberal and various scene in which nature has permitted him to expatiate. (Godwin, *PJ* 285)

As previously mentioned, one of Godwin's major reservations about political associations is that their members, in identifying with the creed of a party, are often influenced by

“compulsion or sympathy” instead of the “conclusions suggested by the reasoning of the thing.” However, individuals who practice open communication have no party to which they might attach their sentiments. They are, therefore, more likely to exercise their mental independence, and, as a result, are more likely to engage in impartial criticism, whereby they examine conclusions based on the merits of the arguments alone.

Godwin also argues that discussion strengthens personal judgment, for it helps to develop a person’s own sentiments (Godwin, *PJ* 289). He compares conversation to a mirror in which participants see their mental reflection in the reaction of other participants. Ritter describes the process:

[j]ust as a mirror helps me know my physical identity, so conversation helps me know my mental self. Through his reactions to my statements, an interlocutor reflects them, so that I understand them better than I could alone. My firmer grasp of my expressed opinions helps me to criticize them, so as to increase the independence of my thought. (Ritter 42-3)

The mirror analogy suggests that individual development requires more than just isolated contemplation. Godwin claims that conversation is necessary because it helps to clarify and strengthen a person’s own thoughts. It may seem contradictory to believe that his or her mental independence depends on the thought of others, but in support of Godwin, Ritter argues that “[o]ne finds individuality by sharing with others the capacity of the human species for independent thought” (Ritter 41). According to Godwin, when conversing, a person does not implicitly conform himself to the estimate of others, but compares their opinions with each other and with his own (Godwin, *Enquirer* 343):

[k]nowledge, such as we are able to acquire it, depends in a majority of instances, not upon the single efforts of the individual, but upon the consent of other human understandings sanctioning the judgment of our own. (Godwin, *PJ* 313)

Conversation strengthens a person’s sentiments through the positive criticism of others. In other words, a person builds his intellectual independence by taking criticism into consideration and then evaluating his own point of view. Thus, communication for

Godwin, fosters individuality and is necessary “in a majority of instances” for acquiring knowledge.

Godwin’s account of open communication stresses contemplation, impartiality, and personal judgment. However, in his view, these factors, in order to be truly effective, require honest communication. Indeed, Godwin believes that sincerity is “the most powerful engine of human improvement” (Godwin, *PJ* 320).

Sincerity

Godwinian sincerity proposes that we tell “every man the truth regardless of the dictates of worldly prudence and custom” (Godwin, *PJ* 312). He argues that sincerity fosters self-development, for it enables conversers to more accurately assess each other’s opinions, and, thus, to strengthen their sentiments. Furthermore, sincerity breeds trust among individuals, which enhances communication and the opportunity for improvement.

In order to fully appreciate the benefits of sincere conversation, Godwin criticizes the “cold reserve” (Godwin, *PJ* 288) that permeates much of society’s communicative space. He states:

[t]here is at present in the world a cold reserve that keeps man at a distance from man. There is an art in the practice of which individuals communicate for ever, without anyone telling his neighbour what estimate he forms of his attainments and character, how they ought to be employed, and how to be improved. There is a sort of domestic tactics, the object of which is to elude curiosity, and keep the tenour of conversation, without the disclosure either of our feelings or opinions. The friend of justice will have no object more deeply at heart than the annihilation of this duplicity. The man whose heart overflows with kindness for his species will habituate himself to consider, in each successive occasion of social intercourse, how that occasion may be most beneficially improved. (*Ibid.*)

Godwin’s central objection to communication marked by a “cold reserve” is that it keeps “up the tenour of conversation, without the disclosure either of our feelings or opinions.” One consequence of a person hiding his true sentiments is that he shall likely “neither add to, nor correct them” (Godwin, *PJ* 314). Godwin suggests that by avoiding discussion or

withholding his ideas, he cuts off any chance of feedback on their behalf. However, if he is candid and unreserved in conversation, then his expressed opinions, with the help of an interlocutor's feedback, are made better.

In the case of deceit, wherein conversers not only withhold their sentiments, but just plain lie, there are again negative consequences, because an interlocutor cannot help me evaluate my own thought with dishonesty as well as he might with genuine criticism (Ritter 44). The interests of improvement, therefore, suggest the need for unreserved communication and general "mutual awareness" (Ritter 34). However, Godwin's critique of the "cold reserve" within society shows the opposite effect. Withholding our true sentiments in silence, lies or equivocation tends to breed "general distrust" (Godwin, *PJ* 328) which in turn stifles communication by keeping "man at a distance from man."

Godwin declares:

[a]t present, men meet together with the temper less of friends than enemies. Every man eyes his neighbour, as if he expected to receive from him a secret wound. Every member of a polished and civilized community goes armed. (Godwin, *PJ* 316)

The lack of sincerity, or "plain dealing" (Godwin, *PJ* 314), in society creates uncertainty about how individuals view each other. For instance, criticism is seldom an open affair, but is much more likely to circulate in secret, if at all. The insincere communicator thus criticizes others "with the sentiments of a criminal, conscious that what he is saying he would be unwilling to utter before the individual concerned" (Godwin, *PJ* 316). As a result, the individual facing criticism is at a disadvantage. First, assume that his conduct, in this instance, is flawed. If left alone in the matter, he will either be unaware of his fault, or he will have some notion of it, great or small. In the first case, without any notion of his fault, there is little chance of correction; in the latter instance, where he must resolve the problem from the confines of his own judgment, his analysis will lack the scope that it otherwise might afford in conjunction with the sincere feedback of his fellows.

Furthermore, Godwin argues that "[i]t is the uncertainty of which every man is conscious

as to his solitary judgment that produces . . . a zeal for proselytism, and impatience of contradiction” (Godwin, *PJ* 313).

Second, assume that the specific conduct of the individual under criticism is not flawed. The insincere communicator simply lies to another about the matter. In this case the intent is malicious, the criticism is unwarranted, and, without open and unreserved communication, the falsehood persists. Godwin asserts that a consequence of insincerity is the increased opportunity for the “basest hypocrite to pass through life with applause” while the “purest character is loaded with unmerited aspersions” (*ibid.*). Insincerity breeds distrust, dismay, and ill will among individuals for they are unaware and uncertain of the true estimate each has for the other.

On the other hand, Godwin claims that sincerity, by making conversers more aware of each others’ sentiments, shall enhance communication and foster a general trust. He says, “I should not conceive alarm from my neighbour, because I should be conscious that I knew his genuine sentiments” (Godwin, *PJ* 317). Thus, in ridding ourselves of duplicity, conversers “acquire a clear, ingenuous and unembarrassed air” (Godwin, *PJ* 312). A person no longer feels the need to express his concerns and criticisms furtively for fear of incurring “the imputation of a calumniator” (Godwin, *PJ* 316). Rather, he expresses his concerns readily, with the full knowledge that what he brings to the table is a matter of open debate. For instance, if his interest is in discussing the faults of another, then his intent is not to spread malicious gossip, for he reveals his sentiments with the foreknowledge that the person concerned, present or not, will know his mind. Also, if a person wishes to discuss his own defects, then he does so knowing that the feedback he receives is genuine, and that he will not suffer ridicule. Consequently, sincere conversers are free from the suspicion and fear that breeds animosity among men who converse under the auspice of a “cold reserve.” Instead, open communication breeds mutual awareness and trust that in turn allows individuals to improve and develop.

In this chapter we have seen that Godwin's arguments place a supreme value on mental independence, and thus, on systems (open communication) that employ reason as a means of change. Systems that rely primarily on coercion (revolution, positive institution), or that rely on communication that inhibits reason (political associations), threaten individuality.

Part one of Chapter IV attempts to further clarify Godwin's theory of perfectibility and to show that it is a plausible thesis. In part two of Chapter IV, we will subject Godwin's communicative ideal to his own criterion to determine if "trusting to reason alone" (Godwin, *PJ* 277) does not itself rely upon the means of manipulation and/or coercion. We will also attempt to determine whether or not a system of open communication can work; in other words, is it achievable and is it effective

Chapter IV

Objections and Replies: Godwin's Perfectibility and Social Communication

In this chapter I deal with some of the main objections to Godwin's account of human perfectibility and social communication. I do not intend to examine Chapters II and III by way of proceeding from principle to principle. First, I have already done this to some extent by reconstructing Godwin's arguments in a way that included replies to objections. More importantly, I think that examining his central ideas better enables us to evaluate the coherence and plausibility of his account. If there are insurmountable problems in these ideas, then a micro-analysis of each and every component is unnecessary, at least for the purposes of this thesis.

Part One - Perfectibility

A main criticism of Enlightenment philosophy is that it overestimates the power of human reason to improve society. In Chapters II and III, we saw that Godwin's belief in human perfectibility depends on the gradual enlightenment of individuals through reason. Therefore, if we are to consider Godwin's thesis, he must show against various objections that he does not overstate the role of reason in improvement.

Perhaps the most common objection to Godwin is that we are creatures of both reason and passion, and thus, to suppose that the former has more power over someone's conduct than the latter simply ignores facts about human nature. In *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt claims that Godwin fails to acknowledge the selfish tendencies of man:

[h]e conceived too nobly of his fellows (the most unpardonable crime against them, for there is nothing that annoys our self-love so much as being complimented on imaginary achievements, to which we are wholly unequal)—he raised the standard of morality above the reach of humanity, and by directing virtue to the most airy and romantic heights, made her path dangerous, solitary, and impracticable. The author of the *Political Justice* took abstract reason for the rule of conduct, and abstract good for its

end. . . . Mr. Godwin gives no quarter to the amiable weaknesses of our nature, nor does he stoop to avail himself of the supplementary aids of an imperfect virtue. (Hazily 184-85)

To say that Godwin “gives no quarter to the amiable weaknesses of our nature” is too strong. It is true that Godwin is an optimist about human nature, but his belief in human perfectibility does not suggest that reason can or will conquer passion or even that it is opposed to it. Instead, perfectibility implies that the passions can and “ought to be purified” (Godwin, *PJ* 137), which means that we are capable of desiring, and, indeed, ought to desire certain things more than others. Thus, the function of reason, according to Godwin, is not to temper desire; rather, reason is “calculated to regulate our conduct, according to the comparative worth it ascribes to different excitements” (Godwin, *PJ* 77). The right question to ask, then, is not merely whether reason can overcome passion but whether it can show us what is truly desirable.²⁸ In order to answer this question, however, Godwin must first show what motivates our desires.

Psychological Egoism

Godwin asserts that we are creatures whose sensations / ideas are accompanied with an awareness of pleasure (good) or pain (evil), and that it is our nature to desire the former and disapprove the latter (Godwin, *PJ* 183).²⁹ Thus, he states that “all our volitions are attended with complacence or aversion” (Godwin, *PJ* 136); or, in other words, that “it is impossible that the hand can be stretched out to obtain anything except so far as it is considered as desirable; and to be desirable is the same thing as to have a tendency to communicate pleasure” (Godwin, *PJ* 132). Passion, then, in the sense that our voluntary actions demonstrate that we must desire one alternative to another, cannot be

²⁸Godwin lists in his “Summary of Principles” that “reason is not an independent principle, and has no tendency to excite us to action; in a practical view, it is merely a comparison and balancing of different feelings” (Godwin, *PJ* 77).

²⁹ “Good is a general name, including pleasure, and the means by which pleasure is procured. Evil is a general name, including pain, and the means by which pain is produced” (Godwin, *PJ* 390).

eradicated. Moreover, what one person finds to be pleasurable / desirable / good, in Godwin's view, can be purified by bringing one passion into contention with another.

Godwin argues that reason is the key factor in purifying the passions. He shows how reason can "ascribe worth to different excitements" in two senses; first, reason provides evidence by uncovering facts to help us gain knowledge / truth; and second, reason helps us to confirm our choices.

I begin by discussing the role of reason in the first sense. For example, if a person has option (a) spending seventy-five dollars for a night out on the town, or (b) directing the same funds to a charity for starving children, how does reason influence the decision? Consider the possibility that he or she might choose option (a) even though admitting that in light of the reasons option (b) is really the better alternative. Does not such a scenario, which seems plausible, suggest that Godwin's concept of reason, and, more specifically, his idea of the "omnipotence of truth" is insufficient to regulate conduct? By asserting that "truth is omnipotent," Godwin means that "every principle which can be brought home to the conviction of the mind will infallibly produce a correspondent effect upon the conduct" (Godwin, *PJ* 145). Therefore, if it is true that a person's voluntary actions differ from his or her convictions, then Godwin is wrong about the "omnipotence of truth" and the power of reason. Ritter thinks that "[i]t is more credible to believe . . . persons when they report failing to follow their convictions than to charge them with misunderstanding what their convictions say" (Ritter 93).

Godwin can reply that conviction about option (b) is in reality less than a full conviction, since all voluntary action is taken as confirmation of opinion. By choosing option (a) a person necessarily shows that he perceives (a) as more pleasurable / desirable / good than option (b). So how is it, in Godwin's view, that reason can affect our choice? Godwin would say that if a person finds option (a) more desirable than option (b) it is because he does not know the relevant facts concerning option (b). For instance, in choosing option (a) a person can enjoy an evening filled with music, food, wine, and

company (an event in which all the particulars are known) as opposed to option (b) where he gives seventy-five dollars to an unfamiliar person, who then transfers the money to an agency and then somewhere in the future food is distributed to starving children (an event in which all the particulars are unknown). However, suppose the relevant facts about option (b) are known. In this case, a number of the starving children are brought before the person so that he might observe their condition. The reality of starvation is now very vivid as opposed to when it was merely an abstract concept. He is now in possession of more facts than he was previously, and thus, is able to better understand the evils of starvation. Consequently, he experiences the appropriate feeling (sympathy) in the full light of the facts and his desire to help the children ousts his desire to go out on the town. In Godwin's words, we have "conquered one passion . . . by the introduction of another" (Godwin, *PJ* 137). Note, however, that the sympathy the person experiences in this instance, according to Godwin's explanation of what motivates our desires, is based on self-interest, *i.e.*, on the "sympathetic enjoyment of the well-being of another" (Brandt 69) possibly mixed with the pleasurable feelings of a satisfied conscience, or of glorifying his own actions as morally superior.

Godwin's account suggests that the function of reason (in the first sense) is to increase knowledge, which can change our opinions and feelings. Thus, one of the main goals of perfecting the human character for Godwin "consists in approaching as nearly as possible to the perfectly voluntary state" (Godwin, *PJ* 127) so that we are as much as possible aware of the reasons for our actions. He states:

[w]e should be cautious of thinking it a sufficient reason for an action that we are accustomed to perform it, and that we once thought it right. . . . We should accustom ourselves not to forget the reasons that produced our determination, but be ready upon all occasions clearly to announce and fully to enumerate them. (Godwin, *PJ* 128)

Godwin stresses that we exercise reason (to approach as near as possible the perfectly voluntary state) because he believes that reason "is calculated to regulate our conduct according to the comparative worth it ascribes to different excitements." In other words,

some passions arise when we know some of the facts and other passions arise when know all of the facts (Monro 181). However, his explanation of the role of reason in relation to passion leaves gaps in the question of motivation. He equates what is desirable with what a person finds the most pleasurable and what he or she finds the most pleasurable necessarily varies according to the understanding. But Godwin is not a psychological or an ethical egoist; instead, he believes that people can and ought to be “influenced by disinterested considerations” (Godwin, *PJ* 377). Thus, reason, in the sense that it merely uncovers facts, is insufficient so far as it regulates the passions. Godwin’s account also requires his view of reason in the second sense, *i.e.*, that it “confirms our choices.”

Benevolent Disinterest (psychological altruism)

Godwin is faced with the problem of showing that people can be influenced by “disinterested considerations” while at the same time he admits that “[t]he things first desired by every thinking being will be agreeable sensation, and the means of agreeable sensation” (Godwin, *PJ* 379). In other words, he must provide a sensible account of the shift from egoism to altruism. His account involves two main ideas: one is that a shift of motive from means to ends is a natural progression for all the passions; the other is that reason “confirms our choice” about the passion of disinterested benevolence in a way that is distinct from other passions.

Godwin argues that “it is the nature of the passions speedily to convert what at first was means into ends” (Godwin, *PJ* 380) so that the pleasure primarily becomes loved “for its own sake.” He attributes the shift from means to ends to the function of habit. It is true, he says, that “all indulgence of the senses is originally chosen for the sake of pleasure that accrues;” however, it is also true that “the quantity of accruing pleasure or pain is continually changing.” Moreover, he argues that the changes in the levels of pleasure are seldom taken into account, and when they are, the power of habit is usually too strong to be overcome. The drunkard, for example, loses touch with the original motive (the

pleasure of drinking) and continues in his habit even after he admits that the pains outweigh the pleasures. Thus, he drinks not for the means of pleasure but for the sake of drinking itself, or, as Godwin says, until the point that he ““will rather die, than part with it”” (*ibid.*).

Godwin thinks that the shift of motive from means to ends is consistent in all the passions, whether it be for the love of wealth, the love of drink, or the love of helping others. Thus, in the case of beneficence, it holds that promoting the happiness of “our child, our family, our country or our species” (Godwin, *PJ* 381) is originally pursued for the means of agreeable sensation. However, like the previous example, it is the nature of habit to convert means to ends so that “after having habituated ourselves to promote the happiness of our child, our family, our country or our species, we are at length brought to approve and desire their happiness without retrospect to ourselves” (*ibid.*). Godwin argues that the motive of agreeable sensation (the original motive) becomes the indirect motive, meaning that it itself is not “present to the mind of the agent at the time of his determination” (Godwin, *PJ* 384). Its influence, however, still perceptibly mixes “itself with such of our beneficent actions as are of a sensible duration.” Thus, our own pleasure is not forgotten but remains a secondary consideration. He maintains that the “disinterested and direct motive . . . seems to occupy the principal place. This is at least the first, often the only, thing in the view of the mind, at the time the action is chosen” (*ibid.*).

Godwin’s other key move is to assert that even though the passions share a “parallel nature” (Godwin, *PJ* 381) in relation to the shift of motivation from means to ends, there is a significant difference also. He states that “once we have entered into so auspicious a path as that of disinterestedness, reflection confirms our choice, in a sense in which it never can confirm any of the factitious passions we have named” (*ibid.*). Thus, according to Godwin, only by experiencing the state of “disinterestedness” is one able to reflect on the position and see its worth. He states:

[w]e find by observation that we are surrounded by beings of the same nature with ourselves. They have the same senses, are susceptible of the same pleasures and pains, capable of being raised to the same excellence, and employed in the same usefulness. We are able in imagination to go out of ourselves, and become impartial spectators of the system of which we are a part. We can then make an estimate of their intrinsic and absolute value; and detect the imposition of that self-regard, which would represent our own interest, as of as much value as that of all the world beside. (*Ibid.*)

Godwin suggests that the state of “benevolent disinterest” is a necessary precondition for deducing the principle of impartiality, and, therefore of justice / utility. In the state of self-interest, being an “impartial spectator” was not possible and thus, reasoning itself was not objective. However, in “disinterestedness” a person achieves impartiality and is capable of accurately assessing the value of others and him or herself. Thus, with “the delusion . . . sapped,” that is, of the “self-regard which would represent our own interest, as of as much value as that of all the world beside” (*ibid.*), one can deduce the proper end of virtue itself:

[t]he end of virtue is to add to the sum of pleasurable sensation. The beacon and regulator of virtue is impartiality, that we shall not give the exertion to procure the pleasure of an individual which might have been employed in procuring the pleasure of many individuals. (Godwin, *PJ* 752)

Godwin’s hypothesis of “benevolent disinterest” avoids the problem Bentham had in trying to deduce the principle of impartiality from egoistic hedonism. Bentham’s ““every one to count as one, and no one for more than one”” (Monro 15) advocates benevolence “because it is in our interest . . . and though this may give us some reason to promote the happiness of others, it will do so only as long as their happiness does not conflict with our own” (Locke, *Don* 176). Godwin’s account argues that we are only able to understand and act according to the principle of impartiality when we have become impartial ourselves. Thus, when someone acts to help others, he does so from kind and sympathetic intentions and not directly from a view to his own pleasure. For Godwin, a moral act is guided by benevolent intentions and contributes to the general happiness. His account may avoid some of the problems that fellow utilitarians such as Bentham run into; however, in escaping these problems Godwin encounters other objections.

First, his emphasis on the role of habit in the conversion of means to ends appears, in a sense, to contradict his emphasis on reason or of “approaching as nearly as possible to the perfectly voluntary state.” His account seems to depend on not always being aware of the facts. For instance, if the drunkard had scrutinized the amount of pleasure he received on each successive drinking occasion he would have noticed a decrease in pleasure, and, consequently, with his motive of agreeable sensation reduced, he would then pursue other means of pleasure. In other words, by constantly scrutinizing his motives, which he does in the perfectly voluntary state, the conversion of means to ends could not take place, and so maximizing agreeable sensation would remain the sole motivator of conduct. Godwin can answer this objection by qualifying “voluntary action.” He states that the goal in perfecting the character involves approaching “as nearly as possible the perfectly voluntary state,” which means revising the facts that constitute our opinions as much as possible. However, Godwin realizes that the mind needs “resting places” whereby it makes choices based on “habit, or custom” (Godwin, *PJ* 125), since otherwise we would be eternally calculating our every move. So in a sense his means / ends account relies on prejudice. However, it is a prejudice that is biologically unavoidable, and thus, comes intact with human nature.

Godwin’s reply here enables him to make the shift from egoism to altruism. In doing so, however, there is perhaps a more telling objection that surfaces. The only way that someone can arrive at the conclusion that the general happiness is desirable is to have been first convinced on egoist grounds. In other words, before he comes to desire the happiness of others from a disinterested perspective, he must first directly associate it with his own happiness. According to Monro:

[i]f we come to desire the general happiness because of associations with our own happiness, and the two are not necessarily connected, then our desire is fundamentally irrational. Indeed this kind of association would seem to be what is meant by prejudice, and it would seem to be the function of reason to destroy such associations. (Monro 195)

Monro contends that Godwin overstates the role of reason in the pursuit of virtue because one of the functions of reason is to destroy false associations. I think it can be shown, in line with Godwin's account of "benevolent disinterest," that reason does destroy the erroneous association Monro brings to light.

Recall Godwin's account of the nature of the passions. He says "the first things desired by every thinking being will be agreeable sensation, and the means of agreeable sensation." Thus, we initially desire the happiness of others from an egoist standpoint. However, by acquiring further knowledge through experience, reason enables us to destroy this association.³⁰ As Godwin has said, it is the nature of the passions to convert means to ends, and in relation to disinterestedness "reflection confirms our choice" unlike any other passion. The idea is that a person must experience "disinterestedness" before he is able to properly reflect and evaluate the passion.³¹ At this point, it may be said that reason nullifies the former association, and we desire the happiness of others without direct consideration to our own pleasure.

In light of Monro's objection and a further look into Godwin's account, we see that Godwin relies on reason *and* experience. His account is not incoherent according to the reasons Monro suggests. However, the coherence of Godwin's account does not mean that what he says is true. For instance, it is arguable that his reliance on the shift of means to ends (for all passions) is not backed sufficiently. Godwin provides a few examples in order to support the claim; however, I do not think that he has shown that the nature of all passions is to convert means to ends. There are counter-examples which would negate his claim. For example, it is hard to imagine that some of the base passions

³⁰ Godwin emphasizes that knowledge is not only gained through argument and reading, but also by "our own observation of men and things . . . [for] [w]e cannot understand books till we have seen the subjects of which they treat" (Godwin, *PJ* 414).

³¹ A person cannot grasp premises that require an intimate acquaintance "with the nature of man" (Godwin, *PJ* 299) before he has this acquaintance. Indeed, "[h]e that knows the mind of man must have observed it for himself; he that knows it most intimately must have observed it in its greatest variety of situations" (Godwin, *PJ* 414). He "must himself have been an actor in the scene," (*ibid.*) and "have had his own passions brought into play" (Godwin, *PJ* 414-5).

Godwin mentions, like sexual passion, quickly convert from means to ends so that they are cherished universally for their own sake and not as a direct means to a person's own pleasure. Granted, a person's own pleasure is not always the direct motive in sexual passion. The direct motive may often be to procreate or to please this person's partner. Nonetheless, I think it is more plausible to believe that direct and indirect motives are able to switch back and forth depending on the particular circumstances. This objection does not disprove Godwin's hypothesis of disinterestedness. Rather, it implies that people can and do act in certain instances primarily with a view to their own pleasure, while at other times their own pleasure is an indirect motive. In order to perceive the value of benevolent disinterest a person has to be able to experience it, and this objection does not preclude this possibility.

In this section I have shown how Godwin can respond to the charge that he has overstated the role of reason in relation to: its influencing a person's conduct (selfish tendencies, omnipotence of truth); confirming their choices (seeing the value of disinterest); and to its dependency on false associations (first associating a person's own happiness with the general happiness). I have also tried to show through responses to objections, that the nature of human habit does not contradict the role of reason in uncovering facts, and that Godwin's means / ends claim does not thwart the hypothesis for benevolent disinterest.

Our task now is to see whether or not a system that trusts "to reason alone" can work. In order for it to work it cannot damage mental independence, and it must be practicable and effective.

Part Two - Social Communication (Open Communication)

In Chapter III, we saw that Godwin's communicative ideal, above all, respects and encourages mental independence. His arguments stress that mental independence is necessary for the gradual improvement of reason in individuals. Systems of change that rely on coercion, or on distorting rational communication, damage individuality and thus, impede progress as he sees it. In this section I attempt to answer objections which claim that Godwin's system is subject to the same charges he levels against other methods of change. For instance, open communication requires the influence of intellectual guides and the practice of public censure. Both of these factors potentially expose Godwin's ideal to charges of manipulation and coercion, and thus, to damaging mental independence. In addition to these objections, someone might argue that Godwinian "sincerity" is not practicable and further, that if it were, it would block effective communication.

Censure

The purpose of open communication is to spread truth / knowledge to as many individuals as possible. Godwin states:

[t]ruth, and above all political truth, is not hard to acquisition, but from the superciliousness of its professors. It has been slow and tedious of improvement, because the study of it has been relegated to doctors and civilians. It has produced little effect upon the practice of mankind, because it has not been allowed a plain and direct appeal to their understandings. Remove these obstacles, render it the common property, bring it into daily use, and we may reasonably promise ourselves consequences of inestimable value. (Godwin, *PJ* 290)

Godwin believes that if his "communicative ideal is spread throughout the public, then knowledge becomes accessible to all" (Couture 3). However, someone might charge him with "elitist manipulation" (Ritter 96) because "the freedom of social communication" (Godwin, *PJ* 289) relies initially on an educated elite who serve as guides. It is true that

Godwin relies on enlightened individuals to engage in open communication because he thinks doing so will, in effect, trigger the diffusion of knowledge. He says:

[l]et us figure to ourselves a number of individuals who, having stored their minds with reading and reflection, are accustomed, in candid and unreserved conversation, to compare their ideas, suggest their doubts, examine their mutual difficulties and cultivate a perspicuous and animated manner of delivering their sentiments. Let us suppose that their intercourse is not confined to the society of each other, but that they are desirous extensively to communicate the truths with which they are acquainted. (*Ibid.*)

Ritter argues that the charge of elitism “makes Godwin sound like a contemptuous manipulator of the masses” (Ritter 95-6) and “misrepresents his view of their intellectual capacities and of how their allegiance should be won” (Ritter 96). Remember, Godwin argues:

the most sacred of all privileges is that by which each man has a certain sphere, relative to the government of his own actions, and the exercise of his discretion To dragoon men into the adoption of what we think is right is an intolerable tyranny. (Godwin, *PJ* 262)

Thus, as I have said previously, Godwin believes that “there is no effectual way of improving the institutions of any people, but by enlightening their understandings” (Godwin, *PJ* 535). His interest, therefore, lies not in the manipulation of the masses but hinges on strengthening their mental independence. The role of the educated, then, is not to force their views on anyone, but to openly communicate the truths they know.

Godwin may avoid charges of “elitist manipulation” by showing that the educated / enlightened are merely catalysts of independent development; however, there are two other criticisms I want to mention involving manipulation / coercion that potentially threaten his supreme value of mental independence. As we have seen, Godwin’s doctrine of perfectibility stresses that coercion cannot aid in the development of individuals and that reason is the proper means. He says:

[c]oercion cannot convince, cannot conciliate, but on the contrary alienates the mind of him against whom it is employed. Coercion has nothing in common with reason, and therefore can have no proper tendency to the cultivation of virtue. It is true that reason is nothing more than a collation and a comparison of various emotions and feelings; but

they must be the feelings originally appropriate to the question, not those which an arbitrary will, stimulated by the possession of power may annex to it. (Godwin, *PJ* 644)

Godwin believes that the “most efficacious instrument I can possess for changing a man’s habits is to change his judgments” (Godwin, *PJ* 559). However, the way in which one goes about changing the judgments of others cannot be coercive in the sense mentioned above or Godwin contradicts himself.

The first method of censure I discuss is that which “imposes sanctions ranging from mild stigma to complete ostracism” (Ritter 14). This method, although a last precaution for Godwin, is designed to protect members of the community from being harmed by certain other dangerous members. For example, Godwin speaks of the “removal or reformation of an offender whose present habits [are] injurious” (Godwin, *PJ* 545) to the community. He also says that “the general consent of sober judgment . . . would surround him. . . . It would carry despair to his mind, or, which is better, it would carry conviction” (*ibid.*). Although Godwin’s focus is on the idea of reformation, that is, the process through which censure “would carry conviction,” he also emphasizes the threat of removal, and of having despair brought to the mind. All three of these tactics are designed for the safety of the community. Nevertheless, the last two use fear, which inhibits the process of rational deliberation and the means of achieving mental independence.

Ritter has developed an interesting response to the charge of anarchist coercion. He suggests that Godwin (and later anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin) “need not show that censure leaves liberty [which includes freedom to determine one’s own conduct] uncurtailed, but only that it curtails liberty less than other alternatives do” (Ritter 17). More specifically, “they argue that censure differs from legal government in ways which make it less coercive on the whole” (Ritter 18). Ritter directs us to three points, all of which are mentioned by Godwin in *Political Justice*. First, public censure is more intimate than legal government, and, therefore, is more able to protect individuality. In other

words, government representatives “being few in number, . . . lack the information about the attitudes and circumstances of their numerous subjects that is needed to control them as individuals, and hence must control them as an undifferentiated group.” Second, government must control this “undifferentiated group” with general laws and general laws “require a whole class of persons to behave the same ways in a wide range of cases” while censure prescribes “not according to certain maxims previously written, but according to the circumstances of each particular cause” (*ibid.*). Each person’s individuality is taken into account in order that their liberty is better protected. Third, public censure is more flexible / mutable in its operation than government which has “a tendency to crystallize what should be modified and developed day by day” (Ritter 19). Thus, censors can more easily modify their directives in order “that they do not become more restrictive as conditions change” (*ibid.*).

Ritter suggests that the above reasons at least point toward the conclusion that public censure is less coercive than government. However, more importantly, he reminds us that “anarchist censure . . . does not rely on sanctions alone to secure compliance with directives; it also uses . . . reasoned argument” (Ritter 21). Thus, Godwin could argue that because open communication focuses mainly on controlling conduct through reason alone, and relies secondarily on coercive sanctions, as in the case of an immediate threat to public security, public censure is less coercive than government, and, therefore, a method of control that is more respectful of mental independence.

The second method of censure I discuss results from peer pressure or from overwhelming opposition. Godwin is most interested in controlling behaviour “with reasoned arguments, through which a censorer tries to convince his neighbours that they should mend their ways” (Ritter 13). Although there is not an obvious sense of coercion involved in reasoning with someone in order to change their behaviour, one might still object that reasoned argument, as a form peer pressure, might hinder “deliberation, choice and conduct” (*ibid.*), and, therefore, damage mental independence. For example, if five

people, argue against one person, with the express intent of showing him the error of his ways, it is possible that he will be intimidated simply by the overwhelming opposition. In other words he may feel obliged to agree with them not because of their reasons, but simply because he is outnumbered by people who perceive his conduct as improper.

Godwin can reply to this charge in three ways. First, he can say that the influence from peer pressure is controlled by the fact that “every man has a certain sphere of discretion which he has a right to expect shall not be infringed by his neighbours” (Godwin, *PJ* 198). Godwin explains:

[n]o man must encroach upon my province, nor I upon his. He may advise me, moderately and without pertaciousness, but he must not expect to dictate to me. He may censure me freely and without reserve, but he should remember that I am to act by my deliberation and not his. (*Ibid.*)

Therefore, even if the group’s advice was based on an “infallible criterion,” they must refrain from imposing this advice so that the individual might yield prior to any conviction produced “in his understanding” (*ibid.*). Otherwise, their imposition damages his intellectual independence and does no service in the advance of truth. Open communicators respect individual discretion, and, therefore, are careful to make sure that arguments are understood and not merely accepted.

Second, Godwin emphasizes that a change in a person’s convictions is seldom very sudden. Rather, the process is better described as a “gradual revolution” (Godwin, *PJ* 559). Therefore, an individual is not likely to feel pressured into accepting or refuting the group’s arguments immediately. Rather, he is able to withdraw into solitude / privacy for further reflection that is unimpeded by the immediate pressure of his peers. Indeed, Godwin argues that besides debate, “sequestered privacy” (Godwin, *PJ* 287) is also required to disentangle “error and delusion” (*ibid.*). Thus, it is unlikely that a system of open communication, due to its contemplative nature, and its respect for individual discretion, would cause participants to feel intimidated, and to conform, apart from the influence of reason alone.

Someone might argue that while Godwin's system has built in safeguards to control the unintentional effects of peer pressure, this will not prevent arguers from intentionally bullying or badgering an individual. For example, five people may attempt to bully one person into agreement by not letting him go off and reflect upon the arguments. This criticism misses the subtlety of Godwin's account of the use of reasoned argument. As I have said, open communicators respect individual discretion, and are aware, or can be made aware, that bullying / forcing others into agreement is counterproductive to the advance of truth. Thus, in response to the group's bullying, the person can reasonably charge them with blocking contemplative practice and the interests of truth. Either they are interested in attaining knowledge and will therefore respect contemplative practice, or not. If they are not interested in open communication there will be no attempt to force them into its practice. Instead, they must be convinced through argument that it is in his / their interest, and the interests of others to trust "to reason alone." Moreover, in Godwin's view, failing to convince them of this argument is not discouraging since truth is "comprehended only by slow degrees, [and] by its most assiduous votaries."

Last, as was discussed in Chapter III, Godwin argues that public censure, in the form of open communication, does not damage individuality but is a necessary part of individual development. He argues:

[k]nowledge, such as we are able to acquire it, depends in a majority of instances, not upon the single efforts of the individual, but upon the consent of other human understandings sanctioning the judgment of our own. (Godwin, *PJ* 313)

Conversation / debate helps to build and clarify thought so that a person gains a better understanding of "his virtues, his good deeds, his meanness and his follies." Indeed, Godwin argues that "we never have a strong feeling of these in our own case, except so far as they are confirmed to us by the suffrage of our neighbours" (*ibid.*). Thus, the sincere feedback of others, including positive criticism, is necessary for developing individuality (Ritter 31-2).

Sincerity

The function of sincerity, which was explained in Chapter III, is twofold. First, it helps individuals to assess each other's opinions more accurately, and, thus, to strengthen their own sentiments. Second, the trust that it breeds among individuals enhances the opportunity for communication. Godwin must be able to show that sincerity is both achievable and effective in order to support the above claims.

Sincerity recommends that we "tell every man the truth regardless of the dictates of worldly prudence and custom" (Godwin, *PJ* 312). If Godwin means that we should always tell the truth, no matter what the circumstances, then there are serious objections to both the practicability and effectiveness of sincerity. First, "the self-watching it requires is self-defeating" (Ritter 45). Sincerity requires a constant self-analysis that would result in a "kind of posturing" or "cerebral invention." Thus, in trying to be sincere one must assume a "disingenuous" (*ibid.*) role. Second, achieving sincerity is doubtful because the constant self-analysis or "posturing" it requires is too demanding. It is unrealistic to assume that anyone could maintain this type of single-mindedness for long. Moreover, even if it were possible, it is doubtful that anyone would want to practice sincerity because it would mean sacrificing spontaneity. Third, let us assume that sincerity is achievable and that people are willing to practice it. In this case, comments to the interlocutor that are too candid or too personal might offend him or her, blocking effective argumentative discussions of issues. This is an argument against spontaneous communication of whatever thoughts or feelings one might be having about the interlocutor.

Godwin can escape these three charges by claiming that sincerity does not demand complete candour. What it does require, though, is a "disclosure of opinions and beliefs so far as they result from rational deliberation" (Ritter 45). Thus, sincerity's "limited . . . scope" (*ibid.*) relieves the type of constant, single-minded, self-analysis that would require posing, or that would make its practice impossible.

The third objection can be answered in the same way as the first two; however, I will be more specific to explain sincerity more fully. We have said that sincerity requires that a person is candid with rationally held opinions and beliefs. Therefore, not everything that comes into a person's mind needs to be said. For example, sincerity does not require that everything that was said about someone in their absence be repeated in their presence. Godwin explains:

there are so many things said from the mere wantonness of the moment, or from a desire to comply with the tone of company; so many from the impulse of passion, or the desire to be brilliant, so many exaggerations which the heart, in a moment of sobriety would disavow; that frequently the person concerned would learn any thing sooner than the opinion entertained of him, and torment himself, as injuries of the deepest dye, with things, injudicious perhaps and censurable, but which were the mere sallies of thoughtless levity. (Godwin, *Enquirer* 344-5)

Thus, he means that participants in open communication should exercise tact. A thoughtful converser may withhold any unnecessary / spontaneous comments that might block the effective discussion of issues. Indeed:

[t]he man who thinks only how to preserve his sincerity, is a glaringly imperfect character. He feels not for the suffering, and sympathies not in the deliverance of others, but is actuated solely by a selfish and cold-hearted pride. He cares not whom he insults, nor whom he injures. (Godwin, *Enquirer* 349)

By limiting sincerity to the disclosure of rational opinion / belief, Godwin avoids the problems associated with complete candor such as the obligation to reveal spontaneous thoughts. However, sincerity's specific application alone cannot sufficiently deal with the problem of "face." For example, let's assume that someone has worked out, to a fair degree, his thoughts and concerns about the opinions of another individual and then engages in conversation with that person. Godwin believes, in this instance, that sincere communication is necessary because it will increase the chance of acquiring knowledge and improvement. He says:

I cannot have intercourse with a human being who may not be the better for that intercourse. If he be already just and virtuous, these qualities are improved by communication. If he be imperfect and erroneous, there must always be, some

prejudice I may contribute to destroy, some motive to delineate, some error to remove. If I be prejudiced and imperfect myself, it cannot however happen that my prejudices and imperfections shall be exactly coincident with his. I may therefore inform him of the truths that I know, and, even by the collision of prejudices, truth is elicited. It is impossible, that I should strenuously apply myself to his improvement with sincere motives of benevolence, without some good being the result. (Godwin, *PJ* 301)

Godwin appears convinced that if we are committed to honest and rational communication, improvement is assured. He seems to think there is no problem of “face,” what might be defined as one’s sense of one’s worth in others’ eyes, in person-to-person exchanges. Communication theorists today consider dealing with “face” a major factor in effective communication. Certainly the nature of open communication is both personal and critical. It therefore must deal with “face” in some manner if its effectiveness is to be considered.

In reply to this objection it can be shown that Godwin did consider the problems associated with “face.” Certainly, he is aware of the fact that many people are not overly receptive to criticism about their conduct or their ideas. He says:

[t]here are few men at present who can endure to have their errors detailed to them in a plain and unvarnished manner. Yet it is my duty, so far as opportunity serves, to acquaint them with their errors. (Godwin, *Enquirer* 346)

Godwin’s interest, or any sincere communicator’s interest, in acquainting someone with their errors, is not to boost the critic’s own ego while simultaneously deflating others. Rather, “sincerity is only a means, and is valuable so far as it answers the purposes of benevolence” (Godwin, *Enquirer* 341). He thinks that through its practice people will gradually become less concerned with issues of “face” and will eventually “acquire a clear, ingenuous and unembarrassed air” (Godwin, *PJ* 312). However, even well-intended criticism, to be effective, must first be “palatable” (Godwin, *Enquirer* 346). Thus, Godwin stresses that “advice . . . should be administered with simplicity, disinterestedness, kindness, and moderation (Godwin, *PJ* 195). He recognizes that the way in which we deliver our sentiments is key to the measure of its receptivity. Godwin is not suggesting

that we put on a facade in order to persuade others. Rather, we should communicate in a kind and polite fashion because we care about the happiness of others. Indeed:

[i]f I spoke to a man . . . of the errors he had himself committed, I should carefully avoid those inconsiderate expressions which might convert what was in itself beneficent into offence; and my thoughts would be full of that kindness, and generous concern for his welfare, which such a talk necessarily brings along with it. (Godwin, *PJ* 312)

Thus, we can see that in both method and intent how open communication deals with the problem of “face.” First, comments are less likely to be offensive when they are delivered in a kind and polite fashion, and second; they are even less likely to offend when that kindness and politeness is backed by a genuine “interest of him who is corrected, [and] not the triumph of the corrector” (Godwin, *PJ* 321). The problem of “face” all too often is caused by communication tainted by the “mixture of disdain and superiority” (Godwin, *PJ* 321). Whereas, sincerity “will be intended with that equality which is the only sure foundation of love” (*ibid.*) and will be perceived as such.

In this section, I have shown how Godwin can respond to charges that claim open communication is unworkable. We have seen that open communication relies on reasoned arguments to influence conduct (except in cases where individuals pose an immediate danger to others) and as a result, encourages mental independence more than government. We have also seen that Godwin’s system controls the effects of peer pressure with built-in safeguards such as the “sphere of discretion” and an awareness that understanding requires a “gradual revolution.” In relation to “practicability” we have seen that sincerity’s “limited scope” deals with the problems associated with complete candor, such as “posturing” and “spontaneous communication;” and, in relation to “effectiveness” we have seen that open communication considers the problem of “face” by both the method and intent of its participants.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have introduced William Godwin in the social / historical context of 1790's England in an attempt to provide a revealing account of his ideas concerning social improvement. Also, I have endeavored to reconstruct Godwin's theory of human perfectibility and social communication in hopes of showing that his account is both coherent and plausible. This has involved a presentation of the theoretical principles involved in perfectibility, including an explication of each principle, arguments in support of them, and an explanation as to how they form a coherent theory. Godwin's practical proposal for improvement, which I call "open communication," was presented in comparison with other modes of social change such as those directed by government, revolution, and extra-parliamentary bodies such as political associations.

The aim of this thesis has been to explore Godwin's version of the question of human perfectibility by asking whether people are constituted in such a way that allows for moral improvement, and whether reason is capable of ensuring progress. I have considered ideas on the prospect of adopting a set of communicative practices based on sincere and rational discussion as the best means of ensuring moral improvement.

Also, I have responded to relevant objections against the role of reason in perfectibility, and against the claim open communication is unworkable, in hopes of showing that Godwin's account is worthy of consideration. I realize that there are other objections against perfectibility and social (open) communication that I have not dealt with in this thesis. For instance, an objection to perfectibility from a Marxist point of view is that societal change is not so much tied to public sentiment as it is to economic conditions, or, from a libertarian perspective, someone might argue that open communication requires that individuals be so acutely aware of each other's ideas and actions that it poses a threat

to basic privacy. I am aware of these objections and the possibility for others as well. However, given the nature of this thesis, much work has gone into reconstructing Godwin's theories and presenting them within a historical context. I have attempted to deal with relevant objections in the sense that they have challenged some of Godwin's central ideas, and at the same time have helped to reveal and clarify his thought. Certainly the possibility of moral improvement and how to ensure its progress is one of the most important practical and philosophical questions and there is room for more work in this area.

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Mark Alan Barrett was born on September 3, 1968 in Ottawa, Ontario. He was raised in Bedford, Nova Scotia and began undergraduate studies at St. Mary's University (Halifax, N.S.) in 1987. His interest in music outweighed the motive of a formal education at this time and it was not until 1993 that he resumed undergraduate studies at the University of Prince Edward Island. He subsequently developed a genuine interest and love for Philosophy which led him to a research position at UPEI in 1996 and 1997. He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts with a major in Philosophy in 1997 and began graduate studies at the University of Windsor the same year.