

**Being Good With Money:
Economic Bearings in George Eliot's Ethical and Social Thought**

Submitted by Dermot Coleman to the University of Exeter
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Abstract

In a world of material needs and wants, economics and ethics are inextricably linked. George Eliot recognised this seminal inter-relationship and sought to unravel its intricacies and complexities through her writing. My thesis explores this contention by reference to two principal questions: how did Eliot conceptualise economic value within her broader individual and social ethics? And how was the integration of economic and wider concepts of the “good” explored and tested within the novels? I frame these questions against the great changes in how economics was theorised over her writing career and, by tracing intellectual connections with Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and later writers attempting to define and secure the moral underpinnings of political economy, I argue that Eliot was better informed and engaged with that process than most criticism has acknowledged. I also re-examine the equally remarkable developments in Eliot’s life and material circumstances, particularly after the success of her first novels. Her wealth and management of financial capital brought a particular focus to all questions of valuation, not least in relation to her own work and intellectual property. I contend that an inability fully to reconcile the moral and aesthetic core of her art and the high financial rewards it was generating gave the economic ethics she tested in the novels an extraordinary urgency and complexity.

In my readings of, in particular, the later novels, I argue that the crucial motivations and actions by which her characters attempt to manage economic choice simultaneously parallel and are contained within competing contemporary moral philosophical systems. I conclude that her dissatisfaction with any rule-based system, whether of outcome or duty, led her to consider an essentially Aristotelian ethics of virtue in relation to economic ethics. My final chapters look out beyond individual ethical choice to consider how Eliot’s social and political vision accommodated the economic and its attendant institutions and to suggest a connection with the new liberalism which was starting to emerge in the final years of her life.

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Introduction

In January 2008, I largely withdrew from the investment management business I had co-founded ten years earlier to begin my doctoral studies. My departure coincided with precipitous falls in the value of many financial asset classes, as problems stemming from the over-expansion of lending in the ‘sub-prime’ mortgage market in the United States escalated into a full-blown banking crisis. A number of investors in my company’s hedge funds credited me with a quite unwarranted level of prescience. Like most people in the industry, I didn’t see it coming, even though my relative knowledge of Victorian history and literature should have given me a distinct prophetic edge. While I was immediately able to relate the exposure of Bernie Maddoff and his fraudulent investment scheme to the adventures of Merdle, Melmotte and the historical scandals on which they were based, I paid too little attention to David Morier Evans’s description of the causes of the 1857 banking crisis and its uncanny relevance to events exactly 150 years later:

In the lenders there was utter recklessness in making advances; in the borrowers unparalleled avidity in profiting by the occasion; and thus an unwieldy edifice of borrowed capital was erected ready to topple down on the first shock given to that confidence which was, in fact, its sole foundation. Such a shock was given by the American failures – this was the result of the same system, carried to a still more mischievous excess – and then the panic began.¹

George Eliot became wealthy through sales of her books into an increasingly consumer-driven and commoditised market. She invested most of those proceeds into the stockmarket and I consequently always knew that finance, markets and material wealth would form part of the loosely-defined project on ‘George Eliot and Money’ on which I had embarked. However, it was the reaction to the unfurling of our own century’s financial crisis, as much as my growing knowledge and understanding of Eliot’s own writings in their cultural, intellectual and economic context, that brought a clearer focus and structure to my work. In particular, there was universal agreement in the main

¹ D. Morier Evans, *The History of the Commercial Crisis 1857-1858, and the Stock Exchange Panic of 1859* (London: Groombridge, 1859), 33.

opinion-forming media that events were, at least in part, the result of the practically-flawed theoretical assumptions and methodology of hegemonic neoclassical economics and its somewhat exclusive academic trajectory. The *Financial Times* newspaper ran a major series entitled ‘The Future of Capitalism’, which included contributions from a range of prominent academic and business figures from within finance and much further afield, including moral philosophy.² One of the most critically-acclaimed books analysing the causes of - and drawing possible lessons from - the crisis was written by the *Financial Times* journalist, Gillian Tett, which drew extensively on her Ph.D research in social anthropology.³ In fact, the events of 2008, served to accelerate and fortify an emerging trend in the cultural understanding of economics, which had already seen the enormous popular success of *Freakonomics* and *The Undercover Economist*.⁴ From a different perspective, Diane Coyle’s *The Soulful Science: What Economists Really Do and Why it Matters*, was a robust defence of the discipline, describing a “hidden humanization” of creative and socially-focused economics.⁵ In short, an increasingly accepted need to overlay theoretical assumptions with behavioural understanding and empirical observation has been accompanied by a growing call for economics to reconnect with the moral philosophical roots from which its modern form sprang in the late eighteenth century.⁶

Such a reconnection would seem to open the way for both imaginative literature and literary studies to contribute significantly as cultural prisms through which psychology and ethics can be better understood as they relate to economic motivation and action. Recent work by economists including Richard Bronk, George Akerlof and Robert Shiller,

² Contributors to the series included Gary Becker, Alan Greenspan, Robert Shiller, Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen.

³ Gillian Tett, *Fool’s Gold* (London: Little Brown, 2009).

⁴ Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* (London: Allen Lane, 2005); Tim Harford, *The Undercover Economist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also Julie A. Nelson, *Economics for Humans* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁵ Diane Coyle, *The Soulful Science: What Economists Really Do and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also the even more provocatively titled collection of essays by Paul Heyne: Geoffrey Brennan and A. M. C. Waterman (eds.), “*Are Economists Basically Immoral?*” and *Other Essays on Economics, Ethics, and Religion by Paul Heyne* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008).

⁶ See Luigino Bruni and Pier Luigi Porta (eds.), *Economics and Happiness: Framing the Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): “The tradition of economics after [Adam] Smith (the philosopher) forgot the very complex and slippery relationship between wealth and happiness” (19). Bruni and Porta trace something of a Smithian reconnection in the development of a school of ‘happiness studies’ within academic economics, which took shape in the 1970s with the work of Easterlin and Scitovsky.

along with Robert Skidelsky's updated, moral-philosophically informed reflections on the contemporary relevance of John Maynard Keynes (his book's subtitle, 'The Return of the Master', is a nod to the proliferation of Keynesian reference and quotation by historically-minded commentators following the crisis) would suggest that the profession itself, or at least a growing number of its participants, is responsive to such a trend.⁷ Tellingly, it was the *FT*'s highly-respected and veteran economic commentator, Samuel Brittan, who concluded his contribution to 'The Future of Capitalism' series (May 1st): "I know that some financial types hate their subject being mixed up with alien topics such as the study of English literature. Yet more is to be learnt from the novelist Jane Austen... than from modern tomes on business ethics."⁸

These various calls for economically-focused interdisciplinarity are effectively seeking ways to reassess how value, in both an individual and social context, is theorised, located and promoted. The strap-line of a now long-running advertising campaign from the high-net-worth, private banking division of Barclays asks: "Wealth. What's it to you?" The range of answers provided by the advertisers largely deal in non-material, even intangible concepts: time, travel, giving choice to one's children, seclusion, reverting to a state of childlike enjoyment. Very few actually mention money, and even then only to suggest transcendence of the material: "Going to places where money ceases to matter."⁹

Nineteenth-century political economy sought to answer the question posed by Barclays definitively, but, as I will discuss throughout this work, the question kept recurring, in progressively complex and urgent formulations, throughout the period. In so doing, it crucially informed the period's dominant literary form, the novel. This may

⁷ Richard Bronk, *The Romantic Economist: Imagination in Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); George A. Akerlof and Robert J. Schiller, *Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives The Economy, And Why It Matters For Global Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Robert Skidelsky, *Keynes: The Return of the Master* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

⁸ *Financial Times*, May 1st, 2009.

⁹ I do not attempt to add to the substantial body of work theorising money, although I discuss how changing cultural concepts of money-forms entered and informed Eliot's work. Georg Simmel's *Philosophy of Money* laid the groundwork for much of what developed in the last century, while, more recently, the influence on late twentieth-century economic criticism of Marc Shell's explorations of concepts of money as it relates to language is well acknowledged. See Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); and *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Susan Bruce and Valeria Wagner (eds.), *Fiction and Economy* (Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 9-13, gives an historical critical summary.

partially explain why the literary scholarship of that period has developed in directions that are particularly relevant for my work. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen's important collection, *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics* appeared in 1999, with contributions from many scholars active in nineteenth-century studies. The collection was the outcome of mounting interest that spanned a number of academic departments over the previous decade, marking an interdisciplinarity that has continued to thrive.¹⁰ Donald Winch, in his recent work on the intellectual history of British political economy in the nineteenth century, signals that 'school's' enduring influence in his welcome acknowledgement "that the engagement of literary historians with the serious economic literature of the past is moving beyond the old stereotypes, making rapprochement with intellectual histories of economic debate possible."¹¹ Patrick Brantlinger, Regenia Gagnier, Catherine Gallagher and Mary Poovey are prominent among a large and widening group of predominantly nineteenth-century literary scholars who have incorporated the economic into aesthetic, ethical and epistemological meditations on literature that go far beyond the more narrow, ideologically-driven interpretations that characterised the previous generation of critics in this field.¹² As a group, they are methodologically diverse and each comes to different conclusions as to exactly how literary writers engaged with and incorporated political economic writing, and how those connections influenced the wider cultural imagination. However, their knowledge and understanding of how crucial economic transitions – from the evolution of paper money at one end of the century to the emergence of a demand-

¹⁰ Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen (eds.), *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). More recent collections, representing a range of disciplines and methodological approaches to the broad interconnections of Victorian economics and literature (and some limited reference to George Eliot) include: Francis O'Gorman (ed.), *Victorian Literature and Finance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Nancy Henry and Cannon Schmitt (eds.), *Victorian Investments: New Perspectives on Finance and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

¹¹ Donald Winch, *Wealth and Life: Essays on the Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1848-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6. That such a rapprochement is possible is in no small part thanks to the work of Winch, who along with Stefan Collini and John Burrow has done much to increase the understanding of the eddying intellectual currents that carried economic and political debate in the nineteenth century. See also Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹² References to the various works of all these writers appear in the body of this work.

led, marginal utility theory of value at the other – infuse literature and underpin cultural formation have added greatly to study in this field.

The development of industrial capitalism in nineteenth-century Britain gave rise to a rapid expansion of financial forms and institutions. Contextual literary studies of the period, including by those writers mentioned above, have illuminated the multiple connections between these products of capitalism and Victorian literature. Literature itself became immersed in the process of production, sales and marketing and thereby gave rise to a new form of capital, intellectual property, whose value and duration were uncertain and shifting, and whose very ownership was contested. Under these changing external conditions, which crucially affected George Eliot's career and art, the economies of authorship and the book took on layers of meaning that have been perceptively unravelled in recent critical works.¹³ Important deliberations on genre by, among others, John Guillory and, more recently, Poovey, have considered the historical process whereby literary and non-literary writing become differentiated and ranked.¹⁴ Aesthetic value and, ultimately, canonicity are interrogated against the sometimes conflicting forces of the market. Within that market, the physical object of the book enters the realm of the commodity and Victorian materiality, in its constant, if continually shifting dialogue with literary fiction has been a further rich source of critical debate.¹⁵

¹³ See Clare Pettitt, *Patent Inventions: Intellectual Property and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Paul K. Saint-Amour, *The Copywrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and Jennifer Ruth, *Novel Professions: Interested Disinterest and the Making of the Professional in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006). For a late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century perspective, which provides excellent contextual background, see Deirdre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), and James Thompson, *Models of Value: Eighteenth-Century Political Economy and the Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹⁴ See John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), esp. ch. 5, 'The Discourse of Value from Adam Smith to Barbara Herrnstein Smith'; and Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁵ The literature on Victorian materiality and 'thing' theory is large. For particularly interesting interpretations with specific reference to Eliot, see Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Daniel Hack, *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); Andrew H. Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Jeff Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

This admittedly condensed snapshot of the various intersections of literature and economics in nineteenth-century criticism, pre-empts the more specific consideration of where George Eliot scholarship stands within this broad area. Many important historicist and contextual studies have greatly enriched our understanding of the intellectual, artistic and cultural background that both shaped Eliot's thought and art and within which she wrote. Science, sociology, religion, history, music and the visual arts have been particularly well served in this regard. With the exception of Alexander Welsh's *George Eliot and Blackmail*, however, which extends to a wider consideration of the price and value of information in a modernising society, there has been no single major Eliot study with an explicitly economic theme.¹⁶ While this is somewhat surprising, critics have increasingly incorporated economic considerations into their wider thematic studies of Eliot, while her life and work often feature prominently in more general works of theory, genre and contextual analysis exploring the complex inter-relationships between economics and Victorian culture and literature.¹⁷

Neither have her biographers, from Gordon Haight onwards, ignored the detailed financial information that record and measure her expanding wealth. Feminist and Marxist critics have extracted this information to reach varied interpretations of Eliot's position in the patriarchal hierarchy of Victorian publishing. More recently, critics including Rosemary Boddheimer and Clare Pettitt have presented more nuanced considerations of how she attempted to reconcile values in her private and public lives.¹⁸ While details of her literary earnings and the publishing deals that produced them have been discussed by biographers and critics, it was not until Nancy Henry's *George Eliot and the British Empire* (2002) that Eliot's stockmarket investments were discussed in any meaningful detail.¹⁹ Like Henry, I have pored over the Eliot-Lewes portfolios and

¹⁶ Alexander Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

¹⁷ See notes 9-14 above.

¹⁸ Pettitt, *Patent Inventions*; Rosemary Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). For earlier critics and biographers who addressed Eliot and economics from various perspectives, see, for example: Daniel Cottom, *Social Figures: George Eliot, Social History, and Literary Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Ruby V. Redinger, *George Eliot: The Emergent Self* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975); Kristin Brady, *George Eliot* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); and Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁹ Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). The editors of Eliot's Journals explained, in their introduction to the 1879 diary (by which time her investment

dividend receipts at Yale with, however, a little more focus on how these developed after John Cross began to advise the couple in the early 1870s. I share what I believe to be Henry's opinion, that an understanding of how Eliot valued her financial capital has bearing not only on her concepts of wider forms of human and social capital. I also believe it helps support my central thesis that, for her, the economic was essentially constitutive of a comprehensive ethical understanding.

Well before the "turn to ethics" in literature that the work of Martha Nussbaum and others helped direct some twenty years ago,²⁰ there had been a long tradition of Eliot criticism that centrally located her moral philosophic questioning, if not vision, at the heart of the novels and her literary art. Building on F. R. Leavis's work, Bernard Paris's *Experiments in Life* (1965) is a study of "her intellectual development and of the ways in which she employed her novels in her quest for values in a Godless universe".²¹ William Myres, Valerie Dodd, Elizabeth Deeds Ermath and K. M. Newton all fall broadly within this tradition, that reads the novels as "work[ing] out in concrete and dramatic terms problems of a broadly philosophical and moral nature."²² Barbara Hardy's more recent assessment is that: "She could have been, and nearly was, a Victorian sage, like John Stuart Mill, Carlyle or Spencer, but she became an artist who extended and re-imagined her emotional experience, which, as her characters insist, is not separable from the intellectual life."²³ The extent to which she directly or implicitly incorporates the theories of the many moral philosophers with whose work she was intimately acquainted has always been, and remains, a source of critical debate. Largely absent from the moral philosophical line of Eliot scholarship, however, is any detailed consideration of what I

portfolio was substantial): "While information about her investment income and various expenditures has a certain interest, these extensive financial memoranda have not been reproduced in the text of this journal, nor have shorter records of dividend income and the like been annotated." Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (eds.), *The Journals of George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 149. Hereafter "*Journals*".

²⁰ Most notably Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

²¹ Bernard J. Paris, *Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), vii.

²² William Myers, *The Teaching of George Eliot* (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1984), qtd. 1; Valerie A. Dodd, *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990); Elizabeth Deeds Ermath, *George Eliot* (Boston: Twayne, 1985); and K. M. Newton, *George Eliot: Romantic Humanist* (London: Macmillan, 1981). For Eliot's hermeneutics, see Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

²³ Barbara Hardy, *George Eliot: A Critic's Biography* (London: Continuum, 2006), 23.

will call economic ethics. Again, given the Smithean origins of nineteenth-century political economy and the fact that that many of its greatest practitioners, including Mill and Henry Sidgwick, were equally celebrated as moral philosophers, the omission is puzzling.

If Smith, Mill and Sidgwick embody the inseparable and fruitful links that existed between economics and moral philosophy over a roughly one hundred-year period in British intellectual history, this should also remind us that the benefits of exchange between the disciplines are not all in one direction. Economic principles, as all these writers well understood, rely for their practical application on wider moral and social modifications, encapsulated by Adam Smith in his concept of sympathy. Deirdre McCloskey, applauding the late twentieth-century revivification of virtue ethics within academic moral philosophy, traces a direct link back to Smith, thereby granting a central position to economic character and behaviour within a broad scheme of practical ethics.²⁴ Even more interestingly, and largely beyond the scope of this thesis, John Broome (who has held university Chairs in both Economics and Philosophy) has argued that the sophisticated methods of analysis that economists have developed for specifically economic purposes have applications in both theoretical moral philosophical questions and practical ethics. In particular, he posits an ethically-described “structure of good” that corresponds to the formal structures of economic theory, including preference satisfaction and aggregation. If one holds with the ethical turn in literature (and the body of this thesis supports that position), Broome’s transitive incorporation of economics via ethics completes a fascinating circular connection (economics-ethics-literature).²⁵

Against this critical background, I have attempted to pull a number of divergent threads together to address two primary questions: how did Eliot conceptualise economic value within her broader individual and social ethics? and how was the integration of

²⁴ Deirdre N. McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

²⁵ John Broome, *Ethics out of Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also Francesco Farina, Frank Hahn and Stefano Vannucci (eds.), *Ethics, Rationality and Economic Behaviour* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), and Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

economic and wider “good” tested and measured within the novels? Framing and addressing these questions requires, of course, a temporal dimension, that tracks Eliot’s progress towards the novels and up to her final written statements; a long period which saw remarkable changes in how economics was theorised and dramatic developments in her own life and material circumstances, which brought a particular focus to all questions of valuation, not least concerning her own work. My first three chapters, therefore have a strong biographical element, although I attempt in each to lay foundations for themes I develop, by way of reference to the essays and novels, in later chapters. Chapter 1 looks at George Eliot in relation to political economy as it developed over her life-time and argues that she was much better theoretically informed and engaged than most criticism acknowledges. I establish some of the roots of Eliot’s domestically-forged economic ethics and trace seminal and life-long intellectual connections with Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. Chapter 2 extends her economic understanding into the application of that knowledge in her private life. Her rapidly gained wealth in the early 1860s and its diversion into the stockmarket influenced how she perceived various interconnected forms of capital and their attendant risks. Her questioning of the adequacy and limits of economic liberalism, to which I return in my final chapter, was becoming informed by a new and illuminating personal perspective. Her shifting and developing quest for values changes location in chapter 3 to the commerce of literature and Eliot’s attempts to reconcile her art and the high financial rewards it was generating. Clare Pettitt believes that Eliot “lost no time in disengaging herself from the economic world of publishing, choosing rather to represent her own fiction as a moral form of ‘good work’.”²⁶ My conclusion is less clear cut; I believe an inability fully to reconcile these elements personally gave the economic ethics she tested in the novels an extraordinary urgency and complexity.

The central chapters primarily comprise readings of the three final major novels, with backward and forward-looking glances to *The Mill on the Floss* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. The latter, her final completed work, contains many fragmented meditations on various ways of how best to be rich and live life well, including ‘A Half Breed’, which plots the evaporation of Mixtus’s “old ideal of a worthy life”, leaving him

²⁶ Pettitt, 214.

“indistinguishable from the ordinary run of moneyed and money-getting men.”²⁷ The collision of often uncontrollable economic forces and personal ideals lies at the heart of all the novels I discuss here. My contention, which defines the structure of these three chapters, is that the motivations and actions by which her characters attempt to manage economic choice simultaneously parallels and is contained within competing contemporary ethical systems. Chapters 4 and 5, therefore, consider Eliot’s testing of the nature and limitations of economic ethics as they relate first to Utilitarianism and then to a deontological alternative, informed by Kant but tracing an English line through to T. H. Green. My reading of *Felix Holt* explicitly links Utilitarianism with classical economics and contextualises Eliot’s critique against significant developments in the intellectual history of both schools. While deontological ethics has no such closely linked economic relation, my reading of *Middlemarch* in chapter 5 attempts to measure the actions and development of a number of the novel’s characters against Kantian principles and, thereby, give an insight into Eliot’s weighing of specifically economic ethics. What I take as her ultimate dissatisfaction with the adequacy and completeness of both these systems leads me, in chapter 6, to consider how she came to prioritise an essentially Aristotelean ethics of virtue above any rule-based system of either duty or outcome. I show how in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Daniel Deronda* economic, or what McCloskey calls the bourgeois virtues are incorporated to varying degrees by characters striving, sometimes unwittingly, for a wider concept of the good life.

My final two chapters look out beyond individual ethical choice to consider how Eliot’s social and political vision accommodated the economic and its attendant institutions. Chapter 7 breaks the largely chronological series of the previous section by stepping back to an earlier work, *Romola*, the only one of her novels set in the distant past. Eliot’s analysis of an essentially proto-capitalist society to illustrate interconnections between social networks and economic behaviour – individual and collective – supports Bruce Mazlish’s ambitious assertion that she was an important link bridging the emerging field of late nineteenth-century British sociology to its leading

²⁷ George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ed. Nancy Henry (London: William Pickering, 1994), 79-80.

European practitioners, Durkheim and Weber, at the beginning of the twentieth.²⁸ Chapter 8 returns to some of the themes introduced in the opening chapter and attempts to, as it were, extract the “political” from political economy. Largely by reference to socio-economic theory and policy, I attempt to establish a connection between Eliot and the new liberalism which was starting to emerge in the final years of her life. As in chapter Five, I argue for what may seem an unlikely intellectual link to T. H. Green.

²⁸ Bruce Mazlish, *A New Science: The Breakdown of Connections and the Birth of Sociology* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 129-43.

‘A subject of which I know so little’: George Eliot and Political Economy

Among the delusions which at different periods have possessed themselves of the minds of large masses of the human race, perhaps the most curious – certainly the least creditable – is the modern *soi-distant* science of political economy, based on the idea that an advantageous code of social action may be determined irrespective of the influence of social affection.¹

- John Ruskin, 1860

Political economy and common sense alike agree to call commodities wealth, and economists profess only to investigate the laws which have regulated and do regulate their production. Economists have no direct concern with what ought to regulate either consumption or production.²

- *Westminster Review*, 1862

We shall then find that our political economy is not a questionable thing of unlimited extent, but a most certain and useful thing of limited extent. By marking the frontier of our property we shall learn its use, and we shall have a positive and reliable basis for estimating its value.³

- Walter Bagehot, 1876

By the time Walter Bagehot began what was to be his last and unfinished major work on political economy, he had been an infrequent visitor to the Priory for over ten years,

¹ John Ruskin, ‘The Roots of Honour’, *“Unto this Last”*: *Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy* (London: George Allen, 1907), 1. The essays first appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine* in the last four months of 1860.

² *Westminster Review*, 22 (Jul.-Oct. 1862), 531.

³ ‘The Postulates of English Political Economy – I’, in Walter Bagehot, *Economic Studies* (London: Longmans, Green, 1880), reprinted in *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, ed. Norman St John-Stevas, 15 vols. (London: The Economist, 1965-86), vol. xi, 238. First published in the *Fortnightly Review*, February 1 1876, 215-42. Bagehot died in March, 1877.

marking a friendship that began when George Henry Lewes serialised *The English Constitution* in the *Fortnightly Review*.⁴ In a preface to a later edition of ‘The Postulates’, Alfred Marshall wrote that Bagehot’s work “promised to make a landmark in the history of economics, by separating the use of the older, or Ricardian, economic reasonings from their abuse, and freeing them from the discredit into which they had fallen through being often misapplied.”⁵ In the final years of George Eliot’s life, Bagehot was one of a number of eminent political economists attempting to reformulate a ‘science,’ which, by his own admission, “lies dead in the public mind.”⁶ While the stridently anti-political-economy theories of Ruskin remained, at least in Eliot’s lifetime, largely isolated from the mainstream, his opponents could no longer rely on the definitive and overarching claims with which the anonymous *Westminster* reviewer attacked *Unto this Last*. As Donald Winch argues in his analysis of what he describes (referencing Ruskin’s famous maxim) as “the conflict between wealth and life,” the debate was not limited to those either in favour of or opposed to the material precepts of classical economics; “it also took place *within* political economy.”⁷

In tracing some elements of this external and internal conflict, this chapter will argue, largely by reference to her letters and essays, that George Eliot was more knowledgeable of and engaged with the emerging theoretical battle-lines than has been acknowledged by most critics and biographers. The first economic writings of Ruskin in the early 1860s and the later reactions of the emerging profession itself to the mathematical and historical methodological challenges to mainstream Ricardianism (largely as reinterpreted by John Stuart Mill) neatly book-end Eliot’s career as a novelist. In subsequent chapters I will relate contemporary developments in economic thought to Eliot’s morally and intellectually-informed responses in readings of the novels, which locate attempts to test the ethical implications and complications of money-related attitudes, choices and actions. My approach is informed by what David Carroll has described as the “crisis of interpretation” which characterised the mid-to-late Victorian period and which he believes Eliot’s novels exploit and uniquely investigate. As political economy sought to

⁴ The serialisation ran in nine parts from August 1865 to January 1867.

⁵ The 1885 edition. See Bagehot, *Collected Works*, vol. xi, 195.

⁶ Bagehot, *Collected Works*, vol. xi, 223.

⁷ Winch, *Wealth and Life*, 2.

shed, or at least refashion its deductive heritage amid competing theoretical and policy-led factions, it faced its own “crisis of interpretation” which mirrors Carroll’s wider hypothesis. Eliot’s novels, he argues, show that “strict deduction is not possible in human affairs, and it is in the inevitable discrepancy between the desire for a comprehensive explanatory scheme and particular, recalcitrant circumstances that the energy and challenge of George Eliot’s fiction are to be found.”⁸ My contention – and it is one that is central to this whole work – is that the economic was a complex, yet integral component of Eliot’s conception of “human affairs” and a focus of her exploratory art.

In the last decade of her life, as her sphere of intellectual influence widened, Eliot and Lewes’s personal acquaintance with men including Bagehot, Sidgwick, Henry Fawcett, Sir Henry Maine and William Stanley Jevons – all of whom influenced, through their various fields, the development of economic thought during the period – contributed to her understanding of that process. As I will discuss later in this work, the critiques of contemporary culture that appear in her later writings attempt to mediate value in the realms of non-financial capital (social, cultural, human and intellectual) in terms directly related to, if not always directly compatible with contemporary neo-classical theories of supply and demand.⁹ However, political economy pervaded Eliot’s thought well before her own wealth and increasing intellectual property brought a more personal focus to questions of valuation. Her life spanned a period of extraordinary developments in economic theory. She was born just two years after David Ricardo’s *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* formalised the teachings of Adam Smith for a new post-war generation. Within ten years of her death, Marshall’s *Principles of Economics* had taken the discipline to such a recognisably modern form that John Maynard Keynes could look back on its author as:

the first great economist pur sang that there ever was; the first who devoted his life to building up the subject as a separate science, standing on its own foundations with as high standards of scientific accuracy as the physical or biological sciences. It was Marshall who finally saw to it

⁸ David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 9.

⁹ For a reading of *Daniel Deronda* in this context (which I will later discuss), see Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), ch. 5.

that ‘never again will a Mrs Trimmer, a Mrs Marcet, or a Miss Martineau earn a goodly reputation by throwing economic principles into the form of a catechism or of simple tales, by aid of which any intelligent governess might make clear to the children nestling round her where lies economic truth.’¹⁰

Keynes is implicitly dismissive of the early-century female populisers of political economy, but they, together with its more religiously-inspired proponents, are likely to have contributed to Eliot’s youthful understanding.¹¹ Economically-informed language and concepts occasionally infuse even her earliest surviving writings. A letter to her childhood friend Maria Lewis in 1840 contains a metaphor one might not expect a twenty-year old provincial woman to use in relation to her current reading programme:

Have you not alternating seasons of mental stagnation and activity? Just such as the political economists say there must be in a nation’s pecuniary condition – all one’s precious specie, time, going out to procure a stock of commodities while one’s own manufactures are too paltry to be worth vending.¹²

The following year, Eliot records her excitement on receiving a six volume edition of the sermons of Thomas Chalmers, whose ‘Bridgewater Treatise’ (1833) was an influential text in the promotion of Christian political economy, which made an explicit and direct connection between moral worth and the providential accumulation of money.¹³ Whatever the extent of her early theoretical grounding, her knowledge and understanding of its application in the business world was extended over the next decade by her close association with the Brays and the Coventry commercial classes. Her practical, business-like approach to the organisation of the Prospectus and relaunch of the *Westminster Review* and penetrative observations on Chapman’s catastrophic financial

¹⁰ John Maynard Keynes, ‘Alfred Marshall 1842-1924’, in A. C. Pigou (ed.), *Memorials of Alfred Marshall* (London: Macmillan, 1925), 57.

¹¹ See below, 24, 38-40.

¹² George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-1978), 1, 45. Hereafter, “*Letters*”. Boddenheimer cites this letter as evidence of Eliot’s early use of metaphor to “provide a partially concealed expression of the immensity of her own ambition, disguised as complaints about the burdens of home duties” (40).

¹³ *Letters*, 1, 104.

mismanagement of the magazine are indicative of her commercial maturity when she reached London in the early 1850s.¹⁴

By the time she began her professional writing life, intellectual and social experiences had taken her to a new level of economic understanding. In December 1857, the year in which *Scenes of Clerical Life* appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*, she wrote to Charles Bray. Her letter was a response to a pamphlet Bray had sent her, the central argument of which was incorporated in his open letter which appeared in the *Leader* on December 19th of that year, entitled 'Our Monetary System.' Eliot replies that,

so far as I am capable of judging, your views are the 'sound' ones. But it has often appeared to me – and your letter is, I think, open to similar criticism – that the opponents of the 'gold standard' do not make it sufficiently clear to their readers that they presuppose, as a necessity, some guarantee such as a government security, as a basis for confidence; so that the holder of a bag of courries for example, where courries are the circulating medium, should not be liable, some fine morning, to discover that his courries will purchase him nothing. That contingency, so far as I am able to see, is the one stronghold of those who maintain that the circulating medium should have an intrinsic value, and therefore all the emphasis of argument and illustration should storm them at that point. But whether I am talking 'sanity or insanity', as Carlyle says of himself, is a perfectly equal chance, on a subject of which I know so little.¹⁵

The prevailing economic background might help to illuminate a number of interesting aspects of what is, admittedly, one of the few surviving letters in which economic theory and debate are quite so prominent. Bray's apparently direct canvassing of her opinion on his pamphlet in itself signifies the relative shift in the intellectual relationship and standing between Bray and Eliot in the twenty years since they first met. He may not have expected expert advice, but he clearly respects her opinion on a technical monetary matter. In fact, her interest and engagement with the debate at issue are suggested not only by the fact that she had pre-emptively read Bray's letter in the *Leader* but also by the succinct argument of her response. This displays a clear understanding of Bray's

¹⁴ See below, 19-20, 43, 66.

¹⁵ *Letters*, 2, 414.

central argument and is given authority by the sure employment of the technical vocabulary of political economy.

Bray's wealth was the result of a family business engaged in the manufacture of ribbons, a business which he took over on his father's death in 1835. In common with all branches of the textile industry, the scale and profitability of Bray's company had been transformed by technological advances, most notably the development of the power loom. The business had continued to prosper during the war years when high prices had been maintained as a result of the inflationary monetary expansion that had followed the suspension of bank notes being issued with gold backing. Between 1797 and 1819 an inconvertible paper currency operated before cash payments were finally resumed after the war. It was against this return to the gold standard that, almost forty years later, and against prevailing mainstream economic thought, Bray continued to argue.

The gold standard backed the British currency throughout George Eliot's life and, despite fragmented anti-bullionist opposition, serious debate over its endurance tended only to surface during periodic financial crises, including the severe panic of Autumn 1857, in response to which Bray was writing.¹⁶ With intense liquidity pressures threatening the survival of some leading discount houses, the government had succumbed to pressure from the City to suspend the Bank Charter Act of 1844 – which had enshrined the principle of linking notes in issue strictly to gold reserves – by instructing the Bank of England to issue emergency funding. This was not the first, and by no means the last time, the Bank would intervene to correct market excesses. Why, Bray asked, maintain what is effectively an illusory asset-backed standard when, as a result of the actions of “people [who] over-trade and over-speculate” the Bank is forced to issue “fourteen millions of notes on Government security, and these are as valuable as those that are readily convertible”? It is notable that, while his promotion of fiat money at the expense of gold ran counter to Ricardian teaching and the ascendant Currency School, his letter is emphatic in its assertion of a cornerstone for all classical economists from Smith to Mill

¹⁶ For colourful descriptions of the various financial crises and a history of the currency debates, see David Kynaston, *The City of London, Volume I: A World of its Own 1815-1890* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994). The best contemporary accounts were provided by D. Morrier Evans, *History of the Commercial Crisis*, op. cit., and *Speculative Notes and Notes on Speculation, Ideal and Real* (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1864). The 1857 crisis temporarily brought down John Cross's family business, Denistoun Cross, for whom he was working in New York at that time. See Stanley Chapman, *The Rise of Merchant Banking* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 74.

and beyond: “Labour, or the cost of production, is the only real and natural standard or measure of value, and production is the first thing we have to care for.”¹⁷

It is unclear from Eliot’s response where she stood on convertibility, despite her loyal opening assertion of Bray’s “sound” views. That she bases her opinions on an implicitly imperfect knowledge (“so far as I am capable of judging”) and then goes on further to undermine her position (“a subject of which I know so little”) softens her effective criticism of the logical flaw in Bray’s position. Her modesty, however, cannot fail to disguise her essentially perfect understanding of the argument and limitations put forward by both sides. The case for maintaining a currency with “intrinsic value” (a key concept, along with “exchange value” of classical economics, to be consolidated into “utility value” in the final years of Eliot’s life) is undermined when the rules linking money to precious metal are forcibly suspended, as in 1857. The case for inconvertible, paper money however, while theoretically accepted, depends crucially on the support of an equal or greater guarantee than gold can give: a “government security”. In this, I think she is recognising a crucial aspect of the social meaning of money that goes beyond the economic – that money of any variety relies ultimately on the trust of all its users. In this, Eliot is articulating the shift Mary Poovey identifies around the middle of the century whereby paper currencies and the writing they contained came to be accepted as representations of fact. Poovey describes this process as one of social “naturalization” whereby first bank notes and then increasingly abstract instruments “passed beneath the horizon of cultural visibility”.¹⁸

Overall, Eliot seems unconvinced by the arguments of Bray, whose own business was being affected by tighter monetary conditions and was, a few years later, to be even worse hit by the abolition of import duties on ribbon. Ironically, the liberal Bray was undone by free trade and *laissez faire* economics. It seems unlikely that Eliot was immune from the general sense that – financial crises and economic cycles notwithstanding - gold, and therefore, the pound sterling continued to represent security and “intrinsic value.” Up until 1870, the interest coupon on UK Government consuls was paid in gold in an almost ceremonial linking of the great social and material embodiments

¹⁷ See note 83, p. 38 below for Smith’s definitive statement on labour value.

¹⁸ Poovey, *Genres*, 16.

of security: the state and the precious metal. As Martin Daunton explains the metal's symbolic and psychological hold: "To question gold was tantamount to an attack on the queen whose head appeared on the newly designed gold sovereigns...The gold standard and gold sovereign were not technical issues, but were embedded in personal culture."¹⁹ Something of this ordering of value is hinted at in Eliot's essays. In 'The Life of John Sterling' (1852), she writes of a man "of whom poetry and philosophy were not merely a form of paper currency or a ladder to fame but an end in themselves."²⁰ Four years later an alchemic image again establishes a link between the highest art and the precious metal: Heinrich Heine, she writes, "touches leaden folly with the magic wand of his fancy, and transmutes it into the fine gold of art."²¹

Gold may have remained the ultimate store of value, but new money forms were becoming increasingly pervasive. The temporal settings of most her novels allowed Eliot to explore the ethical and social implications of economically-related motives and actions at Poovey's "vanishing point"; when both the representational forms in which value was stored and exchanged and the institutional frameworks within which those forms were earned, saved and distributed were at a pivotal stage of transition. In her most fabular tales, *Silas Marner* and *Brother Jacob*, she makes use of the talismanic properties of gold coinage to examine concepts of money-related pathology (hoarding, stealing) and transformation in richly allegorical ways that rely on the period settings. Reflecting on the success of *Silas Marner* in May 1861, she tells Blackwood: "There can be no great painting of misers under the present system of paper money - cheques bills scrip and the like: nobody can handle that dull property as men handled the glittering gold."²² Throughout the novels, money-forms explore the tension between intrinsic and exchange value. Precious stones and gold; metal coins and paper notes; cheques, exchangeable mortgages and gambling chips: all are charged with rich symbolism and anthropological meaning. In Eliot's hands, they establish individual and social frameworks of power and control.

¹⁹ Martin Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare: An Economic and Social History of Britain, 1851-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 276.

²⁰ George Eliot, *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 46. Hereafter, "Essays".

²¹ *Essays*, 216.

²² *Letters*, 3, 411.

Eliot's economic education during the 1850's owed much to her position at the *Westminster Review* which exposed her to many of the leading lights of economic liberalism. The formidable George Combe, the magazine's main financial backer, and a man of forthright liberal views, recorded his first meeting with Eliot in 1851, in which he notes "the great strength of her intellect": "We had a great deal of conversation on religion, political economy, and political events, and altogether, ...she appeared to me the ablest woman whom I have seen".²³ With Combe's approval, Eliot was installed by Chapman as the magazine's *de facto* editor, a role in which she was instrumental in commissioning articles from "the ablest and most liberal thinkers of the time."²⁴ Robust defences of the principles of classical economics, including the increasingly hegemonic pillars of free trade and competition, were a feature of the *Westminster Review* both during and long after Eliot's editorial involvement.²⁵

Eliot's occasional and diffident professions of ignorance, both of economic theory and commercial practice, therefore, seem somewhat at odds with her experience and revealed understanding. William Baker, in his analysis of the sparsely-represented Economics section of the George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Collection in the Dr. Williams Library, takes Eliot at face value, concluding that his data "'seems to attest to [their] lack of interest in the subject."²⁶ However, this opinion should be put in the context both of the remarkable size of the couples' recorded and dispersed libraries and of the significance of those works that did survive, including important texts by Adam Smith, Mill, Fawcett and John Elliot Cairnes.²⁷ Barker's conclusion also ignores the much wider sphere with which nineteenth-century political economy connected. The couple's extensive collection of moral philosophical, political, sociological and scientific

²³ *Letters*, 8, 28.

²⁴ *Letters*, 1, 351. The phrase is taken from a letter from Chapman to Mill, attempting to clarify the aims of the *Review* under its new ownership.

²⁵ See Cottom, p. 27, in which he implicates Eliot in what he sees as the replacement of aristocratic patronage by another form of class control, underpinned by "orthodox political economy" and an illusory educationally-base meritocracy. The assumption of both, he argues, "was that competition would result in a society of discrete levels with different factors of power assigned to them, but that this distribution of power would not be an act or institutionalization of power."

²⁶ William Baker, *The George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Library: An Annotated Catalogue of Their Books at Dr. Williams's Library, London* (New York & London: Garland, 1977), xxvi.

²⁷ The collection at Dr. Williams's Library totals 2,405 items. In addition, about 1,200 were sold at auction in 1923 and a catalogue of 1,046 was made by a descendant of Lewes of books remaining in the family. It is not known what proportion these collections comprise of the original library.

books provide many insights into a much broader definition of economics and provide clues as to how Eliot came to frame her considerations of the wider ethical and sociological implications of the study of material wealth.

Barker specifically notes the absence of Ricardos's works in the collection. However, I believe Eliot was fully conversant with his central theory in the *Principles*, which reciprocally linked wages and capital within an interdependent scheme at the centre of which lay the labour theory of value. His central incorporation of land and rent would have had particular relevance to Eliot, whose father was agent to a large country estate in the post-war years, when the memory of high food prices and inflated land values was fresh. Ricardo's famous theory of diminishing returns was cast in agricultural terms and relates to Thomas Malthus's work on population. As the population grows, increasingly unproductive marginal land is cultivated, driving up the price of rent (and value of land) and reducing profits. Wages were linked to and determined by profit and rent. From a social perspective, this determination was particularly significant as it inevitably pitted the land-owner against the farmer; the landlord against the manufacturer providing the industrial capital.²⁸ Thus, for example, the landowner would support the maintenance of the Corn Laws (empirically true) as the higher price and demand for home-grown corn inevitably raised rents, and would be disincentivised to make any improvements to his land as the benefits of higher productivity and lower cost of production would accrue to the tenant farmer. The typically less enlightened landowners in George Eliot's novels often fit the Ricardian bill closely. Squire Cass is the specific target of the narrator of *Silas Marner* but the wider criticism is of the thought and morals of a particular generation and class:

It was still that glorious war-time which was felt to be a peculiar favour of Providence towards the landed interest, and the fall of prices had not yet come to carry the race of small squires and

²⁸ The very opening sentence of the work draws the battle lines: "The produce of the earth – all that is derived from its surface by the united application of labour, machinery and capital, is divided among three classes of the community; namely, the proprietor of the land, the owner of the stock or capital necessary for its cultivation, and the labourers by whose industry it is cultivated." David Ricardo, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, Vol. 1 of *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, ed. Piero Sraffa, with the collaboration of M. H. Dobb, 11 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), 5.

yeomen down that road to ruin for which extravagant habits and bad husbandry were plentifully anointing their wheels.²⁹

In spite of his other failings of character, Godfrey Cass, by the end of the novel is at least implementing land improvement schemes, part of a line of new-generation estate modernisers stretching from Arthur Donnithorne (another substantially imperfect heir out to correct the selfish mismanagement of the previous generation) to Sir James Chettam in *Middlemarch*. Chettam is also contrasted to a representative of ‘old’ landed attitudes, although here somewhat incongruously espousing radical politics. Mr Brooke claims the authority of both Adam Smith and Humphry Davy in his opposition to “fancy-farming” and reveals again the Ricardian opposition of technology-resistant landlord and tenant:

‘A great mistake, Chettam,’ interposed Mr Brooke, ‘going into electrifying your land and that kind of thing, and making a parlour of your cow-house. It won’t do. I went into science a great deal myself at one time; but I saw it would not do. It leads to everything; you can let nothing alone. No, no – see that your tenants don’t sell their straw and that kind of thing; and give them draining-tiles, you know. But your fancy-farming will not do – the most expensive sort of whistle you can buy; you may as well keep a pack of hounds.’³⁰

The influence on Eliot of Ricardo’s most prominent successor, John Stuart Mill is even more apparent and pervasive. In a letter of 1875 to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, while denying both a personal acquaintance with Mill and that his works represented “any marked epoch in my life”, Eliot nevertheless admits that she has “studied his books, especially his *Logic* and *Political Economy*, with much benefit.”³¹ Ten years earlier, while writing *Felix Holt*, and following publication of popular editions of a number of Mill’s major works, she reflects that “some of his works have been frequently my companions of late, and I have been going through many *actions de grace* towards

²⁹ George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, ed. Terence Cave (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21.

³⁰ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 16.

³¹ *Letters*, 6, 163. Boddenheimer ascribes a particular objective weight to this letter: “Marian allowed herself to offer a modicum of biographical information...because Phelps had managed to assure her that she cared more about her works than her life” (235).

him.”³² Her diary reveals that her specific “companions” at this time were *The Principles of Political Economy*, which she was rereading, and *On Liberty*. In view of the socio-political and religious themes central to *Felix Holt* it is, I think, instructive that Mill’s great texts of classical economic and social liberalism feature on Eliot’s reading list alongside Auguste Comte’s *Social Science*, David Friedrich Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* and Aristotle’s *Poetics* – writers whose influence on Eliot’s thought are well documented – together with Fawcett’s *Economic Condition of the Working Classes*.³³ In fact, it is not at all surprising that any interest Eliot might have had in the study of political economy in the 1850s and 60s should have been largely shaped by Mill. Since it was first published in 1848, the *Principles* had exerted an extraordinarily pervasive and enduring influence on economic thought. Leslie Stephen, writing more than fifty years after the original publication, summarised the impact of the *Principles*, which “became popular in a sense in which no work upon the same topic had been popular since the *Wealth of Nations*.”³⁴

It clearly became Eliot’s primary work of economic reference. In an 1852 letter to the Brays, describing her varied and hectic workload at the *Westminster Review*, she explains that her research for a review of a recent periodical piece by W. R. Greg on ‘Principles of Taxation’ largely comprised reading “all that J. S. Mill says on the same subject.”³⁵ Mill, in the *Principles*, essentially held with Smith’s four great maxims on the requirements of taxation: equality, certainty, convenience (i.e. at a time convenient to the payer) and minimum cost of collection.³⁶ He did not object to current levels of income tax and believed capital should not be exempt from levy. He was opposed, however, to an increased rate for higher earners: his desire to mitigate “the inequalities of wealth” outweighed by an objection “to impose a penalty on people for having worked harder and

³² *Letters*, 4, 196.

³³ *Journals*, 124-6. Fawcett himself was greatly influenced by Mill. *The Economic Position of the British Labourer* (London: Macmillan, 1865) takes up one of the more disputed areas of Mill’s *Principles*: “You will then be able to perceive that employers and employed would both be benefited by the introduction of some system of Co-partnership between capital and labour” (9).

³⁴ Leslie Stephen, *The English Utilitarians* (London: Duckworth, 1900), vol. 3, 53, quoted in Maurice Dobb, *Theories of Value and Distribution since Adam Smith: Ideology and Economic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 124.

³⁵ *Letters*, 2, 68.

³⁶ John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, gen. ed. John M. Robson, 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-1991), vol. 3, 805-6.

saved more than their neighbours.” Where he does believe the wealthy should be liable to increased taxation is on “large fortunes acquired by gift or inheritance.”³⁷

Eliot herself did not appear to have a problem paying out part of her profits of production, writing in 1852: “So the budget is come out - and I am to pay Income Tax. All very right.”³⁸ At the same time, she writes of attending meetings of The Association for the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge in support of the abolition of the Newspaper Stamp Tax, indicating her concern with establishing the proper balance and limitations of the state’s power to tax.³⁹

Mill’s views on taxation were part of much wider theorising of the distribution of wealth, which, he argued, was subject to human will and adjustment rather than subject to unalterable deductive laws.⁴⁰ In this important distinction, Mill’s *Principles* marked a significant advance both on Smith’s “invisible hand” and Ricardo’s unified theory of production and distribution. His theory finds an imaginative parallel in Eliot’s consideration, in the novels, of the co-existence of classical economic principles and altruism. Sir James Chettam allows his largely practical and economically-driven improvements to take a more altruistic colouring under Dorothea’s enthusiasm to assist him in drawing up detailed plans for new workmen’s cottages, a suggestion taken by Brooke as evidence that “young women don’t understand political economy, you know.” Brooke represents a patriarchal view of political economy and its applications in which the overlaying of human sympathy represents a feminising of classical principles. Ironically, his creator’s understanding of that science, in this very context, may well have been advanced by her long-standing acquaintance, Harriet Martineau, whom Eliot had

³⁷ Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 811. Mill was probably influenced in his distinction between earned and inherited wealth by Nassau Senior, who twelve years earlier offers the following as an extension of his maxim that “profit is the remuneration of abstinence, and abstinence is the deferring of enjoyment”:
“...for all useful purposes, the distinction of profit from rent ceases as soon as the capital from which a given revenue arises has become, whether by gift or inheritance, the property of a person to whose abstinence and exertions it did not owe its creation. The revenue arising from a dock or a wharf or a canal, is profit in the hands of the *original constructor*. It is the reward of *his* abstinence in having employed capital for the purposes of production instead of for those of enjoyment. But in the hands of his heir it has all the attributes of rent.” Nassau Senior, *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy* (London, 1836), 58-9, quoted in Dobb, 104.

³⁸ *Letters*, 2, 70.

³⁹ *Letters*, 2, 70. Mill, in the *Principles*, also describes tax on newspapers as “objectionable”. *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 861. I will discuss the economic boundaries of the state and the individual further in chapter 8.

⁴⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 199: “[The distribution of wealth] is a matter of human institution solely.”

visited in 1852 in the midst of Martineau's cooperative scheme for building working men's cottages in Cumbria.⁴¹ Eliot's observation of the great admirer of Malthus - and the era's pre-eminent populiser and policy lobbyist for classical political economy - dedicating herself to such a scheme would suggest that she is pointing to Dorothea's unworldly naivety, rather than expressing an authorial opinion, when her heroine complains of "political economy, that never-explained science which was thrust as an extinguisher over all her lights."⁴²

Martineau's proposed solutions to address the economic condition of the working classes combined old-fashioned paternalism with the doctrine of self-help. The latter, given its most extensive and popular charter in Samuel Smiles's work of that name in 1859, chimed most closely with the hegemonic economic and social liberalism of the third quarter of the century.⁴³ Against this swell, however, divergent socialist interpretations of the theoretical investigations into the creation and distribution of wealth were being voiced well before the radical formulations of Marx and Engels. As early as the 1820s, the first generation of so-called Ricardian Socialists tried, in the words of Maurice Dobb, "to carry Ricardian theory...into a critique of capitalism itself" by calling for the right of labour, as the sole creator of wealth, to the whole produce.⁴⁴ Eliot was undoubtedly aware of the aims and progress of the Owenite movement, although her caustic assessment of its founder and leading light as early as 1843 indicates that she was little swayed by its ideology: "I saw Robert Owen yesterday...and I think if his system prosper it will be in *spite* of its founder, and not because of his advocacy; but I dare say one should even begin to like him if he were known long enough to erase the first impression."⁴⁵ More direct ideological criticism is found in 'The Natural History of German Life' in which she observes the essential self-interest with which the peasants greet plans for the communal partition of the land. Any emotional attraction she may

⁴¹ *Letters*, 2, 62.

⁴² *Middlemarch*, 18.

⁴³ Smiles is characteristically forthright on the subject of 'Money': "...the patriotism of this day has but little regard for such common things as individual economy and providence, although it is by the practice of such virtues only that the genuine independence of the industrial classes is to be secured." Samuel Smiles, *Self Help: With illustrations of Character, Conduct and Perseverance*, ed. Peter W. Sinnema (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 243.

⁴⁴ Dobb, 137. Dobb refers specifically to William Thompson, Thomas Hodgskin, J. F. Bray and John Gray.

⁴⁵ *Letters*, 1, 161.

have felt towards the theory of socialism was offset by a recognition of its practical limitations.⁴⁶

My final chapter will return to Eliot's relation to new liberal theories of the role and limitation of the state in the economy, including private ownership rights to land and property, in the final years of her life. However, it is notable that these issues figured prominently at the outset of her career. She was an early reader of Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics* (1851), in which he argues that "it is manifest that exclusive possession of the soil necessitates an infringement of the law of equal freedom" and consequently calls for a nationalisation of land, with rents passing to the state rather than individual landlords. Although he attempts to distinguish his proposal from "Messrs. Fourier, Owen, Louis Blanc, and Co" and he increasingly distanced himself from practical advocacy of land nationalisation in his later writings, Spencer became an unlikely champion of socialist land-reformers later in the century.⁴⁷ It is unclear what Eliot thought of his thesis. She sent a copy of the book to Charles Bray, not "because I thought you would admire the book – far from it".⁴⁸ Mill's re-statement of the benefits and necessity of private property ownership seems a better reflection of Eliot's own position. In the *Principles* he gives serious consideration to the theoretical basis and attractions of communism and its small scale historical application. His conclusion is essentially pragmatic: that "for a considerable time to come", the political economist

will be chiefly concerned with the conditions of existence and progress belonging to a society founded on private property and individual competition; and that the object to be principally aimed at in the present stage of human improvement, is not the subversion of the system of individual property, but the improvement of it, and the full participation of every member of the community in its benefits.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Essays*, 285.

⁴⁷ Quoted and discussed in D. Weinstein, *Equal Freedom and Utility: Herbert Spencer's Liberal Utilitarianism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 182-96. See also W. C. Owen, *The Economics of Herbert Spencer*, 1891 edn. (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2002) for a late nineteenth-century socialist perspective.

⁴⁸ *Letters*, 2, 14.

⁴⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 214.

As with many of the central props of industrial capitalism, including the doctrine of *laissez faire*, Mill balanced libertarian and moral benefits against real and potential abuses.

While Mill continued wholeheartedly to defend property rights and competition, his proposals for redistributive inheritance tax and lengthy consideration of the position of the working classes in the *Principles* revealed socialist bearings with which even his staunchest followers struggled.⁵⁰ Eliot, together with Lewes, was also greatly concerned with the position of the “Labouring Classes” but had a much more gradualist vision of how a more mobile and egalitarian society might emerge.⁵¹ However, Mill’s main socio-economic position, including a rejection of paternalism, is traceable in Eliot. His objection to welfare dependency was both practical – it is an idealized state that “has never been historically realised” – and philosophical, in that it contravened his concept of individual liberty. Eliot shared the latter objection, although its expression occasionally carries a hard liberal edge, as when she writes to Mrs Nassau John Senior in 1874 on the inadequacy of the Poor Laws: “Do what one will with a pauper system it remains a huge system of vitiation, introducing the principle of communistic provision instead of provision through individual, personal responsibility and action.”⁵²

What Mill looked forward to for the working class was “their own mental cultivation”, to be achieved primarily through education and greater cooperation both within and across classes.⁵³ This in turn might eventually lead to partnerships and even joint-ownership between the sharply divided camps of employers and workers. In *Felix Holt*, Eliot is emphatic that education of the working classes must precede electoral enfranchisement, using the oratory of Felix, both in the novel and later in the ‘Address to Working Men’ to argue that “votes would never give you political power worth having while things are as they are now”.⁵⁴ The strength, dignity and essential virtue of her two principal working class heroes – Felix Holt and Adam Bede – as well as that of more minor characters such as Caleb Garth, present models for the representatives of their class

⁵⁰ Most notably bk. 4, ch. 7, ‘On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes’, Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 3. He writes in the *Autobiography* that this chapter “is entirely due to” Harriet Taylor. *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 255.

⁵¹ See ch. 8 below for the couple’s position on socialism and Eliot’s politics more generally.

⁵² *Letters*, 6, 46.

⁵³ Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 763.

⁵⁴ George Eliot, *Felix Holt, The Radical*, ed. Fred C. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 249.

who might be at the vanguard of Mill's co-operative proposals. Yet it is not only to the exceptional representatives of the working class that Eliot bestows an equal status and value. The conclusion of chapter 19 of *Adam Bede* celebrates the value of labour in a tone reminiscent of Ruskin's praise of the medieval stonemasons. The narrator concedes that Adam while "not an average man", was also not wholly uncommon of many "trained in skilful courageous labour":

they make their way upward, rarely as geniuses, most commonly as painstaking honest men, with the skill and conscience to do well the tasks that lie before them. Their lives have no discernible echo beyond the neighbourhood where they dwelt, but you are almost sure to find there some good piece of road, some building, some application of mineral produce, some improvement in farming practice, some reform of parish abuses, with which their names are associated by one or two generations after them...in old age their white hairs are seen in a place of honour at church and at market, and they tell their well-dressed sons and daughters, seated round the bright hearth on winter evenings, how pleased they were when they first earned their twopence a-day. Others there are who die poor, and never put off the workman's coat on weekdays: they have not had the art of getting rich; but they are men of trust, and when they die before the work is all out of them, it is as if some main screw had got loose in a machine; the master who employed them says, 'Where shall I find their like?'⁵⁵

If the concluding lines suggest an essential acceptance of an established social order, this passage also helps establish Eliot in a long line of thought running counter to the main tenet of political economy in its distrust or outright criticism of those whose ruling passion is "the heart of getting rich". The mechanised image of the industrial worker as a "screw...in a machine" chimes with the language of Dickens and the mid-century Condition of England novelists and their chief inspiration, Thomas Carlyle, who denounced "the Mechanical Age" in all its manifestations: "Not the external and physical

⁵⁵ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 200-1. The labour theory of value united orthodox political economics and the science's opponents, including Carlyle and Ruskin, and is affirmed in Eliot's portrayal of virtuous working heroes and characters (Adam Bede, Felix Holt, Caleb Garth). See, however, Jeff Nunokawa's reading of *Silas Marner*, a "fairy-tale telling of the labor theory of value" (119).

alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also.”⁵⁶ Eliot came to intellectual and creative maturity at a time of economic growth and stability which had dulled the fear of his calamitous projections and bred an acquiescent acceptance of the nexus of cash exchange. Yet she maintained, writing in 1855, “there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle’s writings”⁵⁷ and his influence continued to reverberate in the work of Ruskin and indeed Mill.⁵⁸ Carlyle’s idealisation of mediaeval hierarchical social and economic structures provides a direct link to the Church of the Middle Ages, most directly in his portrayal of Abbot Samson and his monastic community in *Past and Present*. Biblical and Christian teaching on money were obviously intimately known to Eliot but this particular tradition belongs more to the Catholic Church than to the Evangelical Protestantism so central to her early life. Interpreting Riehl, she draws a distinction between the impact of religion in Britain and Europe that was to form the basis of Max Weber’s influential sociological theory more than fifty years later: “for though our English life is in its core intensely traditional, Protestantism and commerce have modernized the face of the land and the aspects of society in a far greater degree than in any continental country.”⁵⁹ The medieval Catholic teaching on the dangers of following mammon and, in particular the evil of usury, marks a dissociation from commerce which links even further back to Greek philosophy and, in particular, Aristotle. The favourite classical philosopher of Lewes and Eliot (to whom she turned “to find out what is the chief good”⁶⁰) draws, in *The Politics*, a sharp distinction between “natural” and “unnatural” money: the former, what is required for the necessities of the good life; the latter, the creation and pursuit of money for its own sake.⁶¹

John Ruskin clearly belongs in this Aristotelean line of opposition against money for its own sake, so it is worth recalling Eliot’s complaint that Ruskin’s work contained

⁵⁶ Thomas Carlyle, ‘Signs of the Times’, in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, Centenary Edition, 30 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), vol. 27, ‘Critical and Miscellaneous Essays II’, 60. Note also how Silas Marner’s work in Raveloe is first described by reference to the unnatural, but still-organic imagery of the spider, before increasingly mechanistic metaphors take over as his obsession with gold intensifies (ch. 2).

⁵⁷ *Essays*, 213.

⁵⁸ See Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 105, on the need of the English to “moderate the ardour of their devotion to the pursuit of wealth.”

⁵⁹ *Essays*, 288. For Eliot’s relation to later economic sociology, see my reading of *Romola* in ch. 7 below.

⁶⁰ *Letters*, 2, 46.

⁶¹ See Henry William Spiegel, *The Growth of Economic Thought*, 3rd edn. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 24-34.

“stupendous specimens of arrogant absurdity on some economical points.”⁶² Ruskin, in turn, identifies Eliot as a proponent of the commercially-contaminated “English Cockney school” of literature, in which “the personages are picked up from behind the counter and out of the gutter; and the landscape, by excursion train to Gravesend, with return ticket for the City-road.”⁶³ Both quotations overstate the level of difference in perceptions of value between the two writers. Eliot greatly admired Ruskin’s writing on art and his attempts to converge aesthetics and economics were mirrored, to some extent, by Eliot’s own struggles to reconcile artistic creativity and increasing sales of the commodity item in which her work was embodied.⁶⁴ Her novels avoid reductive attacks on commerce and those enriched by it, but contain complex investigation of the moral psychology of choices concerning the acquisition and distribution of money and the ethics of the consumption its possession facilitates. Few of her wealthy characters (either of old or new money) possess the human sympathy required of the properly-enlightened individual, and, in accordance with the main lines of attack of both Ruskin and Carlyle, the theoretical application of the calculus of Benthamite Utilitarianism to unravel the mysteries of human nature is frequently brought under attack. In Eliot’s first novel, the narrator of ‘Janet’s Repentance’ first satirises “certain ingenious philosophers of our own day” whose reaction to the greater joy in heaven over the one repentant sinner than of the other ninety nine not in need of repentance is to “take offence at a joy so entirely out of correspondence with arithmetical proportion.” The satire takes on a harder edge when the arithmetical approach meets its limits:

the mother, when her sweet lispng little ones have all been taken from her one after another, and she is hanging over her last dead babe, finds small consolation in the fact that the tiny dimpled corpse is but one of a necessary average, and that a thousand other babes brought into the world

⁶² *Letters*, 2, 422.

⁶³ Quoted in David Carroll (ed.), *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 167. Ruskin was writing in 1881, the year after Eliot died.

⁶⁴ See ch. 3 below. For Ruskin’s economics, see Gill G. Cockram, *Ruskin and Social Reform: Ethics and Economics in the Victorian Age* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007). Ruskin’s influence on later socio-economic thought, discussed by Cockram in ch. 6, ‘Hobson, Ruskin and New Liberalism’, is also relevant to my own discussion of Eliot’s moral and intellectual allegiance with new liberalism in ch. 8 below.

For how Ruskin’s overall notion of economics linked the consumer to the producer in an act of sympathetic projection, see David M. Craig, *John Ruskin and the Ethics of Consumption* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

at the same time are doing well, and are likely to live; and if you stood beside that mother – if you knew her pang and shared it – it is probable you would be equally unable to see a ground of complacency in statistics.⁶⁵

It was a criticism she had voiced in more general terms the previous year in ‘The Natural History of German Life’, when she described the folly “of modern generalization, to believe that all social questions are merged in economic science, and that the relations of men to their neighbours may be settled by algebraic equations.”⁶⁶

In my reading of *Felix Holt* in chapter Four, I will argue that, by the late 1860s, Eliot’s critique of Utilitarianism had become both pervasive and more nuanced. This was partly in response to developments in political economic debate including not only Mill’s modifications to Jeremy Bentham’s hedonistic scheme in ‘Utilitarianism’ (1861), but also to gradually widening fault lines in the theoretical foundations of classical economics, which was finally starting to undermine Mill’s dominance. Returning to Barker’s catalogue of part of the surviving Eliot-Lewes library, two of the contemporary works of economics listed are Henry Fawcett’s *Manual of Political Economy* and John Elliott Cairnes’ *Some Leading Principles of Political Economy Newly Expounded*, first published in 1863 and 1874 respectively.⁶⁷ Reflecting the changing political, social and economic preoccupations of the mid-1870’s, the 4th edition of Fawcett’s *Manual* (1874) in Dr. Williams included a new chapter on “the Nationalisation of the Land”, references to what Fawcett describes as “modern socialism”, considerations of the need for “state intervention”, and an emphasis on “the important economic advantages which would result, if the entire people were brought under the influence of a comprehensive system of national education.”⁶⁸ Eliot’s annotated copy of Cairnes’ *Principles* was used for reference during the writing of *Daniel Deronda* and his ‘Preface’ gives some indication of the disputes within contemporary political economics. While defending the core methodology of the classical school (“combined deduction and verification”), he

⁶⁵ George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. Thomas A. Noble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 270.

⁶⁶ *Essays*, 272.

⁶⁷ Baker, xxvi.

⁶⁸ Henry Fawcett, *Manual of Political Economy* 4th edn. (London Macmillan, 1874), v-vi.

proposes to update the “intermediate principles” against what he sees as “no small proportion of faulty material” prevalent in the early 1870s.

The inclusion of Cairnes and Fawcett in the surviving library is significant. Both men were personal acquaintances of Eliot and Lewes and, as academic economists, both belonged to the loosely described School of Mill. As such, and in opposition to the newly developed theories of value that were starting to take hold by the early 1870s, both resolutely defended the core Ricardian value theory, including the concept of the wages-fund – that is the population-dependent ‘fixed’ amount of capital in the system required to fund the wages of the labourer. Fawcett, in later editions of the *Manual* opens his chapter ‘On Wages’ with a summary of the theory, its challenge (partially acknowledged by Mill) by W. T. Thornton and the subsequent response from Cairnes, “justly regarded as the leading advocate of the wages fund theory.”⁶⁹ Cairnes became the leading guardian of Mill’s legacy, and remained staunchly resistant to the innovations of Jevons and the other marginal utility theorists.⁷⁰

However, even Cairnes recognised that some of the bases of classical economic orthodoxy were becoming untenable. In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Political Economy at University College London in 1870, he argued for “positive and reconstructive” reforms within his discipline, urging, in particular, that its historically intimate association with the dogma of *laissez-faire* should be broken.⁷¹ Alternative schools of economic thought were arguing for much more radical reinterpretations. Even Bagehot, who continued to support the main abstract principles of Ricardo and regarded Cairnes’s modified version of Mill as the best way forward for political economy, ceased to regard the science as absolutely and universally applicable. Rather, it had full relevance only in “a society of grown-up competitive commerce such as we have in England.”⁷² In this expression of relativism, Bagehot reveals some alliance to the

⁶⁹ Fawcett, *Manual*, 132. The wage fund concept stems from Adam Smith, who viewed wages as an advance or sacrifice by the provider of capital, thus adding a temporal dimension to capital.

⁷⁰ As I will discuss in ch. 4, in relation to the publicly-aired dispute between Jevons and the defenders of Mill, Eliot and Lewes were very much allied to Cairnes in this respect. Cairnes, however, disagreed with Mill’s socialist tendencies: see Winch, *Wealth and Life*, 210.

⁷¹ Quoted and discussed in Winch, *Wealth and Life*, 195. This should not imply that Cairnes proposed restrictions in free, international trade, which he strongly supported.

⁷² Winch, *Wealth and Life*, 134. In his obituary of Cairnes, reprinted in Bagehot, *Works*, vol. 9, Bagehot wrote that “he defines better, as we think, than any previous writer, the exact sort of science which political

historical or comparative method which Sir Henry Maine had spearheaded in the field of jurisprudence and which was gaining increasing traction in other disciplines, including economics.⁷³ As I will discuss in later chapters, it was an intellectual methodology that was to have significance in Eliot's work, most notably in the socio-economic themes explored in *Romola* and *Middlemarch*.⁷⁴

These various debates and fractures around the scope and proper methodology of political economy were reaching a climax just around the anniversary, in 1876, of the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*. It is significant that all the various factions tried to claim Smith's inheritance for their own cause. As Bagehot summarised Smith's enduring legacy:

The life of almost everyone in England – perhaps of everyone - is different and better in consequence of it. The whole commercial policy of the country is not so much founded on it as instinct with it...its teachings have settled down into the common sense of the nation and have become irreversible.⁷⁵

Almost forty years earlier, in his Preface to the *Principles*, Mill had pointed to a similarly enduring debt that goes beyond the economic:

The design of this book is different from that of any treatise on Political Economy which has been produced in England since the work of Adam Smith...And it is because Adam Smith never loses sight of this truth; because, in his applications of Political Economy, he perpetually appeals to other and often far larger considerations than pure Political Economy affords.⁷⁶

In his reaching back to Smith, Mill, in a sense represents a central course of practical, human economics resistant to the branches of “abstract speculation” – both classical and neo-classical – that sought to impose restrictive, theoretical confines on the subject. My

economy is, the kind of reasoning which it uses, and the nature of the relation which it, as an abstract science, bears to the concrete world” (401-3).

⁷³ Collini, Winch and Burrow, chs. 7 and 8.

⁷⁴ See also Neil McCaw, *George Eliot and Victorian Historiography, Imagining the National Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

⁷⁵ Bagehot, *Works*, vol. 11, 222.

⁷⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, xci.

placing of George Eliot in the same path goes beyond the scant evidence that foremost amongst Baker's twelve recorded works of economics in her surviving library is an edition of *The Wealth of Nations*.⁷⁷ For just as Smith's economics "perpetually appeals to other and far larger considerations", so too does Eliot's investigation of humanity's "larger considerations" embody the economic. As she writes in *Adam Bede*, using the abstraction of impersonal economic theory for very different ends:

the existence of insignificant people has very important consequences in the world. It can be shown to affect the price of bread and the rate of wages, to call forth many evil tempers from the selfish, and many heroisms from the sympathetic, and, in other ways, to play no small part in the tragedy of life.⁷⁸

To quote Mill again, this time from the *Autobiography*, "Political Economy, in truth, has never pretended to give advice to mankind with no lights but its own; though people who knew nothing but political economy (and therefore knew that ill) have taken upon themselves to advise, and could only do so by such lights as they had."⁷⁹ Although the neo-classical economists admitted the limitations of their science (Alfred Marshall, for example, recognises the partial dependence of great questions of economic distribution "on the moral and political capabilities of human nature"⁸⁰), the mathematical basis of the marginal utility theorists tended to quantify, redefine or simply ignore Smith's "larger considerations". Jevons, in his 'Preface' to the first edition of *The Theory of Political Economy*, explains his treatment of economy "as a calculus of pleasure and pain...The nature of wealth and value is explained by the consideration of indefinitely small amounts of pleasure and pain, just as the theory of statics is made to rest upon the

⁷⁷ It seems clear from a number of references in the novels that she was very familiar with Smith's work. See my discussion of 'Brother Jacob' in ch. 8. Note also the opening passage of Chapter 29 of *Felix Holt*: "Imagine what a game at chess would be if all the chessmen had passions and intellects, more or less small and cunning... Yet this imaginary chess is easy compared with the game a man has to play against his fellow men with other fellow-men for his instruments" (383). This extended image chimes with Smith's chessboard image in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 234.

⁷⁸ *Adam Bede*, 63.

⁷⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 243. His own work attempts to treat "Political Economy not as a thing by itself, but as a fragment of a greater whole; a branch of Social Philosophy, so interlinked with all the other branches, that its conclusions, even in its own peculiar province, are only true conditionally".

⁸⁰ Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics*. 8th edn., (1920), (New York: Prometheus, 1997), 4.

equality of indefinitely small amounts of energy.”⁸¹ As classical theories of growth gave way to equilibrium and optimisation, value came to reside with the consumer, which, as I will discuss in the following chapters, proved problematic for a morally-informed artist growing rich from ever greater sales of books. Only *Daniel Deronda* and *Theophrastus Such*, of George Eliot’s finished novels, were written after the publication of Jevons’ *Theory*, whose main impact, in any case, was felt several years later. However, I believe the growing acceptance of subjective, demand-led theories at a time when her own wealth and material accumulation was, in part, being fuelled by the development of her books as consumer items changed, confused and even upset the basis of value on which most of her personal and professional life rested. Following the receipt of a cheque from Blackwood for sales of *The Mill on the Floss* in April 1861, she writes: “I prize the money fruit of my labour very highly as the means of saving us dependence [sic] or the degradation of writing when we are no longer able to write well or write what we have not written before.”⁸² It is one instance of many in which she writes to her publisher and friend of the value and product of her labour, but, in its prudential basis, its temporal dimension and its distinction between money and real value it reveals a debt to Adam Smith, who both provided a foundation of her theoretical economic understanding and a means of incorporating that understanding into a wider normative scheme.⁸³

⁸¹ W. Stanley Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy*, ed. R. D. Collison Black (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 44.

⁸² *Letters*, 3, 396.

⁸³ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, textual ed. W. B. Todd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), vol. 1, 51: “Labour alone, therefore, never varying in its own value, is alone the ultimate and real standard by which the value of all commodities can at all times and places be estimated and compared. It is their real price; money is their nominal price only.”

‘Intentions of Stern Thrift’: The Formation of a Vernacular Economics

I thank you also for your offer about the money for Adam, but I have intentions of stern thrift, and mean to want as little as possible.¹

- George Eliot to John Blackwood, July 1859

That science [political economy], although it considers wealth as an object of desire, and inquires what circumstances are favourable to its increase, lays down no doctrine whatever with regard to the moral propriety of devoting our energies to making money.²

- *Westminster Review*, July 1865

By the time the *Westminster Review* issued yet another in its long series of staunch defences of the principles of political economy in 1865 (the article referenced above was, ostensibly, a review of the latest edition of Mill’s great work), George Eliot’s direct connection with the magazine had long since ceased. However, the explosion of her career in the six years that followed her professed intention sternly to conserve her literary earnings had propelled her into the ranks of high earners for whom the wider moral issues raised by the *Review*’s article were most pertinent.³ The following two chapters will attempt to extend the consideration of Eliot’s theoretical understanding of economic matters into their application in her private and professional lives.⁴ Chapter 3 will deal specifically with George Eliot as a professional writer within the context of the

¹ *Letters*, 3, 118.

² [W. R. Greg], ‘Political Economy’, *Westminster Review*, 84 (Jan. 1865), 106-33, (125).

³ In the three years prior to the publication of *Adam Bede* in 1859, her annual earnings averaged around £300. By 1864, advances and sales on her first four full novels (*Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner* and *Romola*) alone had earned her around £15,000. *Letters*, 7, Appendix I, 358-61. To put her earnings in context, an 1868 analysis of income distribution in England and Wales shows that a family earning in excess of £1,000 per year fell within the top 0.5% of the total population. Within ten years of this survey, Eliot was earning more than £1,000 in stock dividend income alone. See Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1800* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 420. Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 35-50, gives data on the comparative earnings of different professions.

⁴ In doing so I hope partly to address Catherine Gallagher’s admission of a limited examination of “the novelists’ actual economic situations” in her recent work on Political Economy and the novels of Eliot and Dickens. Gallagher, *Body Economic*, 5.

changing economics of the publishing industry over her working life, including considerations of the value of literature in an increasingly commoditised market for the printed word. The current chapter, while inevitably referential to those literary earnings, will focus on her attitudes towards spending, investing and distributing money. My intention in both is not simply to retrace well-documented biographical details, but to consider her recorded thought and actions as she became wealthier within the context of contemporary debate surrounding the benefits, dangers and limitations of the market economy and the formation of her own ‘applied economics’. I will later argue that monetary and economic elements are inextricably entwined in her understanding of practical ethics and attempt to analyse their broad and complex treatment in the novels. My more immediate contention is that, beyond the intellectual influences of religious, moral philosophical and economic writers, the ‘money ethics’ explored in the novels are crucially informed by her personal experiences of having first little and subsequently significant material wealth and the choices for action its possession imposed. Crucially, considerations of selfishness and altruism that were to become central to her moral philosophy find a testing-ground in her own personal situations.⁵

In the same year that George Eliot was professing her “intentions of stern thrift” to Blackwood, the publication of Samuel Smiles’s *Self Help* was urging the absolute necessity of that same virtue to all working men seeking to elevate their character and material condition “by means of individual action, economy, and self-denial.”⁶ In his chapter on ‘Money – its Uses and Abuses’, Smiles emphasises the requirement by

⁵ Collini locates the debate as central to “the primacy of morality” in mid-century culture: “I want to suggest that the texture of moral response among the most prominent Victorian intellectuals was marked at least as much by an obsession with the role of altruism and a concern for the cultivation of feelings as it was by any commitment to the premises of self-interest and rational calculation.” Collini, *Public Moralists*, 62. See also Frank Christianson, *Philanthropy in British and American Fiction: Dickens, Hawthorne, Eliot and Howells* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007): “philanthropic discourse and practice registered the epistemological shift that defined the relationship between the individual and modern capitalist society” (139).

⁶ Smiles, 17. Eliot read Smiles’s *Life of George Stephenson* (1857) – in which many of the virtues promoted in *Self Help* are given human embodiment - in the year of its publication, finding it “a real profit and pleasure” (*Letters*, 2, 369). Adrian Jarvis, in his biography of Smiles, shows how the hagiographic treatment of the great engineer involved the suppression of his financial acumen during the speculative railway boom of the 1840s, including practices of which Smiles was otherwise extremely critical. Adrian Jarvis, *Samuel Smiles and the Construction of Victorian Values* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 27-28 and 86-91.

repeating the advice given to the young Francis Horner, one of the earlier evangelists of political economy who helped spread the word from Edinburgh and Dugald Stewart's lecture room to the Whig establishment in London. Thrift, in fact, constituted an essential individual requirement that underlay both secular and religious manifestations of classical political economy and was central to its populisers of varying ideological persuasions from Martineau to Smiles. It was to remain a central tenet of both individualistic and more communitarian forms of liberalism throughout the century.⁷ Eliot's thrift is traceable to a variety of sources.

As I suggested in the preceding chapter, by 1859 Eliot's intellectual grasp of economics owed much to the work of Mill and those other *Westminster Review* contributors swimming in the secular stream of the Philosophic Radicals. However, while Mill, following Bentham, held that Christianity and political economy were incompatible, for much of Eliot's childhood and formative years, such a linkage was central to a deeply influential Evangelical ideology. Boyd Hilton's now well-accepted contention is that this ideology was a strong and unifying factor among policy makers during the 1820s and 30s and that it "contributed more than 'classical economics' or utilitarianism to the formation of that public morality (or doctrine) in the context of which the new economic policy emerged and by which it was sanctioned."⁸ Within this Christian Economics, thrift, together with other financial and materially-related characteristics, was elevated so as to create, in the words of Thomas Chalmers, an "inseparable connection between the moral worth and the economic comfort of a people." Chalmers's influential 'Bridgewater Treatise', first published in 1833, but successfully reissued some twenty years later, makes the theological link yet more explicit when it describes political economy as "but one grand exemplification of the alliance, which a God of righteousness hath established, between prudence and moral principle on the one hand, and physical comfort on the other."⁹ As A.C.M. Waterman concludes, Chalmers and leading academic theologians

⁷ See Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 31, for Spencer, individualism and thrift as an essential component of "character" in the 1880s.

⁸ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social Thought 1785-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), viii.

⁹ T. Chalmers, *On the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God as Manifested in the Adaptation of External Nature to the Moral and Intellectual Constitution of Man* (London, 1853), quoted in G. R. Searle, *Morality*

such as John Sumner, Edward Coplestone and Richard Whately, succeeded in persuading the intellectual establishment that Christianity could be consistent with a number of political principles (both Whig and liberal Tory) which were being sharpened by Political Economy: “private property rights, free and competitive markets...and a high degree of social and economic inequality.”¹⁰ This was the ideological background against which the teenage George Eliot observed the passing of the Reform Act of 1832 and a Whig-led coalition government enact a series of social and economic reforms which were to test the relationship between individual economies and state support. The most controversial of these, the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, was – as even George Eliot’s letters show – to continue to prick the liberal social conscience for most of the century.¹¹

Even before Eliot’s adoption of a somewhat stern Evangelicalism in the mid-1830s, the influence of Christian Political Economics would have naturally found its way into the house of the sober, hard-working and financially prudent Robert Evans.¹² Eliot’s father was a lifelong Tory (like the tenant farmers of Treby in *Felix Holt*, his allegiance was unquestionably towards the party of his squire) and traditional Anglican. Nevertheless, he recognised the shortcomings of the Old Poor Law and consequently approved of the 1834 Amendment, hoping it would better distinguish between an “industrious good man” and “an idle bad man” in the distribution of parish relief.¹³ Eliot must have considered the implications of the distinction between worthy ‘poverty’ and self-induced ‘pauperism’ even as she assisted her new wealthy Coventry Evangelical friends in distributing aid to the city’s poor.¹⁴ In the domestic sphere, her assumption of the role of mistress of the house at the age of seventeen (following her mother’s death) necessitated careful

and the Market in Victorian Britain (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 12. Eliot records her excitement on receiving a six volume edition of Chalmers’s Sermons in 1841. *Letters* 1, 104.

¹⁰ A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy, 1798-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3.

¹¹ See p. 30 above and p. 193 below, regarding Eliot’s letter to Jane Senior.

¹² His daughter’s description conjures an image of a kind of Smilsean ideal: “he raised himself from being an artisan to be a man whose extensive knowledge in very varied practical departments made his services valued through several counties. He had a large knowledge of buildings, of mines, of plantation, of various branches of valuation and measurement” (*Letters*, 3, 168). His accomplishments clearly match those of the fictional Caleb Garth with the very significant exception that Robert Evans (and, I think his daughter) would never have been so imprudent as to secure a debt for the likes of Fred Vincey – an imbalance between personal affection and economic calculation which had already cost Garth his building business.

¹³ Robert Evans to Francis Newdigate, 13 September 1834, quoted in Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), 15.

¹⁴ Ashton, *Life*, ch. 2.

household management and a habit of meticulous bookkeeping that she maintained throughout her life: “I like to be able to calculate with precision my incomings”, she wrote in 1860 and the later diaries are notable for the frequency with which well-ordered columns of income, expenditure and investment holdings are interspersed among her writing.¹⁵ Even when some of this accounting is passed on to John Cross, she is pleased to record that he “brought me a register with all my investments neatly written out.”¹⁶ Eliot’s individual personal and professional progression is exceptional but, in the way she thought about money, initially in a domestic context, she is, to some extent, representative of her particular generation. As Hilton has observed, it was not Ricardo and Mill but Martineau and other women writers “who mediated political economy for the masses by placing it in the current of domestic household management.”¹⁷ In her carefully documented records of earnings and outgoings, portfolio valuations and dividend receipts she testifies to the increasing pervasiveness of the money economy, supported by both secular and religious ideologies, as industrial capitalism matured in Britain during the nineteenth century.

The application of an intuitive and domestically-honed financial prudence into a wider and life-long money ethic is most evident in Eliot’s attitude to debt. Again, her publisher is the correspondent to whom she admits a tellingly jumbled mixture of values and anxieties:

I certainly care a great deal for the money, as I suppose all anxious minds do that love independence and have been brought up to think debt and begging the two deepest dishonours short of crime.¹⁸

The link between money and independence is one that recurs in her letters and journals. Celebrating her physical removal from the Chapman household in 1854, she writes: “I like my independent life in lodgings better and better and want nothing but a little more

¹⁵ *Letters*, 3, 351.

¹⁶ *Letters*, 7, 106. Eliot’s juxtapositions serve to place her outside of the traditional dualism of market and non-market, domestic activity.

¹⁷ Boyd Hilton, *The New Oxford History of England: A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 366. Marcet’s *Conversations on Political Economy* appeared in 1824 and Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy* in 1832.

¹⁸ *Letters*, 3, 69.

money”¹⁹; while the break from her family following the admission of her attachment to Lewes provokes a determined statement of her financial independence:

I am not dependent on anyone, the larger part of my income for several years having been derived from my own constant labour as a writer. You will perceive, therefore, that in my conduct towards my own family I have not been guided by any motives of self-interest, since I have been neither in the reception nor the expectation of the slightest favour from them.²⁰

The loss of financial independence – to be dependent on anybody, including in Eliot’s mind, one’s own family – constitutes a form of beggary and thereby dishonour. This equation is central to political economic theory and, for example, supports the enforcement of less eligibility in Poor Law administration and minimal state interference in the economy. It was also, of course, at the heart of the self-help doctrine of more popular interpreters of morals and economics, most notably Smiles. For Smiles, the accumulation of wealth, beyond the attainment of physical comfort, was not an end in itself, but a means of securing independence, respectability and moral enlargement.

If Eliot’s deep-rooted abhorrence of financial dependency aligns her with all shades of mid-century liberal economic thought, her characterisation of debt as an almost criminal source of dishonour goes somewhat against the grain of the rapidly developing credit economy.²¹ *The Mill on the Floss*, as I will later discuss, explores financial and wider notions of risk at a temporal inflection point as a wider acceptance of debt and institutional credit was starting to gain traction. Eliot’s observation of the sympathetic limitations of the affluent Dodson sisters is checked by the probity of their “old fashioned” and “narrow notions about debt”. The implicit criticism turns on the casuistry of moral justifications of debt prevalent in 1860:

¹⁹ *Letters*, 2, 145.

²⁰ *Letters*, 2, 350. Redinger, 337-41, describes perceptively how, in the months after her elopement, she adopted various strategies to ensure that she was able to preserve that independence by continuing to receive the income from her inheritance while initially concealing, then obscuring from Isaac the facts of her change in situation.

²¹ See Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Eliot’s views on debt, however, are very much in line with those of Smiles, and, interestingly, contrary to those of both St Simon and Comte who, according to Patrick Brantlinger, “treated credit as a social-mystical category...Credit was the spiritual energy that fuelled materialist, industrial progress.” Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694-1994* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 138.

in these days of wide commercial views and wide philosophy, according to which everything rights itself without any trouble of ours: the fact that my tradesman is out of pocket by me, is to be looked at through the serene certainty that somebody else's tradesman is in pocket by somebody else; and since there must be bad debts in the world, why, it is mere egoism not to like that we in particular should make them instead of our fellow-citizens.²²

The passage is a reminder that, whatever the supposed sophistication of credit arrangements, debt is not an abstract concept that relates only to states, banks or the corporate world, but is a threat to the "personal integrity and honour" of every individual who takes it on. Eliot was never in debt and was careful never to assume overly-restrictive financial commitments. In 1860, even as her success as a high-selling novelist was becoming apparent, she resisted the idea of buying her first house, "dreading a step that might fetter us to town, or a more expensive mode of living than might ultimately be desirable."²³ A corresponding situation is most notably dramatised in *Middlemarch*, in the imprudence of Lydgate and Rosamond's domestic-economic choices and their destructive consequences.²⁴

Lydgate comes perilously close, but is finally saved from the terrifying extreme fate of the debtor: bankruptcy. Barbara Weiss has traced the incidence, legal history and the artistic and literary representations of a process that assumed a grimly fascinating ascendancy in the Victorian cultural imagination.²⁵ While identifying certain contradictions between the rhetoric of the public perception of bankruptcy and the pragmatic legislative response thereto, two significant points in relation to Eliot's imaginative treatment of bankruptcy and financial distress emerge from her study. Firstly,

²² George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 244.

²³ *Letters*, 3, 351.

²⁴ See Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008) for a discussion of the contrast of Rosamond's status-defining extravagance and Dorothea's thrift and an attempt to locate both behavioural patterns in relation to more traditional forms of domestic management. These themes are also explored by Miller, *Novels Behind Glass*. Dorothea's relation to 'things' is perceptively analysed by Elaine Freedgood as an illustration of Eliot's narratorial reduction of the metonymic to the metaphoric as an attempt "to reduce or anticipate the random way in which things, as they are read by readers, take on meaning" (*The Ideas in Things*, 112). For related discussion, see my ch. 5 below.

²⁵ Barbara Weiss, *The Hell of the English: Bankruptcy and the Victorian Novel* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986).

social judgement on those afflicted went beyond the financial and legal to wider issues of character and morality: as Weiss concludes, “there is no denying the sincerity of the Victorians’ moral outrage toward bankruptcy”.²⁶ Secondly, although the extent of its novelistic treatment may tend to exaggerate its actual frequency, the incidence of bankruptcy and insolvency rose significantly over the century and embraced not only those engaged in entrepreneurial commercial activities, but individuals imprudently exposed to the period’s recurrent financial speculative frenzies and the simply financially inept.²⁷ Consequently, in her personal and professional life, Eliot was not unusual in coming into direct contact with those touched by bankruptcy. She records, somewhat dispassionately, the failed china clay speculation and bankruptcy of Arthur Helps, an acquaintance and collateral victim of market excesses: “In the panic last year all turned out badly for him and he has had to part with everything – even to his library.”²⁸ Her shrewd business eye also quickly alerted her to the implications of John Chapman’s financial mismanagement and inability either to quantify or control his growing indebtedness: “The way he is behaving is, between ourselves, generally the prelude to bankruptcy.”²⁹ Her main experience, however, was rather more intimate. Her sister Chrissy married a country doctor, Edward Clarke, whose gradual descent into debt was finally accompanied by illness and early death. The revelation that his property was already mortgaged left Chrissy and her children reliant on the generosity of her family, including her still far from financially secure sister.

This incident clearly informed Eliot’s treatment of Mr Tulliver’s bankruptcy both in its effects on his dependents and the psychological impact on Tulliver himself. His perception of self, both intrinsically and socially, is rooted in his ownership of the mill and the continuity and social position it embodies. In bankruptcy, he is diminished in every sense: “I’m nought but a bankrupt – it’s no use standing up for anything now” (350). Within his family, the state of bankruptcy assumes a meaning beyond the purely legal definition. His wife, lacking both in intelligence and human understanding, is

²⁶ Weiss, 29.

²⁷ Weiss, esp. ch. 2.

²⁸ *Letters*, 4, 375 – a consequence of the banking and stockmarket crisis of 1866-7. The sometimes apparently random fall-out from such events is beautifully expressed in *The Mill on the Floss* when she describes “legal chain-shot or bomb-shells that can never hit a solitary mark but must fall with widespread shattering” (329).

²⁹ *Letters*, 2, 163.

happy to appeal to the benevolence of her sisters (and even Wakeham) to try and maintain ownership of the self-defining possessions she brought to the marriage.³⁰ Her sisters and their husbands deplore the affront to their bourgeois virtues – thrift, prudence, temperance – which mark Tulliver’s character and actions and which have threatened their all-important family honour and reputation. Tom, to a large extent shares their resentment of his father’s imprudence – “Why should people give away their money plentifully to those who had not taken care of their own money?” (308) – and emerges as a model of entrepreneurial self-help and independence. Maggie, until her need to earn an independent income late in the novel, remains largely outside the market economy and love and sympathy for her father transcend any financially-based judgement during the downfall. Her perception of her father’s bankruptcy immediately attains the wider meaning: ““Why...what...have they made me a *bankrupt*?” “O father, dear father!” Said Maggie, who thought that terrible word really represented the fact” (347).

Eliot reacted to the reality of Chrissy’s financial distress with a mixture of Maggie’s compassion and Tom’s determined practicality.³¹ Her attempt to achieve this balance indicates an understanding of the necessity of combining the moral and the economic in the application of practical ethics in real-life crises. It is a synthesis that serves to position her outside the traditional economic dualism of market and non-market (domestic) activity and its gendered assumptions.³² There is evidence that, even in her youth, she was mentally linking the two domains in what Stefanie Markovits describes, in a different context, as her “ethical cost-benefit analysis.”³³ In 1847, she writes of the exchange of letters as a system of debits and credits; and in an overly-dramatic admonition to Sara Hennell for failing to remind her of a two shilling loan outstanding again extends the image of the balance sheet to wider commitments of duty and responsibility: “save me

³⁰ Much has been written on the Victorians’ relation to things and how material culture developed. See p. 8, note 15 above and, Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), and John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

³¹ Her final act of benevolence to the family was financial and substantial, with the bequest in her will of £5,000 to Chrissy’s daughter, Emily.

³² A theme explored in Nancy Folbre, *Greed, Lust & Gender: A History of Economic Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Nunokawa for an analysis of the Victorian novel which reveals the constant breaching of the imagined saving distance between home and marketplace.

³³ Stefanie Markovits, *The Crisis of Action in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), 97, describing Eliot’s somewhat utilitarian weighing of the consequences of eloping with Lewes.

from the pain of finding that I have neglected to pay even my money debts, when there are so many others which I am unable to defray.”³⁴ Many years later she puts a similar juxtaposition into the mind of Will Ladislaw, who, thinking with annoyance of his obligations to Mr Casaubon, wished “that he could discharge them all by a cheque”, an echo of Godfrey Cass’s observation in an earlier novel that ““there’s debts we can’t pay like money debts.””³⁵ When she became financially wealthy, Eliot continued to set appraisals of her material gains alongside higher stores of familial contentment, while, as already noted, the diaries freely intersperse financial tables and schedules. In the final years of her life, she turned to John Cross not only to provide dispassionate investment advice, but to mediate on the repeated claims on her generosity. “I am in dreadful need of your counsel” she writes, before presumably taking his advice to decline requests for loans to Vivian Lewes and Mde. Beloc.³⁶

As I will describe in the next chapter, the reconciliation of high financial reward and the creation of art through literature was not always an easy or straightforward process for Eliot, but this should not imply a wholesale criticism of the commercial system within which book publishing was increasingly becoming integrated. From her youth she was exposed to her father’s business efficiency and careful financial management and, in her early adulthood, became well acquainted with the details of the Bray family manufacturing business. For them and the other prosperous Coventry Evangelicals, money-making, morality and philanthropy were different sides of the same coin.³⁷ The various, albeit partial influences of Mill, Comte and Spencer, supported a general perception that the age of industrial capitalism was an unevenly progressive historical stage, which would in turn give rise to a more elevated and enlightened social state. For Spencer, the progression was conceptualised as from the “militant” to the “industrial” state, the latter characterised by the triumph of consensually agreed contract underpinning

³⁴ *Letters*, 1, 236. See also Bodenheimer, who characterises Eliot’s letter-writing “as a system of credits and debts” (20); and describes her use of “moral mathematics” (100) in confronting ethical choices involving conflicting claims of duty.

³⁵ *Middlemarch*, 250; *Silas Marner*, 169.

³⁶ *Letters*, 7, 138.

³⁷ See Ashton, *Life*, 34-5. Christianson argues that philanthropy could be read both as a critique and a redeeming consequence of capitalism and its widening of wealth inequality (140).

legal, commercial and social systems.³⁸ Rather than attempting to undermine the status of contract, in her life and work Eliot sought to find ways of either incorporating or overlaying higher moral considerations. In Spencerian terms, she aimed to illustrate how individual action – including money choices – could lead a collective movement towards the altruistic social stage. An illustration is Tom Tulliver’s decision to destroy the loan note issued by his father to his Uncle Moss. His recognition that this is both an honourable and dutiful act (it would be, he is convinced, his father’s wish) transcends the strictly legal interpretation expressed by Mr Pullet, who is fearful that “anybody could set the constable on you for it” (301). The incident has an interesting real-life echo in the sad case of Edward Clarke. In 1842, Robert Evans rescued his son-in-law with a loan secured against a bond: “and if he does not pay it to me in my life time it must be stoped (sic) out of my Daughters fortune after my Death”.³⁹ With Chrissy’s family inheritance accordingly reduced and her husband’s estate largely worthless, she became reliant on the support of her family. Eliot offered the little help she was able to afford and, significantly, her sense of duty becomes crystallised in the desire to help financially, which in turn focuses her motivation for her own work: “the dear creatures here will be a constant motive for work and economy”, she writes the week after Clarke’s death.⁴⁰ Four months later her concern spills over into guilt that she “dare not incur the *material* responsibility” of somehow housing and supporting Chrissy and her children. Her assessment speaks more to her wider philosophical concerns around motivation than the practicality of any alternative scheme:

Yet how odious it seems that I, who preach self-devotion, should make myself comfortable here while there is a whole family to whom, by renunciation of my egotism I could give almost everything they want. And the work I can do in other directions is so trivial!⁴¹

³⁸ See J. D. Y. Peel, *Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of a Sociologist* (London: Heinemann, 1971), ch. 8, ‘Militancy and Industrialism’.

³⁹ *Letters*, 1, 141.

⁴⁰ *Letters*, 2, 74.

⁴¹ *Letters*, 2, 97.

In the difficult choices concerning how and why we earn money and how we should then allocate it, Eliot was negotiating the shifting and sometimes overlapping boundaries of egoism and altruism.

The year before writing this letter, Eliot's first reference to the work of Auguste Comte appeared in a *Westminster Review* article.⁴² Much has been written about the influence of Comte on Eliot's thought and, as T. R. Wright has observed, the extent of that influence has remained a subject of critical disagreement "from the first reviews by Christian critics" to the current day.⁴³ Comte's writing certainly helped her focus her criticism of established forms of Christian observance, although Wright is correct to point to a combination of influences in her important later *Westminster Review* essays: "Her attacks on the baptised egoism of Dr. Cumming and Edward Young owe as much to Feuerbach as Comte, but maintain a strong humanist position."⁴⁴ The main interest for my specific focus on money and ethics, is the sharpening of her humanist analysis of the motivation for choice and action. Her criticism of the controversial, yet popular minister, Dr. John Cumming highlights aspects of self-interest and consequentialism that facilitated the ideological reconciliation of Evangelicalism with an unconstrained market economy and social inequality in the second quarter of the century.⁴⁵ Her greatest fictional representation of the translation of this ethic into the actions and character of the businessman is *Middlemarch's* Bulstrode, whose hypocrisy and moral relativity are supported by a selfish ends-based interpretation of Divine Will.

Bulstrode belongs, appropriately, to the 1830s, for by the time Eliot began her career as a novelist, the ascendancy of Christian Political Economy had passed. Historians including Hilton and Searle have analysed the changing relationship between churchmen and the market apologists during the 1850s and 60s, the former tracing a shift he

⁴² 'The Progress of the Intellect', *Westminster Review*, 54 (Jan. 1851), 353-68, in *Essays*, 27.

⁴³ T. R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 173. See also Peel, op. cit, and Thomas Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (London: British Academy, 2008).

⁴⁴ Wright, 174, in reference to 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming' (Oct. 1855); and 'Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young' (Jan. 1857). For the influence of Feuerbach in relation to altruism, see, for example, Myers, 4-8.

⁴⁵ She uses a financial image to argue that Cumming reduces human motivation for justice and compassion to a fear of divine consequences: "Dr. Cumming's Christian pays his debts for the glory of God; were it not for the coercion of that supreme motive, it would be evil to pay them" (*Essays*, 187).

characterises as from Atonement to Incarnationalism.⁴⁶ While pointing to the growth of economics as a more independent and professional academic discipline, Searle too examines the opposition from both religious and secular humanist schools to what they saw as the increasing prevalence in society of an unconstrained commercial moral code.⁴⁷ This criticism went beyond the periodic excesses of the stockmarket and financial world to question the ethical core of the whole market economy. The year in which Eliot took up the editorship of the *Westminster Review*, 1852, saw the publication – incidentally, by John Chapman - of *Money and Morals: A Book for the Times*, written by the influential economic journalist and Unitarian, John Lalor. While Lalor accepts the economic and, indeed, moral advantages that arise when men “are perfectly free to exchange with each other the products of their industry”, he unequivocally rejects what he sees as the partial and misguided conclusion of theoretical political economy: “the doctrine that buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest market is to be the supreme rule of human action.” Such doctrine, he argues, elevates the market above essential human values and leads to a sanctification of the market’s single value measure, money.⁴⁸

Mill, despite being praised for his elevation of human welfare over the pursuit of wealth, was critical of the book and defended both Ricardo and political economy generally against Lalor’s criticism.⁴⁹ Many contemporary liberals would also have objected to Lalor’s specifically Christian recommendations, but his conclusions were starting to chime with a widening body of opinion, including even Spencer. Spencer’s article in the *Westminster Review* at the end of the decade, ‘The Morals of Trade’, is notable for its indictment of the motives and actions of all sectors of the commercial economy from manufacturing to retailing, wholesaling, banking and finance. Like Lalor, he characterises the age as being driven by an “intense desire for wealth”, which is a result of “the indiscriminate respect paid to wealth.”⁵⁰ By implication, the manner in which wealth is created has no qualitative scale, which explains the paradoxical social acceptance of the abuses of trade. “To a terrible extent” he concludes, “dishonesty is, not

⁴⁶ Hilton, *Atonement*, esp. part 3, ‘After the Age of Atonement’. See also David Payne, *The Reenchantment of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, and Serialization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁴⁷ Searle, 15-26.

⁴⁸ John Lalor, *Money and Morals, A Book for the Times* (London: John Chapman, 1852), 132.

⁴⁹ See Winch, *Wealth and Life*, 59-60.

⁵⁰ ‘The Morals of Trade’, *Westminster Review*, 71 (Apr. 1859), 357-90, (385).

an exceptional or temporary, but a general and permanent element of our mercantile system”: trade is essentially corrupt.⁵¹ Somewhat unconvincingly, Spencer ends the article by insisting that the age is still one of progress and development in which “undue admiration for wealth seems to be the necessary accompaniment.”⁵² Ironically, Adam Smith himself largely foresaw the attendant problems of creating an economy in which the self-interested capitalist was to play an increasingly influential role.⁵³ Jerry Evensky identifies, particularly in Smith’s later work, “a growing frustration that the incentives in commerce lead merchants to behaviour that is inconsistent with the social welfare.”⁵⁴ Hence, his famous observation that men of the same trade can rarely meet without moving the conversation to price fixing and his conclusion that the commercial sector represents “an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the publick, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the publick”.⁵⁵

It is, I think, also worth remembering that Smith recognised that the consequences of an increasing division of labour – the productivity benefits of which were, of course, central to the thesis of the early part of *The Wealth of Nations* – were not entirely favourable. George Eliot’s most overt criticism of this cornerstone of political economy comes early in the second chapter of ‘Brother Jacob’, which, as I discuss more fully in my final chapter, references Smith’s work extensively. Eliot’s observations on the changing competitive dynamics of retailing and an emergent consumerism address individual moral and wider social issues. She had first noted these changes in her 1855 essay, ‘Three Months in Weimar’, which describes a similarly undeveloped commercial society, in which retail distribution is unspecialised and competition barely existent. Abuses exist, but the “peculiar Weimarian logic” nevertheless retains a value as part of a community, shaped organically by custom and history.⁵⁶ The exposure of Edward Freely reverses Smith’s stadial progression and Grimworth returns to the traditional retailing

⁵¹ ‘The Morals of Trade’, 356.

⁵² ‘The Morals of Trade’, 389.

⁵³ See Gagnier, *Individualism*: “Essential to the story told in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) was its many ironies that yoked Hobbesian self-interested rationality and the altruism of the civic humanists into a theory of social Progress” (28).

⁵⁴ Jerry Evensky, ‘The Evolution of Adam Smith’s Views on Political Economy’, *History of Political Economy*, 21:1 (1989), 123-45, (123).

⁵⁵ Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, vol. 1, 267.

⁵⁶ *Essays*, 93.

practices Eliot also describes in *The Mill on the Floss*, written in the same year as 'Brother Jacob'. The town of St Oggs had "no plate-glass in shop windows ... The shop windows were small and unpretending; for the farmers' wives and daughters who came to do their shopping on market-days were not to be withdrawn from their regular, well-known shops".⁵⁷ It is somehow fitting that the publication of 'Brother Jacob' followed a path completely outside the market priced mechanism: George Eliot simply gave it to George Smith for publication in the *Cornhill Magazine* as amends for the shortfall Smith incurred on *Romola*.

In her attitudes to credit and the limits of the marketplace in a commercial society, Eliot's singular synthesis of intuition, humanist sympathy, scientific analysis and metaphysical questioning make her economics, or, rather her moral economics difficult to align precisely. In turning to the management of the assets on her personal balance sheet, categorization becomes no less problematic. An understanding of her motivation and action as a stockmarket investor over the bulk of the fiction-writing years gives valuable insights into her money ethics, including important considerations of risk and capital forms, and their testing in the novels. Relative to the depth of research and commentary that has attended most of Eliot's biographical history, her life as an investor has received little attention. Nancy Henry, who has done much to correct this oversight, concludes that both editorial decisions on primary documents and a lack of biographical focus on "mundane" financial information have created a perception that "Eliot appears less interested in her investments than she actually was."⁵⁸

Again, it is possible to trace this interest in the prudence and thrift of her upbringing by a financially competent father, whose legacy was to provide Eliot's first modest, yet independent income. Income-generating assets were a tangible reality for her throughout her adult life. A letter of 1854 to Charles Bray expresses her concern at the prospect of that income being reduced:

⁵⁷ *The Mill on the Floss*, 103. The passage is quoted and discussed by Miller, *Novels Behind Glass*, 5, in his introductory comments on the impact of glass-making technology, shop-window displays and consumer culture in the mid Nineteenth-Century.

⁵⁸ Henry, 91. Ch. 3, 'Investing in Empire' is the most detailed investigation of Eliot as an investor I have yet come across.

circumstances render it desirable for the trustees to call in £1,500 of my money, which must consequently be found in the funds until a new investment can be found for it...I only hope he [Isaac] will think it worthwhile to get another investment. For a considerable part of my sister's money he gets 5%.⁵⁹

She was fully aware that any returns above the benchmark 3% consuls in which her uninvested money sat carried additional risk. Risk premia and excess returns feature prominently and are crucially character-referent in the various investment schemes described in *The Mill on the Floss*, reflecting a period when small-scale share investment was not yet open to the lower middle classes. Money is 'put out' and 'called in' on the basis of local funding opportunities and is at the heart of the prudent investment portfolio of the Dodson sisters. Indeed, Uncle Glegg's exasperated response to his wife's puzzlement at the "ten or twelve per cent" offered by Tom and Bob Jankin's venture – "You can't get more than five per cent with security" (416) he tells her - points to a level of return that seems to mark the vernacular boundary between secured investment and speculation. For her own money Eliot seems to have decided that 5% represented an acceptable risk premium: her first stockmarket investment, a Guaranteed 5% stock, made with the proceeds of the advance on *The Mill on the Floss*, is recorded both by Lewes (who arranged the transaction with a stockbroker) and Eliot herself, who again juxtaposes the material and the familial in her journal entry:

my cup is full of blessings: my home is bright and warm with love and tenderness, and in more material vulgar matters we are very fortunate. I have invested £2000 in East Indies stock, and expect shortly to invest another £2000, so that with my other money, we have enough in any case to keep us from beggary.⁶⁰

Over the next twenty years, she achieved diversity in her steadily growing portfolio by adding similarly-sized investments. From the early 1870s, this process became a collaborative effort with John Cross, who came to assume progressively greater control of Eliot's financial affairs. In relation to how Cross might have influenced Eliot's perception

⁵⁹ *Letters*, 2, 184.

⁶⁰ *Letters*, 3, 360.

of financial capital risk (which, I will later argue, in turn related to how she viewed other forms of capital), I find it interesting that his major career move represented a shift from the principal, proprietary risk-taking that his work for the family firm of Dennistoun Cross involved, to the advisory, fee-generating nature of the firm he set up with Robert Benson in 1875. In his early career with the family business, Cross lived through what were likely to have been a traumatic series of financial events, including the transatlantic banking crisis of 1857 (his first year at work in New York), which temporarily brought Dennistoun Cross down.⁶¹ By the time he came to advise Lewes and Eliot, Cross had developed into a cautious and diligent investor, as his own financial writings demonstrate.⁶² Moreover, he was an unusually well-informed proponent of investment opportunities in the post-civil war United States, where he had lived and worked for 15 years.

As a result, the Eliot-Lewes portfolio evolved to display great geographical and industry-sector diversification.⁶³ The highly speculative Railway investments of the 40s and 50s had settled into a more mature, consolidated sector, which was easily the biggest group by value on the London market and was correspondingly well represented in Eliot's portfolio. Notably absent are the speculative mining ventures that are fictionalised in her only two contemporaneously-set works: *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, in which the rapacious Sir Gavial Mantrap devises ingenious mining speculations "for the punishment of ignorance in people of small means" (129); and *Daniel Deronda*, where the demise of Grapnell & Co is attributed by Mrs Davilow to "great speculations...about mines and that sort of thing." (199) These, Eliot's final fictional works, include her only treatments of specifically stock-market financial speculation. In *Daniel Deronda*, it is incorporated into a pervasive gambling trope that extends questions of chance and probability from the roulette table to both the stock and marriage markets. The triangulation of gambling, speculation and investment, the specific points of which were rarely securely-fixed during the period, is here further complicated by the fact that the academic mathematical work which had long theorised odds in games of pure chance was starting to be adapted to the

⁶¹ See Chapman, ch. 5.

⁶² Henry, 141-9.

⁶³ My own analysis shows the following geographical exposure of her final portfolio: UK 48%, Empire 32%, USA 17%, Europe 3%, although all the securities were denominated in sterling. Railways were easily the largest weighting by industry group at 64%, followed by smaller exposures to Banks, Canals, Gas and Miscellaneous. Mining represented just 2%. See Appendix, 199.

statistical modelling of stock portfolios. Eliot read up on probability theory in preparation for *Daniel Deronda* and Lewes was well acquainted both personally and with the work of many influential mathematicians, including John Venn, Jevons and Augustus de Morgan, some of whom were pioneering new work in the field.⁶⁴ It was not until some 80-years after her death that mathematical modeling enabled the formalization of efficient portfolio theory, but it is evident that Eliot and Cross managed an increasingly well-balanced and relatively low-risk portfolio, which, in its stock and industry weightings, shows signs of sophisticated qualitative and quantitative construction. What she certainly seems to have grasped is that this was a strategy that was less risky than simply leaving money in the bank at a time when no single institution, whether Grapnell & Co or its real-life model Overund & Gurney was “too big to fail”. In the last year of her life, when her portfolio was valued at over £30,000, fully three-quarters of her total estate value at death, Eliot never had more than about £1,000 in the Union Bank of London (ironically now part of the “too big to fail” Royal Bank of Scotland).

However, while she remained fully invested throughout the decade, the 1870s did see some reduction in Eliot’s investment risk appetite, partly facilitated by the growth in issuance of lower-risk debenture securities. Eliot was clearly instrumental in the decision to reduce the equity component of her portfolio, at a time when Lewes’s deteriorating health was prompting an increased desire for capital preservation. When Lewes writes to Cross in February 1877, instructing him to invest the second half of the payment for *Daniel Deronda*, he is explicit that Eliot wishes the £2,000 to be invested “without any risk” in domestic debentures of Cross’s choice.⁶⁵ By the time of her death, the yield on her portfolio had fallen close to 4%, with US Government bonds representing her largest single investment, at around 13% of the portfolio.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ In preparation for writing *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot took notes on R. A. Procter’s article ‘Gambling Superstitions’, *Cornhill Magazine*, 25 (June 1872), 704-17. Procter refers to the probability calculations and elaboration of the law of large numbers described in Steinmetz’s *The Gaming Table* and cites de Morgan on probability. For Venn’s work on probability, including his rebuttal of Henry Buckle’s influential theories of determinism, see Helen Small, ‘Chances Are: Henry Buckle, Thomas Hardy, and the Individual at Risk’, in Helen Small and Trudi Tate (eds.), *Literature, Science, Psychoanalysis, 1830-1970: Essays in Honour of Gillian Beer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 64-85.

⁶⁵ *Letters*, 6, 344.

⁶⁶ See Appendix, 199.

Less than three months before making her first investment in the Great Indian Peninsular Railway, Eliot replied to Charles Bray's letter seeking investment in his increasingly stretched business ventures:

I know no capitalist to whom I could mention it...At present I have no money that I could invest...But I have a small sum in the Bank of Deposit, which we keep there to supply extra calls, and from this I could manage, on due notice, to lend you £100.⁶⁷

Blackwood's substantial advance on *The Mill on the Floss* was promised, but not yet in the bank and the prudent Eliot was not going to count on any unhatched chickens even for such an old friend. Reckless lending, of the type that undid the generous and otherwise estimable Caleb Garth in trusting the creditworthiness of Fred Vincy, was not in her nature. What I think is more interesting about this passage, however, is the distinguishing of herself (about to become a woman of significant capital) from the "capitalist" Bray is seeking. By implication, she would not regard a passive investor in the shares of stockmarket-listed shares – what she was about to become and would remain for the rest of her life – as a capitalist either.

Mary Poovey has written of the abstracting of the economic in the middle of the nineteenth-century as the growth of share issuance and widened ownership helped to sever the links between corporate ownership (diverse shareholders) and management responsibility.⁶⁸ Pivotal to this transformation was the passage, in the 1850's and 60's of a series of legislative initiatives, including the Partnership and Liability Acts (1855), the Joint Stock Companies Act (1856) and the Companies Act (1862). In the debates surrounding the build-up to the passages of these Acts – which, Donna Lofthouse concludes, "gave England one of the most permissive frameworks for business in Europe" – the *Westminster Review* was an active participant, running several related articles, some included under Eliot's editorship.⁶⁹ The debate actually split opinion even

⁶⁷ *Letters*, 3, 323.

⁶⁸ Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 23. In *Genres of the Credit Economy*, Poovey explores the social processes that served to "naturalise" money and money derivatives in their evolution from precious metals to complex and abstract credit and equity instruments. (16)

⁶⁹ Donna Lofthouse, 'Capital and Community: Limited Liability and Attempts to Democratize the Market in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England', *Victorian Studies* 45.1 (2002), Special Issue, 'Victorian

between committed laissez-faire political economists. The opponents of limited liability, including such prominent names as J. R. McCulloch argued that the removal of individual liability for the debts incurred by an investee company beyond the value of the shares owned would substantially reduce individual responsibility and thereby increase fraud.⁷⁰ The *Westminster Review*, however, was in the vanguard of those leading calls for the new legislation on both economic and social grounds. The October 1853 article, 'Partnership with Limited Liability' argues the prospective benefits to all classes of society: capitalists, who, free from the restriction imposed by unquantifiable liability, "would embark their money, whether for the hope of profit or in the desire to do good"; the middle-classes, previously unable to invest either in land (because of the prohibitive cost) or what they knew best, commerce (because of excessive risk); and the working classes, who would be able to participate in associations, in accordance with Mill's vision of worker participation.⁷¹ Beyond this cross-class argument, the wider benefits both to society and the elevation of individual character strike a chord with Eliot's ethics of community, in which she saw art adopting a central role. For her reviewer, however, it is a freeing of the laws of *business* which would have a transforming effect: "feelings of good will, sympathy, and friendship would inevitable spring from laws which placed men in relations to mutual dependence and reciprocal benefit."⁷²

In one argument offered against the new legislation, at least, its opponents could claim some justification. The enlargement of the investing public and an explosion in the issuance of listed shares in which to invest would combine, it was feared, greatly to increase stockmarket speculation, bubbles and the inevitable and ruinous subsequent busts and financial crises. The regional banking crisis of 1825 and the 'railway-mania' of the mid-1840s had shown that more permissive legislation was not a prerequisite for such occurrences but the fear and censure of market speculation came to occupy a much more

Investments', 93-120. See also Timothy L. Alborn, *Conceiving Companies: Joint-Stock Politics in Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 1998), and James Taylor, *Creating Capitalism: Joint-Stock Enterprise in British Politics and Culture, 1800-1870* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006).

⁷⁰ J. R. McCulloch, *Considerations on Partnerships with Limited Liability* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1856).

⁷¹ 'Partnership With Limited Liability', *Westminster Review* 60 (Oct. 1853), 382-5.

⁷² 'Partnership With Limited Liability', 414.

dominant position in the cultural imagination in the 1860s and 70s.⁷³ The list of novels of this period in which financial fraud and speculation is central to both plot and moral is well documented, with Eliot herself incorporating the “wicked recklessness” of a speculating banker and the demise of the bank as an essential plotting device in her one contemporaneously set novel.⁷⁴ Newspaper coverage of finance and markets expanded in proportion to the growth of the investing public and was also on hand to expose and forensically investigate the frequent frauds and abuses enacted. It seems clear that Eliot was never tempted into speculative trading and certainly never employed the increasingly prevalent means of making leveraged, margined bets on short-term price movements that were often the undoing of Victorian speculators, both actual and fictional.⁷⁵ She may have belonged to the growing ranks of ‘invisible’ capitalists but, in her own mind, she stayed firmly behind the line which separates long-term investing from the less easily differentiated activities of speculating and gambling.⁷⁶ Not all, however would agree. Barbara Hardy believes the financial ethics of the novels are, compared with the author’s own life, idealised:

⁷³ See e.g. Weiss, Searle.

⁷⁴ John R. Reed, ‘A Friend to Mammon: Speculation in Victorian Literature’, *Victorian Studies* 27 (1983-4), 179-202, still provides a useful summary. More recently, Mary Poovey has wryly observed: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that mid-nineteenth-century novelists represented financial matters in ethical and moral terms” (*Genres*, 373).

See also Tamara S. Wagner, *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel Genre, 1815-1901* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), for an analysis of the complex interconnections between fiction, the economy and finance in the cultural imagination. As she nicely summarises: “There is much more to literature’s use of the stock market than a mere reflection of contemporary financial crises alone. It formed a new cultural imaginary that expressed changing ideas of moral probity and indeterminate identity, creditworthiness and the management of financial risks, the experience of instability and the contesting strategies to consider its repercussions at home and abroad” (3).

⁷⁵ See David C. Itzkowitz, ‘Fair Enterprise or Extravagant Speculation: Investment, Speculation, and Gambling in Victorian England’, *Victorian Studies* 45.1 (2002), Special Issue, ‘Victorian Investments’, 121-47.

⁷⁶ It is interesting, however, that in a memorable passage in ‘The Lifted Veil’ she seems to recognise the urge to speculate as an instinctive characteristic of the unfettered individual: “if the whole future were laid bare to us beyond to-day, the interest of all mankind would be bent on the hours that lie between; we should pant after the uncertainties of our one morning and our one afternoon; we should rush fiercely to the Exchange for our last possibility of speculation, of success, of disappointment”. George Eliot, ‘The Lifted Veil’, in *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. Helen Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29. Nonetheless, Claire Pettitt’s observation that “Capitalist activity is figured by Latimer throughout the story as violent and repugnant, unreflective and grossly material” (242) is surely correct.

Life and art are intertwined, but are not the same. Ideals are easier to promote in art than life. George Eliot's investments made her complicit with Grapnell & Co, her gambling capitalists. Her shares were not ethical, she invested in Empire.⁷⁷

The distance she presents between art and life is, I believe, overstated. I have argued in this and the preceding chapter that Eliot, while not uncritical and suspicious of the market economy and its limitations, recognised its development as both consistent with and representative of progressive, scientific society. Investing, like other commercial practices compatible with liberal rights and the broad precepts of capitalism, could be accommodated in Eliot's ethical framework.

The introduction of a disastrous financial speculation in her final, and only contemporaneously set major novel, brings into focus what I believe is a more interesting observation on investing in Eliot's life and art. By setting most of her novels in the generation of her youth, or earlier, Nancy Henry argues that "she evaded the moral issues attending her own reliance on a system by which money generated money ('getting rich without work') and in which the value of stocks and shares differed from the 'genuine value' of her own labour."⁷⁸ This seems right to me and it certainly allows Eliot to consider individual and social notions of value at transitional points in the development of a commercial 'money economy.' It also excludes her great working-men heroes, Adam Bede and Felix Holt, from any uncertain debate about the benefits to their class of the democratisation of share ownership and market participation.⁷⁹ However, such omissions and limitations should not make one lose sight of the fact that, in her life and art, Eliot continually reflected on and, to some extent, constantly struggled with the question of how she should deal with the fact of her ever-growing financial wealth. Like Gwendolen Harleth, Daniel Deronda is unusual among her characters in explicitly owning an investment portfolio. His questioning of that ownership and its employment forms a crucial episode in his full moral awakening. Until he discovers his wider inheritance, he is content neither with the "three or five per cent" returns on his unearned financial

⁷⁷ Hardy, 65.

⁷⁸ Henry, 89.

⁷⁹ The argument Felix uses against the immediate widening of the franchise – that the working classes must first be educated in order properly to understand and employ their increased rights – was one used in the context of democratising the capital markets by opponents of limited liability.

capital, nor with the prospect of one of the few professions ostensibly open to him: authorship, “a vocation which is thought to turn foolish thinking into funds”.⁸⁰

At the end of the novel, it is unknown whether Daniel has sold his stocks to fund his new life in the East or whether the “three or five percent” continues to accrue in the Zionist cause, in much the same way as Eliot’s own dividend income funded her extensive family commitments both before and after her death. The dissatisfaction that this, in many ways the most wholly virtuous of her characters, expresses echoes the author’s own periodic concerns that she is not sufficiently active: “In my private lot I am unspeakably happy, loving and beloved. But am I doing little for others?” and later: “You see my only social work is to rejoice in the labours of others, while I live in luxurious remoteness from all turmoil.”⁸¹ Eliot shied away from what she called “public action” in her pursuit of the good. The action in which she largely confined herself “to help in some small nibbling way to reduce the sum of ignorance, degradation, and misery on the face of this beautiful earth” was the same vocation that she has Deronda reject as one “which is understood to turn foolish thinking into funds.”⁸² It is to authorship and its sometimes conflicting claims as art and exchangeable commodity that I will now turn.

⁸⁰ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1984), 157.

⁸¹ *Letters*, 5, 127, and 6, 65.

⁸² *Letters*, 3, 293. See Gallagher, *Body Economic*, ch. 5, ‘*Daniel Deronda* and the Too Much of Literature’.

‘A money-getting profession’: Negotiating the Commerce of Literature

[The author] is laugh'd at if poor; if, to avoid that curse, he endeavours to turn his Wit to Profit, he is branded a Mercenary.¹

- James Ralph, 1758

Mr. Smith the publisher called and had an interview with G. He asked if I were open to a ‘magnificent offer.’ This made me think about money – but it is better for me not to be rich.²

- George Eliot, 1862

The literary or artistic field is at all times the site of a struggle between the heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g. "bourgeois art") and the autonomous principle (e.g. "art for art's sake"), with those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tending to identify with a degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise.³

- Pierre Bourdieu, 1993

As Bourdieu suggests – and Ralph’s words from a distance of over two hundred years would seem to confirm – the struggle to reconcile material gain and power with an independent creative process that sits outside, indeed transcends, the market and other hierarchical constructs, has occupied the novelist since the genre’s inception. Bourdieu’s insightful analysis has helped to identify shifting allegiances and balances of power within his wider, cultural “site of struggle” and, most relevant to this study, illuminate how “the established definition of the writer” can be transformed during periods in which

¹ Quoted in John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 149.

² *Journals*, 108.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. and introd. by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 40.

long-standing relationships and power balances between groups involved in the chain of literature – from creator, via producer and distributor, to reader – are significantly altered.⁴ In this way, “...the second half of the nineteenth century [was] the period in which the literary field attained its maximum autonomy.”⁵ Bourdieu’s assertion is supported by the wide body of work examining developments in the structure of the publishing industry during this period, including the changing economic position of the novelist. In this context, some illuminating work has focused on Eliot, relating her personal dealings with the House of Blackwood and the production of her novels to her life, thought and art.⁶

While I am greatly indebted to some insightful analyses of certain specific periods of Eliot’s creative life, in this chapter I hope to extend the narrative range and widen the focus on her professional career, considering the tensions and resolutions at various stages of what Robert Darnton has called the “communications circuit” of literary output.⁷ Eliot was not unique in her progression around this circuit, but the variety of her sources of income from translator to periodical journalist; from editor and publishing business advisor to best-selling novelist gave her an unusually broad perspective on the economic and artistic aspects of literature in the pivotal third quarter of the century. Looping off this main “circuit”, at each stage of her career, are (continuing in Bourdieuean terms) Eliot’s own attempts to mediate heteronomy and autonomy and thereby evaluate her “specific capital” as a novelist. These loops widened as the success of her work increased her material wealth, extended her readership and elevated her position in the hierarchy of the literary establishment. As well as building on my earlier chapters better to understand Eliot’s concepts and limitations of money value, I also here conclude that her inability fully to reconcile these sometimes conflicting claims in her own life led her to consider in ever-richer and more complex ways the ethical implications of financial motivation and action within the novels.

⁴ Bourdieu, 42.

⁵ Bourdieu, 46.

⁶ For example, Pettitt; Boddinheimer; Saint-Amour; Poovey, *Genres*; and N. N. Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁷ Robert Darnton, ‘What is the History of Books?’ *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 107.

In April 1854, Eliot wrote to Sara Hennell expressing her low expectations for the reception of her forthcoming translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*:

The press will do nothing but abuse or ridicule it -- which for those who know what "the press" means, as I do, is not of the slightest consequence to one's own view, but must always affect a publisher's. I daresay Mr. Chapman will think his case pitiable, but if he knew the amount of phosphorus it requires to translate such a book (which he does not) he would think it is still more pitiable to have only two shillings a page for it.⁸

The letter was written four years before the publication of her first novel, but her professional experience already enables her to assess a literary project from the points of view of the publisher, the reviewing press and the writer-translator. It is a multiple perspective that gives authority to her critique of a press deficient in artistic judgement and a publishing establishment indifferent to the labour expended by the poorly-paid translator.⁹ The following year she was to write a short article for the *Leader*, 'Translations and Translators', in which she attempts to place her subject within a hierarchy of writing: "Though a good translator is infinitely below the man who produces *good* original works, he is infinitely above the man who produces *feeble* original works." Particular praise is given to those whose "exceptional faculty and exceptional knowledge" can translate complex works of thought or science "so as to lay open the entire uninjured kernel of meaning" - an accurate description of her own achievement with the work of Strauss and Feurbach.¹⁰ Implicit in both the letter and the *Leader* article is the disconnection between her perception of the literary value intrinsic to a particular

⁸ *Letters*, 2, 152.

⁹ Poovey traces the development of the pre-modern literary critic around this time: "even though reviewers were trying to acquire the social authority to make their judgements more decisive than the crude measure of popularity or sales, they had yet to cultivate a *technical* vocabulary that would immediately distinguish between the way they evaluated novels and the way less expert readers did" (*Genres*, 378).

Cottom, however, highlights the developing hierarchy of the reviewing industry itself, an institutional delineation associated with the formation of the "middle-class intellectual", a process in which Eliot directly participated: "As Blackwood's and the *Edinburgh, Quarterly* and *Westminster* reviews especially assumed a position as cultural arbiters, they catered to ... the growing assumption among the middle and upper classes that matters of public interest were matters of intellectual argument before all else" (5).

¹⁰ 'Translations and Translators', *Leader*, VI (20 October 1855), in *Essays*, 207-211.

work or genre and the monetary value given by the book trade. Her calculation of the price per page she earns from her Feuerbach translation is an ironic foreshadowing of Trollope's dryly quantitative enumeration and analysis of his literary output and earnings.¹¹

The precarious condition of Chapman's business in the early 1850's gave a particular edge to Eliot's formative views on the relation between literary output and financial reward. When, in 1853, he apparently backs away from an agreement to publish an original work by Eliot titled 'The Idea of a Future Life', she writes angrily "I would much rather that you should publish the work and *not* pay me than pay me and not publish it."¹² By then, Eliot's motion around the "communications circuit" was already under way and was about to rapidly accelerate, at a time when established commercial practices and relationships were being reshaped. While the "pitiable" translation earnings of which she complains relate specifically to an allocation of value between writer and publisher, Eliot was closely allied with that publisher, John Chapman, in an important mid-century site of struggle in the economics of publishing. At stake was not only how the surplus profits from the sale of books should be allocated, but who should be able to control the level and variance of that surplus.

The Bookselling Question of 1852 arose as a result of attempts by the powerfully self-interested London Booksellers' Committee to impose their Regulations, which scaled and limited the discounts at which books could be retailed.¹³ Writing in his *Westminster Review* article, 'The Commerce of Literature' (1852), which chronicled the progress of the debate, Chapman frames the argument against restrictive pricing in a wide and elevated setting: "The facts connected with the production and distribution of books, though little heeded by the public are, nevertheless, of great social and political, as well as literary, importance".¹⁴ Chapman, as one of a small group of publisher-booksellers defying the Committee by underselling books, was probably as much motivated by economic self-interest, if not necessity, given the recurrently precarious position of his

¹¹ Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, ed. Michael Sadler and Frederick Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 363.

¹² *Letters*, 2, 130-1. For background to this incident, see Rosemary Ashton, *142 Strand: A Radical Address in Victorian London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), 196.

¹³ See James J. Barnes, *Free Trade in Books: A Study of the London Book Trade Since 1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) for a detailed discussion of the debate.

¹⁴ [John Chapman], 'The Commerce of Literature', *Westminster Review* 57 (Apr. 1852), 511-54, (511).

business ventures.¹⁵ Nevertheless, his defence of “enterprising booksellers” against the collusive and monopolistic forces of the large, established publishing houses, wholesalers and booksellers struck a chord very much in tune with the newly-relaunched *Westminster Review*, under the effective editorship of Eliot. Her own letters provide further insight into Chapman’s orchestration of the campaign which, in a matter of months, succeeded in effectively overturning all the Committee’s restrictions and establishing a free trade in books.¹⁶ While the economic outcome placed the industry firmly in the prevailing and fast-flowing tide of liberal, free-trade ideology, the social benefit its supporters propounded – cheap literature available to a wider readership – was, in a sense, a victory for Utilitarianism against the Romantically-informed conservatism of those who argued that price maintenance served to protect ‘high’ literature.

This last point is, I think, interesting because of the crucial support given to the undersellers’ campaign by a number of very prominent authors, including not only economic liberals such as Mill, Gladstone and Spencer, but Dickens and Carlyle as well. James J. Barnes summarises how this rare instance of unanimity came about: “They held that the issues were clearly drawn, the interests of authors were obviously affected by the regulations, and the spirit of the age favoured liberty in all branches of commerce.”¹⁷ That the authors’ battle at this stage was with the booksellers rather than directly with the publisher (as we will see, George Eliot was at the forefront of innovative deals which were to supplant entire copyright advance purchase) should not cloud the significance of 1852. Some thirty-years ahead of the formation of their own professional organisation, the Society of Authors, their support for the removal of price restrictions marked a significant claim of influence over and greater ownership of the product of their own intellectual capital. The ownership debate was to intensify as the market, sales and profits from books all grew in the second half of the century and ultimately focused on the question of what constituted the public sphere in literature.¹⁸ It was a question that was to greatly exercise George Eliot throughout her career and, in her final published work, she

¹⁵ Ashton, 142 *The Strand*, 146-51.

¹⁶ *Letters*, 2, 23, records her first sighting of Dickens, who chaired the meeting of the Association’s opponents at Chapman’s house on May 4th, 1852.

¹⁷ Barnes, 90.

¹⁸ See Saint-Amour for a description of attempts by freetrade liberals to abolish copyright in the late 1870s, a position opposed by Herbert Spencer.

undermines the argument of “Universal Utilitarianism” that original authorship should be as “free and all-embracing as the liberal air” and that the individual ownership rights of “property in ideas” are invalid.¹⁹

Eliot’s late writings are increasingly pre-occupied with meditations on the constitution of the author’s particular form of ‘capital.’ In ‘Leaves From A Note-Book,’ her contention that “[t]he author’s capital is his brain-power – power of invention, power of writing”, hints at an analogy between the writer and the physical inventor that Clare Pettitt has identified as a central field of nineteenth-century discourse.²⁰ Eliot actually makes the analogy explicit by examining the intellectual capital of authorship in terms related to, but ultimately incompatible with marginal utility theory as applied to two manufacturing businesses.²¹ The first is a producer of basic, commodity calico whose profit is reinvested to create more calico, thus “reproducing and increasing” his capital: “The wise manufacturer gets richer and richer, and the consumers he supplies have their real wants satisfied and no more.” The second manufacturer, however, has developed a new, fashionable material which sells well as a “transiently desirable commodity” that goes beyond the consumer’s “real wants” but, containing arsenic in its colouring, has a harmful effect on both workers and purchasers. Neither demand-led model is applicable to what Eliot conceives as the proper function of authorship, which precludes both formulaic repetition and any market-driven innovation that compromises “the office of teacher or influencer of the public mind” which the published writer necessarily assumes.²² The standardised, mass-produced item calls to mind the formulaic fiction she had so scathingly criticised twenty years earlier in her *Westminster Review* article, ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’ (1856). Her critique of the sub-genre actually proceeds by reference to a hierarchy of capital forms: the excess financial returns these writers achieve (“they think five hundred a-year a miserable pittance”) enables them to produce

¹⁹ *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 91, 88.

²⁰ ‘Leaves From A Note-Book’, in *Essays*, 439. First published four years after her death by Charles Lewes, who loosely dates their composition “some time between the appearance of ‘Middlemarch’ and ‘Theophrastus Such’”.

Pettitt argues that the formation of ideas of literary ownership and value, including debates on copyright, did not occur in academic isolation “but, in fact, took place as part of a much wider reconceptualization of labour, and particularly of mental labour” (2).

²¹ The passage is discussed in some detail and with largely similar conclusions by Gallagher, *Body Economic*, 118-20.

²² *Essays*, 438-440.

what Eliot describes as a “commodity” item; but in their “poverty of brains” they lack any corresponding intellectual capital capable of generating literary value. The article concludes with an economic explanation for why the phenomenon she describes will self-perpetuate: “No educational restrictions can shut women out from the materials of fiction, and there is no species of art which is so free from rigid requirements.”²³ In other words, there are no barriers to entry.

By the time she came to write *Daniel Deronda* in 1875, Eliot was concerned that she too was becoming implicated in the depreciation of literature by the rapid growth in production of cheap books for a widening, but increasingly indiscriminating readership. Gallagher and Bodenheimer have both written perceptively of the doubts Eliot expressed in her Journal entry of January 13th, 1875 “as to the worth of what I am doing”. Her fear for her new novel is that she “may not be able to complete it so as to make a contribution to literature and not a mere addition to the heap of books.”²⁴ Her fears, as an ageing and famous author, enriched by the sales of her books, are restatements of concerns she articulated throughout her writing life. She recognised the fragility and transience of authorial capital well before the formal advent of marginal economics and struggled to contain her higher artistic purpose within a requirement to maximise the material return on that capital. While awaiting publication of her first work of fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, she wrote: “Writing is part of my religion...At the same time I believe that almost all the best books have been written with the hope of getting money for them.”²⁵ Lewes is less ambivalent on the question of literature in the market-place, writing to Blackwood:

To push a book and sell it as fast as possible is the very purport of publishing. If the public won't buy they won't – and one must content oneself with reflections on their taste. If they will, they should have every chance.²⁶

²³ *Essays*, 303-4, 324. For an informative discussion of this article alongside the earlier ‘Woman in France: Madam de Sable’ (1854), see Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 181-7.

²⁴ *Journals*, 145. See Gallagher, *Body Economic*, 118.

²⁵ *Letters*, 2, 377. See also, Trollope, *Autobiography*, on the great historical and contemporary writers: “I may say that none of those neglected the pecuniary results of their labour” (106).

²⁶ *Letters*, 3, 212.

This conviction was to influence substantially the form in which *Middlemarch* was published some years later.²⁷ Earlier in her career, when the balance of power lay less certainly with the author, Eliot and Lewes sought to negotiate deals that not only secured high financial rewards, but also promoted what was to become the ‘George Eliot’ brand both domestically and internationally. N. N. Feltes has been critical of such interpretations of Eliot’s commercial negotiations, which, he argues, serve “to dehistoricize the relations of production of her novels and to entertain Blackwood’s private speculations about her ‘mercenary trait.’”²⁸ I believe his overtly Marxist and feminised reading of this aspect of Eliot’s life and business dealings misrepresents her position (both individually and in tandem with Lewes) within the undoubtedly male, capitalist hegemony of nineteenth-century publishing that Feltes seeks to expose in opposition. Margaret Oliphant, in her history of Blackwood & Co is clear in her assessment of Eliot’s commercial understanding and involvement: “we find that she was an admirable woman of business, alert and observant of every fluctuation of the book-market, and determined that in every way her works should have the fullest justice done them.”²⁹ Eliot’s close association with Chapman and his precarious finances in the early 1850’s gave her both an important inside knowledge of the economics of publishing and a vivid illustration of the effects of an imbalance between literary idealism and commercial reality. Chapman came increasingly to rely on Eliot’s pragmatic business sense in the re-launch of the *Westminster Review* and she became impatient of his disorganised and ill-prepared advances to potential financial supporters.³⁰ Her understanding of wealthy businessmen, probably sharpened by her exposure to Bray’s business circles, is evident – “I think Mr. Lombe is a capital man, who knows what he means and will not pay for what he does not mean” - and was later to inform the novels.³¹

Over the course of Eliot’s career the “commerce of literature” changed significantly. Disappointing sales of *Felix Holt* in 1866 prompted Blackwood’s partner, Joseph

²⁷ See p. 78 below.

²⁸ Feltes, 46.

²⁹ Quoted in Redinger, 384.

³⁰ *Letters*, 2, 247.

³¹ *Letters*, 2, 47. A good example is her portrayal of Mr Deane in *The Mill on the Floss*; see p. 136-7, below.

Langford, to observe that the new market dynamic “places everyone in a state of uncertainty and renders it impossible to know through what channels a successful book reaches the public...Looking back at the subscription paper of *The Mill on the Floss* there is evidently a great change in the book trade since 1860.”³² Eliot and Lewes were well attuned to the new challenges and opportunities that a wider, increasingly consumerist readership presented. Lewes’s proposal for the innovative publication form of *Middlemarch* recognised this trend, as did his suggestion that (following the precedence of Dickens and Thackeray, alongside whom he now confidently places his wife) advertisements for forthcoming parts of the novel be included in each current part-volume. The focus on the wants of the consumer provides a further justification, for “this would not only bring in some hard cash, it would help to make the volume a lot bigger for the five shillings which in British eyes is a consideration not to be neglected.”³³ Langford, perhaps revealing something of the conservatism of the established publishing trade, is sceptical, but the progressive Lewes prevails. In fact, a preoccupation with advertising, marketing and presentation is a feature of the Eliot-Lewes correspondence with Blackwood from the outset. Writing from Munich in 1858, Lewes links a complaint over a lack of advertising with another subject of occasional annoyance, Charles Mudie, who “has never advertized ‘The Scenes’ among his works, although many works far less significant...are named in every list.”³⁴ Eliot herself bemoans the inadequate impact of *The Mill on the Floss* marketing campaign: “I wish the lettering of the advertisement could be managed so as to prevent this sort of ignorance, or rather of ignoring.”³⁵ However, the product design of the six-shilling edition of *Adam Bede* elicits praise: “I think the advertisement and specimen pages are perfect. The utmost simplicity is the only thing that is distingue in these days.”³⁶ Much later in her career, her pragmatism in the face of changing consumer tastes is even more direct, when she explains her approval of a new illustrated edition of the works in 1866:

³² *Letters*, 4, 274.

³³ *Letters*, 5, 184.

³⁴ *Letters*, 2, 467.

³⁵ *Letters*, 3, 334.

³⁶ *Letters*, 3, 465.

In the abstract I object to illustrated literature, but abstract theories of publishing can no more be carried out than abstract theories of politics. The form in which books shall appear is a question of expediency to be determined chiefly by public taste and convenience.³⁷

I will later argue that Eliot's growing concern with how her books were presented and sold was linked to an increased equity ownership of her production, which involved the assumption of more risk both in their formal and thematic elements and in the economic terms under which they were published. Her fears surrounding the commoditising of literature persuaded her that, in order to maintain the value of her intellectual capital, or brand, she would require a greater return on that capital. Moreover, and mirroring wider trends in British commerce and investment flows (including Eliot's personal stock investments), that brand had become increasingly international. The basis of her financial deals with Blackwood was largely established as early as *The Mill on the Floss*, and while *Romola* (1862) marked the peak of her British book advances, her overseas rights continued to rise with each new book. In 1858, with only *Scenes of Clerical Life* in publication, she asks Blackwood "Can anything be done in America for *Adam Bede*? I suppose not – as my name is not known there".³⁸ Once her name was known, however, Lewes was instrumental in securing exponential increases in the size of her US advances from Harper.³⁹

To illustrate a number of the points I have raised and also to construct a bridge to a consideration of the non-commercial aspects of Eliot's authorship, I would like briefly to examine what was a pivotal point in her relationship with her publisher and a negotiation that transformed her financial position. Discussions surrounding the publication of *The Mill on the Floss* took place during the second half of 1859, when the full extent of the success of *Adam Bede* was becoming clear. The euphoria of both publisher and author was clouded only by the unforeseen side-effect of the latter's anonymity: a claim of

³⁷ *Letters*, 4, 313. For product advertising in the serialised editions of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, see, respectively, Gillian Beer, 'What's Not in *Middlemarch*', in Karen Chase (ed.), *Middlemarch in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 15-35, and Hack, ch. 5, 'Moses and the Advertisement Sheet: *Daniel Deronda*'s Earthly Mixtures.'

³⁸ *Letters*, 2, 508.

³⁹ The progression, quoted by Haight, was as follows: *Adam Bede* £30, *The Mill on the Floss* £300, *Middlemarch* £1,200, *Daniel Deronda* £1,700. (*Letters*, 2, 509)

authorship by Liggins. It is clear that Lewes and Eliot believed Blackwood was insufficiently rigorous and definitive in his denials of Liggins' bogus claim and the publisher was clearly alert to the commercial advantages of the identity of his new, best-selling author being shrouded in mystery and the subject of publicly-argued dispute.⁴⁰ The Liggins affair revealed a tension over the ownership, management and valuation of her intellectual property that was to intensify in the next negotiation and, to varying degrees, recur with each new work. The success of *Adam Bede* had greatly shifted the terms of the financial negotiation for *The Mill on the Floss* and Eliot was clear and open in her basic requirement. John Blackwood wrote to his brother in June 1859: "She honestly confesses to a most deep seated anxiety to get a large price for the new Tale and I think we will be well able to afford to give it. It should be a little fortune to her."⁴¹ In the event that Blackwood could not meet these expectations she would have felt confident that competing firms would so. She had already been courted to write for *Once a Week* by publishers "perfectly prepared to meet any views you might entertain as to remuneration"; while Dickens, writing in effusive praise for *Adam Bede*, invited her to join him as "a fellow labourer" promising that "no channel that even you could command, should be so profitable as to yourself."⁴² Blackwood, despite the ruthless open-market practices of the industry, from which not even the noble Scotsman was wholly immune, started the race in poll position.⁴³ His opening offer, however, made only after careful consideration of "what...is right and prudent" of £3,000 for serial publication in *Blackwood's Magazine* and the retention of copyright for four years thereafter, is met with some annoyance.⁴⁴

A week before the dispatch of the offer, Eliot had written to Blackwood from Weymouth anticipating his preferred form of publication but warning that any financial benefit accruing to the publisher from periodical serialisation should, in effect, compensate the author for what she foresaw as the inevitably negative effect on sales of

⁴⁰ *Letters*, 2, 73, 75, 78. See Boddeneimer, 121-43, 169 for the commercial aspects of the distance initially preserved between 'Marian Evans/Lewes' and 'George Eliot'.

⁴¹ *Letters*, 2, 94.

⁴² *Letters*, 2, 115.

⁴³ See David Finkelstein, *The House of Blackwood: Author-Publisher Relations in the Victorian Era* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), esp. 28-34.

⁴⁴ *Letters*, 2, 160.

the complete novel.⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that the argument for outright publication is not made on artistic or aesthetic grounds, (although the implication of Lewes's later comment that it was unlikely she would publish in *Once a Week* is that the quality of periodical was important to her) but on the basis of what constitutes a fair financial split between author and publisher.⁴⁶ Moreover, Blackwood's enthusiasm for the benefits of anonymity supplied by periodical publication – "it would be great fun to watch the speculations as to the author's life" – was by no means shared by his author. More than half of Eliot's letter rejecting the offer is taken up with complaints about Liggins, his supporter Bracebridge and the latter's efforts to identify the original sources of Eliot's fictional characters. To maintain the mask of George Eliot – a relatively straightforward and manageable professional disguise – was one thing; further levels of concealment were not only unnecessary, but would serve to thicken the fog of uncertainty that she feared might obscure, and thereby tarnish and undermine her income-generating capital. During October she began to sign her letters to the Blackwoods and Langford, as "Marian Evans Lewes", a change noted ruefully by William Blackwood, no doubt wary of the commercial implications should his author decide to remove all her various masks: "I am rather sorry to see the change of signature. On the whole I think you may be as well without the new tale for Maga."⁴⁷ Shortly afterwards, a specific financial exchange triggered a new and threatening urgency to what had so far been a guarded, though still essentially friendly game of negotiation. The incident is a telling illustration of how human economics, while potentially serving to elevate and enrich the requirements of a solely commercial or contractual agreement can, because of the qualitative and subjective nature of its enactment, simultaneously engender misinterpretation and distrust.

Back in May of 1859, Blackwood, in response to the exceptional sales of the relatively cheaply-acquired *Adam Bede* and, no doubt, preparing his ground for the negotiation of the next novel, told Eliot of his intention to pay her an additional, uncontracted fee of £400. Initially the offer was graciously acknowledged but there is little objective evidence of her real opinion of the nature and extent of Blackwood's bonus in the

⁴⁵ *Letters*, 2, 151.

⁴⁶ *Letters*, 2, 204.

⁴⁷ *Letters*, 3, 118. See Boddenheimer, 129, for the evolution of Eliot's signature: "the connection between the fictional married name and the pseudonym is a tantalizing one. If she could be George Eliot, why not Marian Lewes?"

following months. Letters between the two Blackwood brothers and their London and Edinburgh partners indicate the presence of genuine motivations and principles in their action, although Feltes warns against taking the publisher's apparent generosity at face value. The distribution of a small part of the surplus profit of *Adam Bede* to the book's creator, he argues, merely epitomised the paternalist hegemony of the large publishers.⁴⁸ What does seem clear is that Blackwood had decided to increase the *ex gratia* payment to £800 in October, even when he genuinely feared he would be unable to secure terms for the new novel.⁴⁹ What he regarded as "the very dry way" in which his increased payment was acknowledged, closely followed by Lewes's somewhat crude and boastful suggestion that *The Mill on the Floss* was becoming the subject of a competitive bidding war, provoked a full and frank expression of views and grievances from both parties which, in turn, facilitated a swift agreement of terms for the new book in early December.⁵⁰ While it is impossible to assess the exact roles Eliot and Lewes played in the drawn-out negotiation, the process concludes with a small but telling incident which indicates Eliot's ultimate level of control in financial as well as artistic matters. Lewes's plan to publish a serialised one-shilling edition alongside the main publication is ostensibly left open after the agreement of the principal terms, but its implementation was, in reality, never likely to pass the final sanction: "I think we have fairly dissipated the Nightmare of the Serial by dint of much talking" she tells Blackwood.⁵¹

With friendly relations restored and a new benchmark established for the novels which was to give the author a significant scaled profit share of excess sales and greater control of cheaper editions, Eliot was able to infuse the professional, commercial relationship with her own brand of human economics. Her journal entry confirms that the offer of £4,500 from Bradbury and Evans and the expectation of a firm offer from Dickens were not exaggerated negotiating counters and that she could indeed have extracted terms for *The Mill on the Floss* beyond Blackwood's capability.⁵² However, the professed value of a long-standing relationship with her publisher implicitly differentiates the communications circuit of literature from those commercial activities whose participants

⁴⁸ Feltes, 46.

⁴⁹ *Letters*, 3, 172-3.

⁵⁰ *Letters*, 3, 216.

⁵¹ *Letters*, 3, 235.

⁵² *Journals*, 82.

are connected solely by economic or monetary forces: “I prefer in every sense, permanent relations to shifting ones, and have the strongest distaste for the odour of mere money speculation about my writing.”⁵³ I have argued earlier that Eliot was at least familiar with the principles of political economy in its mid and later-century variations. Her application of human economics in her professional life, however, serves to undermine the concept of ‘economic man’ on which much of that theory rested. In effect, she acts at odds with the over-riding principle of economic self-interest. An example already cited is her decision to give ‘Brother Jacob’ to Smith as compensation for his losses on *Romola*, removing entirely her short story from the market mechanism in favour of what she saw as a higher personal claim. This action might even be interpreted as a renunciation of the act by which she temporarily abandoned her “permanent relations” with Blackwood, by selling *Romola* to the highest bidder. Her decision to follow the market rules of supply and demand was economically rational, indeed theoretically necessary, but the emotional realities – guilt and disappointment over Smith’s losses – were more deeply felt and proved decisive in her future choice of publisher. Indeed, there are instances in her letters to Blackwood when she adopts an almost maternal concern for the financial health of her publisher. In 1867, discussing a new cheap edition of her works, she insists that “I care comparatively little about profiting further by it myself, but I am seriously anxious that the speculation should not prove ultimately an undesirable one for you.”⁵⁴ When Blackwood admits that “an oversight in our calculations” on the economics of the 12-shilling editions of *The Mill on the Floss* meant that, despite high sales, he had barely covered his costs, Eliot insists that the contract for subsequent runs should be amended to give the return envisaged in the spirit, if not the final contractual terms, of the agreement.⁵⁵

The overlay of non-monetary standards into her commercial publishing dealings both mirrored and informed her determination of value in the works themselves, particularly as the monetary value ascribed by the market escalated. The need to find a value for her work beyond the economic led her to reject financially lucrative commissions which did

⁵³ *Letters*, 3, 219.

⁵⁴ *Letters*, 4, 373.

⁵⁵ *Letters*, 3, 369.

not fulfil a literary standard or give her sufficient artistic independence.⁵⁶ At the very time that Blackwood and his partners were bemoaning their client's lack of gratitude and mercenary motivations, she was declining an offer of £1,200 for the rights to publish a story in a New York magazine, the *Century*, while, at the peak of her success as a novelist, she published *The Spanish Gypsy* for a fraction of her normal advance. In a letter to Cara Bray, she distances herself from those whose measure of literary output is financial:

Don't you imagine how the people who consider writing simply as a money-getting profession will despise me for choosing a work by which I could get hundreds where for a novel I get thousands.⁵⁷

Her distrust of, or, at least, ambivalence towards money-valuation is again evident during the negotiation for what was to be her highest book advance. Lewes writes of George Smith's initial £10,000 offer for *Romola*, "Polly, as usual was disinclined to accept it, on the ground that her work would not be worth the sum!"⁵⁸ Even when the final sum is settled at £7,000 – allowing for copyright reversion and a less daunting serialisation schedule – Eliot justifies her decision not even to enter Blackwood into a negotiation by conflating his assessment of the value of her work with her own, and concluding that Smith's terms were "hopelessly beyond your usual estimate of the value of my books to you."⁵⁹

One way of approaching Eliot's two-tier estimation of the value of her work is by reference to how she perceived, differentiated and attempted to reconcile the professional and the vocational in her writing. Susan Colón uses alternative terminology but with the same aim of probing their sometimes complex co-existence, that is to examine "the dialectic between materialist and idealist rationalities in order to prevent flattening the existential tension between them that the Victorians experienced." Through specific

⁵⁶ See 'Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young', *Westminster Review* 67 (Jan. 1857), in *Essays*, 335-385, for the potential of patronage to suppress independent artistic expression. Pinney characterises the essay as "an episode in the long history of the nineteenth century's revolt from the eighteenth" (335).

⁵⁷ *Letters*, 4, 438.

⁵⁸ *Letters*, 4, 18.

⁵⁹ *Letters*, 4, 34.

consideration of the role of mentoring and the service ethic in readings of *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*, Colón explores “the tension between self-interest and public service”; a tension embodied in Eliot’s attempts to reconcile maximum financial reward and higher moral purpose in literature.⁶⁰ After the success of her early novels, Eliot describes in a letter to her old friend François D’Albert Durade a vocational awakening that is grounded in personal fulfilment: “I have at last found my true vocation, after which my nature had always been feeling and striving uneasily”.⁶¹ At the opposite end of her career, in ‘Leaves From a Note-Book’, she uses the language and imagery of the materialist, commercial world both to root the nature of artistic capital in the physical domain of human needs and wants and, simultaneously, to distinguish and distance the “vocation” of the author whose duty is to uphold intellectual and moral standards “which would override the rule of the market.”⁶² The financial, ‘professional’ aspects of published literature may be negotiable and relative according to market demand, but its ‘vocational’ nature carries an absolute social and moral responsibility, for “man or woman who publishes writings inevitably assumes the office of teacher or influencer of the public mind.”⁶³ The wider an author’s readership becomes and the stronger that author’s ‘professional’ duty to reflect public taste and, as it were, give the consumer what she wants, the more dangerous it is that the author, in succumbing to what is transient and fashionable, neglects the ‘vocational’ role.

The moral argument for widening readership had strong liberal credentials, as illustrated in Chapman’s argument in ‘The Commerce of Literature’ and Eliot’s letters make repeated complaints against “the enforced dearness of good books” and calls for editions of her books to be “as cheap as my public requires.”⁶⁴ Clare Pettitt argues that

⁶⁰ Susan E. Colón, *The Professional Ideal in the Victorian Novel: The Works of Disraeli, Trollope, Gaskell, and Eliot* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 13. See also Barrett, for whom “vocation and desire...in their widest possible senses...form a dichotomy in all George Eliot’s work” (17), and Alan Mintz, *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard university Press, 1978), which considers, in particular, characters’ vocational striving in *Middlemarch*.

⁶¹ *Letters*, 3, 186.

⁶² *Essays*, 438.

⁶³ *Essays*, 440. William R. McKelvy, *The English Cult of Literature: Devoted Readers, 1774-1880* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), explores how the vocation of literature assumed a kind of sacred function during the period.

⁶⁴ *Letters*, 4, 316; and 5, 441.

Eliot continued to resist the potential dilution of the quality of her readership as it expanded:

Over her career, Eliot was to construct a model of morally strenuous readership that satisfied her need for a 'public' sphere not defined economically, but rather as a sphere of moral virtue and high culture. Such a model allowed her to fantasize something approaching an *exchange* between the writer and the actively responsive reader.⁶⁵

By the mid-1870s this model was becoming increasingly stressed as sales of cheap editions of *Middlemarch* exceeded the best estimates of Blackwood and even the optimistic Lewes.⁶⁶ As already noted, her journal reflections reveal an attendant concern raised by popular success: she fears for her future work "lest I may not be able to complete it so as to make it a contribution to literature and not a mere addition to the heap of books."⁶⁷ Ironically, her fears were realised only posthumously when, in the last two decades of the century, her publisher continued to flood the market with new popular editions, which

were assiduously issued at an ever-increasing rate after her death in 1880, and as a result began accounting for an ever-increasing percentage of Blackwood's income...The unfortunate result was a dangerous overdependence upon this success, and a major collapse in profits when the market for Eliot's work dried up at the end of the century...a result of overproduction of Eliot texts to the point of saturation by a firm that was increasingly at sea in a changing literary marketplace.⁶⁸

Through the production of books "as cheap as my public requires" she became, albeit temporarily, a posthumous victim of the market rule of surplus supply.

⁶⁵ Pettitt, 242.

⁶⁶ Bodenheimer pinpoints the Bracebridge-Liggins affair years earlier as a time when "[t]he gap between sympathetic individual readers who 'recognized her' in her books and an ignorant gossiping public that recognized only a lowest common denominator was being firmly established as a paradigmatic image of her audiences" (143).

⁶⁷ *Journals*, 145.

⁶⁸ Finkelstein, 34. In October 1876, with Eliot at the peak of her popularity, Blackwood wrote to his brother urging that "We must risk a good deal and go in for the whole works." *Letters*, 6, 297.

I will conclude this chapter and, indeed, this biographically-informed section by briefly considering how Eliot attempted to mediate her materialist and idealist positions by reference to her concepts of the boundaries of risk and action. Risk is often closely associated with a testing of the “rule of the market” and, in the changing risk profile of her commercial agreements I identify almost paradoxical attempts to use and better control the market as a means towards that “fixing of the author’s vocation” which seeks ultimately to override the market. She attempted a similar rationalisation during the *Felix Holt* negotiation when she told Blackwood, “I don’t want the world to give me anything for my books except money enough to save me from the temptation to write only for money.”⁶⁹ In her publishing contracts, the parallel route to financial and artistic independence is via increased principle ownership and its attendant risk. From the outset, she is clear in her determination to retain ultimate copyright ownership, but, for the first novels, rejects Blackwood’s offer of a profit-share arrangement:

I wish to retain the copyright, according to the stipulation made for me by Lewes when he sent Amos Barton and whatever you can afford to give me for the first edition, I shall prefer having as a definite payment rather than as half profits.⁷⁰

Her prudence, as a new novelist, is understandable, although the riskier option would have paid back extremely well with *Adam Bede*. As I have shown, her next negotiation hinged crucially on her desire to maximise book sales and to have direct financial participation in the event of its popular success. Blackwood justifies his initial, disappointing offer for *The Mill on the Floss* by reminding Eliot of the many unsold copies of *Scenes of Clerical Life* he has been left with and warns his young author of the uncertainty of the market, strongly implying his own superior ability to assess risk.⁷¹ Eliot’s response is definitive: “As, from the nature of your offer, I infer that you think my next book will be a speculation attended with risk, I prefer incurring that risk myself.”⁷² Notably in this instance, Eliot seems prepared to accept the characterisation of her risk-action as a “speculation”; as discussed in the previous chapter, the term in its stockmarket

⁶⁹ *Letters*, 3, 152.

⁷⁰ *Letters*, 2, 388.

⁷¹ *Letters*, 3, 161.

⁷² *Letters*, 3, 161.

context represented an area beyond the field of genuine investment into which she refused to cross. Years later, in negotiation with Blackwood over *Middlemarch*, she and Lewes specifically dissociate themselves from a publishing speculation. Blackwood is presented with the option of a high initial advance or a royalty agreement - “the choice is open to you to speculate or not as you see fit” – but in deciding on the latter he increases both the risk and (as it transpired, substantial) reward for the author who, in effect, shared in the speculation.⁷³ Detailed royalty negotiations recurred in 1876 with the publication of the complete works and the extension of the copyright lease, with Lewes’s calculations particularly focused on the detail and definition of the author’s “contingent advantage”.

Eliot’s attitude towards risk in her writing goes beyond issues of remuneration for and ownership of the novels. Writing about the shift in the way authors were paid at the end of the nineteenth-century – a trend away from up-front rights payment which George Eliot helped to initiate – Paul Delany concludes: “About the effects of the royalty system on literary creativity we can only speculate.”⁷⁴ Eliot provides a few clues as to how external, material circumstances shaped what and how she wrote. Explaining, in 1861, her decision to interrupt the progress of the ambitious *Romola* project in favour of *Silas Marner*, “a story of old-fashioned village life”, she tells Blackwood, “I think I get slower and more timid in my writing, but perhaps worry about horses and servants and boys, with want of bodily strength, may have had something to do with that.”⁷⁵ She was now a woman of capital and the co-incidence of a transformed financial position and the adoption of Lewes’s sons at this time has been well noted in connection with the emergence of the novel and its major themes.⁷⁶ Despite the author’s profession of timidity and implied narrowness of canvas, Mary Poovey’s reading of the novel places it in an important line of works attempting to mediate concepts of material and transcendent value (most obviously Eppie’s hair which first resembles, then replaces, then becomes an embodied transformation of gold in all its scale of meaning) through the language and concepts of the economic:

⁷³ *Letters*, 5, 179.

⁷⁴ Paul Delany, *Literature, Money and the Market: From Trollope to Amis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 109.

⁷⁵ *Letters*, 3, 371.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Pettitt, 258, and Boddenheimer, 230.

Silas Marner provides a particularly clear example of the way that mid-century novelists subjected economic matters – in this case, the monetary value of gold – to the alchemy of a moral lesson by emphasizing the connotative capacity of language – that is, the elevation of figuration and suggestion over denotation and reference.⁷⁷

Later in the decade, by which time further large advances on *Romola* and *Felix Holt* had fully secured her financial position, the form and structure of publication become areas for potential risk and innovation. Noting the previously-observed changes occurring in the book trade in the mid 1860s, which in part explained the disappointing initial sales of *Felix Holt*, she proposes a strategy which again sets the author and Lewes apart from their less reactive publisher: “I am quite for trying a new experiment when we publish anything again – if we can get Mr. Simpson’s caution to consent.”⁷⁸ The next published novel, *Middlemarch*, did indeed constitute a new, and very successful experiment, its eight half-volume publication schedule accommodating its greater length and – at least initially – the elaboration and fusion of the two main storylines. The shifting tension between the commerce of literature and its higher value is again highlighted by Jerome Beaty’s analysis of the evolution of *Middlemarch*, which shows the original subjection of the novel’s form of publication to its artistic integrity gradually reversing under the pressure of commercially-driven deadlines.⁷⁹ In *Daniel Deronda*, the self-reflexive narratorial admission that any attempt fully to understand character is necessarily partial and that the beginnings and ends of stories are illusory or “make believe” serves to alert the reader to the very representative boundaries and mimetic limitations which the realist novel – not least her own - had succeeded in widening. The formal experiment became even more radical with her final work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, in which the dense and sometimes obtuse reflections of a narrator of indeterminate authority constitute the whole of a text which is detached from narrated context and action. Eliot was as

⁷⁷ Poovey, *Genres*, 383. Gillian Beer’s analysis of the “acquired cultural language” of science during the period makes somewhat similar claims: “It offers an imaginative shift in the valency of words, new spaces for experience to occupy in language, confirmation of some kinds of vocabulary, increased prowess in pruning, in which diverse senses are held in equipoise within the surveillance of consciousness.” *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 140.

⁷⁸ *Letters*, 4, 309.

⁷⁹ Jerome Beaty, *Middlemarch, From Notebook to Novel: A Study of George Eliot’s Critical Method* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1960).

diligent as ever in negotiating the contract for *Theophrastus* with Blackwood, but I suspect that she knew the book would be neither popular nor a commercial success.

Eliot's inability fully to reconcile competing and sometime conflicting motivations in the production and sale of her novels gives rise, I believe to an even larger consideration of the status and limitations of writing as an action in addressing the question of how best to live. The moral purpose of her writing and what she believed to be the social duty of the writer have been hinted at in this chapter and will be elaborated in my readings of the novels, a literary form that enabled her to explore money-ethics in uniquely rich and complex ways. A starting point of this analysis is a contention that Eliot believed the circumstances of her own life in her own time – indeed of any single life – bound and confined the range of motivations, decisions and actions she wanted to explore.⁸⁰ It is in the novels themselves that the scale of her individual and social projects must be expanded, for the action of writing itself created its own confinement; what she uneasily called her “luxurious remoteness from all turmoil.”⁸¹

She concludes ‘Leaves From a Note-Book’ with a celebration of impulsive, if ultimately futile action, of action as sympathy:

The question, “Of what use is it for me to work towards an end confessedly good?” comes from that sapless kind of reasoning which is falsely taken for a supreme mental activity, but is really due to languor, or incapability of that mental grasp which makes objects strongly present, and to a lack of sympathetic emotion. In the *Spanish Gypsy* Fedalma says, -

“The grandest death! To die in vain – for Love
Greater than sways the forces of the world,”

referring to the image of the disciples throwing themselves, consciously in vain, on the Roman spears. I really believe and mean this, – not as a rule of general action, but as a possible grand instance of determining energy in human sympathy, which even in particular cases, where it has only a magnificent futility, is more adorable, or as we say divine, than un pitying force, or than a prudent calculation of results.⁸²

⁸⁰ Her reservations towards autobiography and biography hardened with age. Just a year before she died, she wrote that “the best history of a writer is contained in his writings” and that “Biographies generally are a disease of English literature” (*Letters*, 7, 230).

⁸¹ *Letters*, 6, 65.

⁸² *Essays*, 451.

In writing *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot knew that any “prudent calculation of results” that was limited to domestic popularity and critical approval would have persuaded her greatly to reduce the length and detail of the Jewish element of her novel. She recognised, but opted to ignore what she described as the “stupidity” of prevailing British attitudes and chose to “treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to.”⁸³ Daniel Hack sees her decision as “resisting – even repulsing – the demands of the marketplace.”⁸⁴ It would, of course, be wrong to describe it as an act of “magnificent futility”, for, despite generally unfavourable reviews, the book was commercially successful and, as I will later describe, fulfilled Eliot’s wider social ambitions. As a novel written in the market, whose final form was determined by an ethically and socially-informed aesthetic whose motivation stood essentially outside of that market, Eliot’s last great novel at least partially achieves the reconciliation of professionalism and vocation with which she continually struggled. The remainder of this work will consider how she addressed issues of individual moral and wider social good within the novels themselves.

⁸³ *Letters*, 6, 301.

⁸⁴ Hack, 150.

Calculating Consequences: *Felix Holt* and the Limits of Utilitarianism

...there is no means of measuring pleasure & pain directly, but as those feelings govern sales and purchases, the prices of the market are those facts from which one may argue back to the intensity of the pleasures concerned.¹

- William Stanley Jevons, 1872

This is what I call debasing the moral currency: lowering the value of every inspiring fact and tradition, so that it will command less and less of the spiritual products, the generous motives, which sustain the charm and elevation of our social existence – that something besides bread by which man saves his soul alive.²

- George Eliot, 1879

I have argued in the first three chapters that experience and observation taught George Eliot that economic strains infuse the motivations and intentions of most human action. An acute psychological understanding allowed her to analyse the complex composition of those reasons for action, and a strongly-felt and intellectually forceful perception of the means and ends of literature presented the form of that analysis. Her novels were her “experiments in life”; the characters therein the intricately-compounded subjects of her ethical probing and testing.³ This chapter will explicitly link her critique of two related,

¹ William Stanley Jevons, letter to J. E. Cairnes, 14 January 1872, quoted in Sandra Peart, *The Economics of W. S. Jevons* (London: Routledge, 1996), 149.

² *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 337.

³ *Letters* 6, 216. See Paris, 37-9, for how the experimental elements of Eliot’s art as a novelist relate to Lewes’s argument, in *The Principles of Success in Literature*, that the scientific and artistic processes have a strong imaginative commonality, i.e. “[t]he experimental process employed by the scientist to test his hypotheses is analogous to the novelist’s invention of a story.” Victorian understandings of experimentation are discussed by Beer, 148-9, 151.

See also Carroll: “each experiment proceeds by the testing, juxtaposing, comparing, and contrasting of different ways of making sense of the world until coherence reaches its limit and breaks down into incoherence” (2).

yet distinct systems that attempted to formulate economic behaviour and wider ethical choice and action: classical economics and Utilitarianism. As the quotation above from Jevons indicates, the advent of neo-classical economics in the early 1870s more clearly formalised the link with the psychological core of Benthamism and thereby challenged some of the important modifications Mill had incorporated into Utilitarianism: a development of which Eliot was aware and which, I will argue, thematically impacted her later novels. After attempting to contextualise George Eliot the novelist within related mid-century theoretical economic and moral philosophical debates, I will expand my argument largely by reference to a reading of *Felix Holt*, which hinges on specific developments in the late 1860s. However, because many of the critical concerns to which I will refer were apparent in her earlier work and were continually refined throughout her career I will introduce this chapter with a short analysis of a piece from an earlier novel alongside related “impressions” from her last complete work.

Mr. Riley is a relatively minor character in *The Mill on the Floss*. In the first chapter of Book 3, after a long absence from the narrative, we learn that he “had died suddenly last April, and left his friend [Mr Tulliver] saddled with a debt of two hundred and fifty pounds.”⁴ However, the early chapter whose title preserves his name – ‘Mr Riley Gives His Advice Concerning a School for Tom’ – concludes with a dense narratorial analysis of the emotional and cognitive processes out of which his advice proceeds. The preceding descriptions of Riley’s manner, opinions and conversation paint an apparently clear and simple picture of a man motivated solely by self-interest whose concept of value – as might befit an auctioneer and appraiser - has a single, monetary dimension: like one of Eliot’s later self-serving value monists, “he knew the price-current of most things.”⁵ The expectation, aroused by “subtle indications”, that a mercenary motivation will be revealed is briefly made explicit with the admission that “Mr Riley was a man of business, and not cold towards his own interest” (22). However, the subsequent unravelling of a fragmented, loosely-connected chain of causal linkages in the character’s

⁴ *The Mill on the Floss*, 172. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

⁵ *Felix Holt*, 288: a description of Maurice Christian, who features in my discussion later in this chapter. See Miller, *Novels Behind Glass*, 209-12, for a discussion of auctions in *Middlemarch*. Trumbull, the auctioneer, “uses language to inflate the worth of the objects he sells”, a practice in which authors are also potentially implicated.

mind serves to undermine the ruling principles both of classical political economy and of its symbiotically related ethical system, Utilitarianism. Riley's recommendation of the Rev. Walter Stelling stems neither from "far-sighted designs" and "distinct motives" (rationally calculated utility maximization); nor from "any positive expectation of a solid, definite advantage resulting to himself" or "deliberate contrivance in order to compass a selfish end" (economic self-interest). It is rather the result of a somewhat haphazard mix of "small promptings" which, while undoubtedly incorporating the intention of diverting money "from less worthy pockets into his own", captures a wide and diverse range of psychological promptings and even an admittedly weak trace of benevolence towards Stelling, "wishing him well so far as he had any wishes at all concerning him" (22-3).

A Benthamite interpretation of Riley's decision-making process might hold that he was in fact attempting to apply some kind of felicific calculus to maximise pleasure and minimise displeasure or pain, not only for himself, but for the community of people who enter his evaluative equations, although the obvious flaw here is the educational outcome deriving to Tom Tulliver.⁶ It is not that Riley is being a bad Utilitarian. Rather, the impressionistic jostling of the claims of memory, reputation, self-image, economic gain and mild sexual attraction presented by Eliot offers a far more compelling and identifiable behavioural pattern that cannot conform to a single all-embracing system. The measurement and comparison of diverse desires on a single scale, Eliot insists, demands "too intense a mental action" for most people – even an apparently simple *homo economicus* like Riley. Her insistence that attempts systematically to model motivation are reductive and misleading recurs throughout the novels and is forcefully made in her final work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, in which the reader is again warned against confusing sagacity with

the common mistake of supposing that men's behaviour, whether habitual or occasional, is chiefly determined by a distinctly conceived motive, a definite object to be gained or a definite evil to be avoided...[S]ociety is chiefly made up of human beings whose daily acts are all

⁶ Mill repeatedly defends Utilitarianism against those who claim that it is invalidated by the impossibility of accurately predicting consequences. Mill's argument is that general (rather than individual) classes of actions can identifiably be predicted to give rise to pleasurable or painful consequences. Riley does not appear to apply principles of either Act or Rule Utilitarianism in calculating Tom's educational utility. See, for example, 'Whewell on Moral Philosophy' (1852), reprinted in Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 10, 167-201.

performed either in unreflecting obedience to custom and routine or from immediate promptings of thought or feeling to execute an immediate purpose. They pay their poor-rates, give their vote in affairs political or parochial, wear a certain amount of starch, hinder boys from tormenting the helpless, and spend money on tedious observances called pleasures, without mentally adjusting these practices to their own well-understood interest or to the general, ultimate welfare of the human race.⁷

Her perceptiveness is acute and looks forward beyond even the twentieth-century to recent work in the fields of behavioural economics and situational ethics.⁸ The employment of Utilitarian terminology – “carefully appraised end to serve”, “definite consequences”, the calculable weighing of “pleasures” against “evil to be avoided” – here serves to emphasise the system’s inapplicability to the everyday reality of imperfectly informed agents making imperfect decisions, informed by an incalculable combination of multiple cognitive and emotional promptings. This is a level of critique beyond that of the early essays to which I referred in my opening chapter and, indeed, the rather blunt Benthamite-bashing of the passage in ‘Janet’s Repentance’ in which “certain ingenious philosophers of our own day must surely take offence at a joy so entirely out of correspondence with arithmetical proportion” and where we are reminded that “there is a transcendent value in human pain, which refuses to be settled by equations”.⁹

As her final complete work, *Theophrastus*, together with ‘Leaves From A Note-Book,’ contains important indications of her later thoughts on many ethical issues that had exercised her throughout her life. However, it is in the full novels that Eliot achieves her most complete examinations of the complex inter-relationship between ethics and economics. Broadening a connection I have made earlier between Eliot and Adam Smith, Smith’s most enduring contributions to moral philosophy, the concept of the “Impartial Spectator” and the centrality of human sympathy, are embodied in the form of the novel

⁷ *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 53-4. Just eleven days before she died, Eliot emphasises the complexity of individual motivation. Defending the decision of a Mrs. Menzies (a friend of Eliot’s correspondent, Elma Stuart) to convert to Catholicism, she explains, “I for my part would not venture to thrust my mind on hers as a sort of omniscient dictatress, when in fact I am very ignorant of the inward springs which determine her action” (*Letters*, 7, 346).

⁸ The literature on behavioural economics continues to expand, despite ongoing hostility from certain schools of theoretical economics. See, for example, George Loewenstein, *Exotic Preferences: Behavioural Economics and Human Motivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For empirical ethics, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁹ ‘Janet’s Repentance’, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 270-1.

as practiced by Eliot.¹⁰ Years before writing her first fiction, she had recognised the potential of the novel to combine the ethical and the aesthetic in a uniquely powerful way. Such a synthesis, she believed, was achieved in the work of George Sand. In an 1849 letter to Sara Hennell, she compares Sand to Rousseau as a moral and intellectual inspiration, but is insistent that she would “never dream of going to her writings as a moral code or text book.” For Eliot, the novel form is not incidental to but positively embodies the ethical force of Sand’s writing:

I cannot read six pages of hers without feeling that it is given to her to delineate human passion and its results – and ... some of the moral instincts and their tendencies – with such truthfulness such nicety of discrimination such tragic power and withal such gentle humour that one might live a century with nothing but one’s own dull faculties and not know so much as those six pages will suggest.¹¹

Her description of Sand’s achievement prefigures the aim of Martha Nussbaum, well over a century later, “to establish that certain literary texts ... are indispensable to a philosophical inquiry in the ethical sphere”.¹² Like Eliot, Nussbaum rejects the implication that her readings serve to reduce literature “into a chapter in a textbook on ethics.”¹³ Rather, she promotes a critical project which, in opposition to the long-standing dichotomy at the heart of both nineteenth and twentieth-century moral philosophy, sees

¹⁰ For Smith’s moral philosophy see: Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Robert Sugden, ‘Beyond Sympathy and Empathy: Adam Smith’s Concept of Fellow-Feeling’, *Economics and Philosophy* 18.1 (2002), 63-87; and D. D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith’s Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). Raphael concludes that the concept of the impartial spectator was “the most important element of Smith’s ethical theory” (11). Mill uses curiously similar terminology when describing the process to be followed by the rational, calculating agent: “As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.” ‘Utilitarianism’, *Collected Works*, vol. 10, 218.

¹¹ *Letters*, 1, 278. Coincidentally, Lewes was also already a great admirer of Sand at this time. Valerie Dodd traces the influence of Sand on both Eliot’s and Lewes’s (largely similar) theories of fiction and her part in the former’s decision to write novels. See Dodd, 132-142 and 213-215.

¹² Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 23. She later expands her proposal, “that we should add the study of certain novels to the study of these works [seminal Kantian and Utilitarian philosophical texts], on the grounds that without them we will not have a fully adequate statement of a powerful ethical conception, one that we ought to investigate” (26).

Nussbaum’s thesis that ethical perception is both cognitive and affective is also articulated by Eliot: “And how can the life of nations be understood without the inward light of poetry – that is of emotion blending with thought” (*Letters*, 6, 124).

¹³ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 29.

novels “as helping to state a distinctive alternative to Kantian and Utilitarian conceptions.”¹⁴ More recently, Andrew H. Miller has restated the case for literature’s ability to bypass the consequentialist and deontological arguments at the heart of most ethical theory. Miller cites Iris Murdoch’s argument for the philosophical claims of literature as he describes “the untidiness of everyday ethical insistence, not captured in the language of ‘action’ and ‘choice’ but apparent as story, metaphor, vocabulary”.¹⁵

Eliot’s description of Riley and his unspoken deliberations captures this “untidiness of everyday ethical insistence” precisely. Sophie Ratcliffe, in her recent work *On Sympathy*, questions the claims of humanist literary critics including Nussbaum, arguing that the assertion of a direct link between the novel and the articulation of a virtue-based morality is “to simplify both what is going on when we read, and the concerns that we have about ideas of identification and understanding other minds.”¹⁶ In her discussion of how readers sympathise with fictional characters, Ratcliffe presents an opposition between those who believe the actions of characters can inspire simulation in the real world; and those who argue that readers will typically remain as onlookers or side-participants, selectively drawing on thoughts or actions by characters merely to reinforce existing ethical standpoints.¹⁷ Ratcliffe’s distinction is nuanced but, for my immediate purposes, largely irrelevant. Riley, like a number of the characters in *Felix Holt* I am about to discuss, does not embody economic virtue. It is unlikely that any reader will be moved either to simulate his actions or to be converted by the implicit suggestion of an alternative, ‘better’ way to act. Rather, by first leading us to the jaws of the trap of “greater sagacity” (largely through external description of Riley’s appearance, language and behaviour) and then steering us away from a simplistic assessment of his motivations, Eliot forces us to recognise a commonality, not with a merely fictional character, but with any individual confronting choice in the world outside the text. Miller

¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 23. The ‘ethical turn’ in literary studies was roughly contemporaneous with the re-emergence of an essentially Aristotelean ethics of virtue in academic moral philosophy. See ch. 6, below, which concludes my argument that Eliot’s examination of economic ethics in the novels followed a parallel progression.

¹⁵ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 62. Nussbaum’s linkage of literature and “everyday” ethics echoes Miller’s lack of tidy system: “Our actual relation to the books we love is already messy, complex, erotic” (29).

¹⁶ Sophie Ratcliffe, *On Sympathy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 35.

¹⁷ Ratcliffe, 45-48.

identifies a particular “ethical power” of Eliot’s work as resting not in the moment of choice or action but in the perspectival understanding the reader uncovers in “moments of conversion where visions are exchanged and the exercise of the will is uncertain.”¹⁸

Before considering how, in *Felix Holt*, she tested the economics of self-interest and consequentialist ethics, I will first try and establish how the systems of classical economics and Utilitarianism coalesced in Eliot’s critical sight in the mid-1860’s. Once again, the figure of J. S. Mill will play a central role in delineating the intellectual context. Indeed, as one eminent economic historian of the period has observed, the stature of Mill and, to a lesser extent, his father and their close connection to Bentham have served to exaggerate the strength of the direct connection between mainstream political economy through much of the century and the far less prevalent doctrine of Utilitarian ethics.¹⁹ However, the ideological and institutional links went beyond the commonality of prominent individuals, although their long-involvement in the *Westminster Review* clearly places the Mills at the centre of the formal articulation of the overlapping philosophical underpinnings of the two systems.²⁰ From its inception (by Bentham) in 1824, the *Westminster Review* strongly espoused an essentially Smithean vision of international free trade, *laissez faire* economics and the abolition of corrupt privileges: a vision of political economy as a force for social progress.²¹ Calls for the abolition of the Corn Laws gave a focus to its conviction that government interference in the economy should be minimal.

¹⁸ Miller, *Burdens of Perfection*, 70. Cora Diamond makes a similar point in relation to “classic realist novels ...[which] contain scenes of deliberation and choice, and this is necessary to the moral view they express.” Cora Diamond, ‘Martha Nussbaum and the Need for Novels’, in Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker (eds.), *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49.

¹⁹ D. P. O’Brien, *The Classical Economists Revisited* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 29-31. Bentham, when enumerating “the several simple pleasures of which human nature is susceptible” places “the pleasures of wealth” at number two, aligning it closely with the science of wealth with which political economy was exclusively concerned. Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, in John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Mary Warnock (Glasgow: William Collins, 1962), 68.

²⁰ Both Mills were significant contributors of economic articles from the *Review*’s earliest years, and, over a long period, had direct editorial and proprietorial interests. John Mill’s financial support – and occasional reviews – continued into the Chapman years. See note 21 below.

²¹ See Frank W. Fetter, ‘Economic Articles in the *Westminster Review* and Their Authors, 1824-51’, *Journal of Political Economy* 70.6 (1962), 570-96. “To the writers in the Westminster political economy was not the dismal science, it was a message to all men except “aristocrats” and “monopolists,” and to them it was the handwriting on the wall” (573).

Although by the time Chapman took over the *Review* in 1851 some of the consistency of the earlier economic ‘message’ had been lost, a strong continuity with the previous period of the magazine’s history can be traced. The younger Mill himself remained an occasional contributor as did earlier economic commentators including W. R. Greg and Harriet Martineau.²² Eliot herself defined the primary ongoing purpose of the *Review* in correspondence with Chapman, placing Mill at the forefront of those writers who “are amongst the world’s vanguard, though not all in the foremost line; it is good for the world, therefore, that thy should have every facility for speaking out.”²³ Through her time as editor and beyond, political economy was consistently defended, including favourable reviews of new editions of Mill’s 1848 classic, which became the defining economic work for a generation. Eliot’s personal views, as I described in my opening chapters, were more ambivalent and she had little time for the exaggerated claims for political economy as an explanatory, predictive or wholly beneficial social science. She is likely to have agreed with Bray’s assessment in 1841, the dawn of her full intellectual maturity, that “Political Economy is without a moral sense; it has no conscience, and its calculations are based upon the supposition that each man as necessarily seeks his own individual interest as that a stone falls on the ground”.²⁴

An awareness of a similarly constrained moral sense also served to create a distance between her own views and those championed by the *Westminster Review* on political economy’s ethical counterpart, Utilitarianism.²⁵ Her first major periodical publication, ‘The Progress of the Intellect’ (1851) warns against a narrow view of human benefit which exclusively concerns “the truth which comes home to men’s business and bosoms in these our days”, while ignoring the richer, yet less tangible or calculable appreciation of historical thought and tradition.²⁶ Her very infrequent use of the word ‘utility’ in the novels exclusively expresses the long-standing, primary meaning of usefulness and assumes neither Bentham’s application to ‘pleasure’ nor later appropriations of ‘good’ or

²² Fetter, 577.

²³ *Letters*, 2, 49.

²⁴ Charles Bray, *The Philosophy of Necessity or, Natural Law as Applicable to Moral, Mental, and Social Science*, 2nd edn. (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1863), 201.

²⁵ Mill claims to have been the first to bring the term into common usage. ‘Utilitarianism’, *Collected Works*, vol. 10, 209-10. Subsequent references to the essay will appear in the text.

²⁶ ‘The Progress of the Intellect’, *Westminster Review*, 54 (Jan. 1851), in *Essays*, 27-8.

simply 'preference'.²⁷ However, the indications in her earlier non-fiction writings that she was aware of the principles of Utilitarianism are strengthened by the language and phraseology of the novels: her greatest egoistic hedonist, Tito Melema asks "what...was the end of life, but to extract the utmost sum of pleasure?"²⁸

Her understanding of the directions in which Utilitarianism was being taken in the mid-century was progressed by Bray and accelerated by her move to London and the *Westminster Review*.²⁹ In this context, Collini, Winch and Burrow warn against both any simplistic "identification of a unitary, homogenous Utilitarianism and any easy assumption of its later disappearance".³⁰ More recently, Kathleen Blake has reassessed the influence and legacy of Benthamite Utilitarianism, characterising Bentham and the doctrine as "poorly understood and poorly regarded, and this is true even among new economic critics."³¹ Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics*, published in 1850, had attempted a reformulation of the doctrine into a wider, synthesised system, which had provoked criticism from Mill.³² In 1852, the first edition of the re-launched *Westminster Review* under Chapman's control (and Eliot's editorship) contained an important article by Mill himself, strongly attacking the criticism of Utilitarianism launched by the Oxford Professor of Moral Philosophy, William Whewell.³³ Mill's article, while overtly a strong defence of his old mentor against intuitionism, marks an important step in his adaptation of Benthamite Utilitarianism, including his attempt to broaden what he saw as too narrow a definition of utility through the admission of a qualitative (rather than purely quantitative) distinction among pleasures. Mill's arguments were more fully developed in his essay, 'Utilitarianism', which was finally published some ten years after the Whewell article in 1861. As in his earlier writing, a personal defence of Bentham and what he sees

²⁷ However, one - possibly ironic - reference to the Benthamite meaning is her description of the wholly-egotistical Duncan Cass, "whose delight in lying, grandly independent of utility, was not to be diminished by the likelihood that his hearer would not believe him" (*Silas Marner*, 83). For an illuminating debate on the changing meaning of 'utility' in economic and philosophical literature from Bentham to the present, see John Broome, "'Utility'", *Economics and Philosophy* 7 (1991), 1-12, and 'A Reply to Sen', *ibid*, 285-7.

²⁸ George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Andrew Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 117.

²⁹ Bray's *Philosophy of Necessity* has strong Utilitarian leanings, with moral ends and happiness closely linked, e.g. 29. Bentham is frequently quoted.

³⁰ Collini, Winch and Burrow, 281.

³¹ Kathleen Blake, *Pleasures of Benthamism: Victorian Literature, Utility, Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31.

³² See J. B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 175. Mill's belief that *Social Statics* was opposed to Utilitarianism was disputed by Spencer.

³³ Mill, 'Whewell's Moral Philosophy'.

as crude misrepresentation of his doctrine is accompanied by a reiteration of the core principles of Utilitarianism. Eliot was never converted to acceptance of the scope and methodology of Mill's reiterated principles, which continued to place happiness (defined by pleasure) as the sole and ultimate end and determined the goodness of acts according to their consequences in promoting that end. Neither, however, did her criticism rest on any reductive interpretation that Utilitarianism promoted an exclusively selfish individualism. Mill reasserts Bentham's promotion of a standard of wider good, or happiness: "for that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether" ('Utilitarianism', 213); and again, "the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned" ('Utilitarianism', 218).

Where Mill largely diverged from Bentham was in his shifting of the focus of the principles of utility from his mentor's primarily social and legislative purposes, to their direct application to individual morality. This gives a different slant and weight to the altruistic component of any particular act motivation and also opens the way for possibly Mill's most significant departure from Bentham: the introduction of a qualitative distinction between pleasures, making commensurability on a single scale theoretically problematic. In making this distinction, Mill criticises Benthamite Utilitarianism and, more specifically, many of its followers on two grounds. Firstly that they "have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, etc., of the former – that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature" ('Utilitarianism', 211); and, secondly, that in their strict application of the utilitarian standard, they "do not lay sufficient stress upon the other beauties of character which go towards making a human being lovable or admirable" ('Utilitarianism', 221).

There seems little doubt that Eliot was largely supportive of Mill's main positions here. Mill's criticism of Whewell's attack on Bentham appeared in the *Westminster Review* under Eliot's editorship and in an essay of her own some five years later she takes the opportunity to mock Whewell's simplistic reading of Bentham's interpretation of

animal rights.³⁴ Perhaps even more significant is her position in relation to a much later debate, in which Mill's modification of Bentham's hedonic calculus is roundly criticised by Jevons.³⁵ In 1877 and 1878, Jevons produced a series of articles in the *Contemporary Review* under the heading, 'John Stuart Mill's Philosophy Tested', which included a refutation of Mill's attempts to reconcile his concept of "higher pleasures" within the single scale of the Utilitarian happiness principle.³⁶ Edith Simcox records in her diary for 1879 that George Eliot discussed the controversy sparked by Jevons' articles during a visit to Oxford: "They turned back and there was more conversation, concerning Jevons on Mill."³⁷ The position of Lewes and Eliot may be guessed from the tone of the former's letter congratulating George Croom Robertson on his "calmly crushing" response to the Jevons articles.³⁸ My conclusion is that Eliot agreed with Lewes that attempts by Jevons to undermine Mill's morally-informed qualitative distinction of pleasures was regressive and must be opposed, but that, equally, the logical difficulties of integrating Mill's modifications highlighted Utilitarianism's limitations as a complete ethical system.

It is my contention that during the 1860s and 70s Eliot recognised the emergence of a tendency in economic thought towards greater system and mathematical quantification which, both independently and in its appropriation of Utilitarian ethics, ultimately threatened the line of morally-informed political economy which connects Smith and the post-Benthamite Mill. The extent of any theoretical economic shift, however, should not be exaggerated. Much of the substance of classical economics, particularly in regard to cost of production and consumption, was incorporated into neo-classicism, while the application of advanced mathematics was already apparent in some branches of the earlier school.³⁹ However, the focus of Jevons and the marginalists on the nature of market pricing and exchange and their relation to individual preference or utility marked a significant new way of explaining economic behaviour, and in doing so brought

³⁴ *Essays*, 376: "This is a notion of loftiness which may pair off with Dr. Whewell's celebrated observation, that Bentham's moral theory is low, because it includes justice and mercy to brutes."

³⁵ The debate is well covered, in the context of Jevons' wider and complex ambivalence towards Mill in Winch, *Wealth and Life*, ch. 6.

³⁶ See Peart, 137-54.

³⁷ *Letters*, 9, 217.

³⁸ *Letters*, 9, 211.

³⁹ Fetter points to an early *Westminster Review* article by Perronet Thompson, 'On the Instrument of Exchange', which is thought to be the first English economic writing to employ calculus. (571)

theoretical economics into methodological alignment with Benthamite Utilitarianism. As the latter provides a common currency (pleasure or pain) to all moral judgements in relation to their consequences, so all economic value can be measured by a single measure: the price exchange at which marginal utility is satisfied. Both systems make assumptions concerning perfection of information and agent rationality that enable mathematical modelling and claims for universal applicability.⁴⁰

Axiomatic to neo-classical economic theory is the utility-maximising agent. Self-interest, which Smith tempered with the moral sentiment of sympathy and Mill overlay with morally-informed, socially-elevating higher pleasures thus becomes a general principle and, at least superficially, roots neo-classical economics in the same bedrock as Utilitarianism.⁴¹ To some extent, this linkage both over-simplifies Bentham's theory, which, as I described earlier, always had a wider, non-individualistic dimension. It also under-estimates the extent to which theoretical classical economics throughout most of the century had jettisoned the moral philosophical elements of Adam Smith in its concentration on individual wealth creation, a singleness of purpose amplified by the application of those theories in the emergent industrial capitalist society. *Felix Holt* is often included in that series of realist fictions, written mostly in the 1840s, generically described to as the 'condition of England' industrial novels.⁴² The novel's setting, around the time of the 1832 Reform Act places it at an interesting period in the development of political economy; a period in which its ideological acceptance was starting to influence economic and social policy, while its academic credibility was being cemented by the establishment of a number of university chairs.⁴³ By 1865, when the novel was written,

⁴⁰ It has been a powerful and long-standing combination. As Amartya Sen concludes, twentieth-century welfare economics "was dominated by one particular approach, to wit, utilitarianism, initiated in its modern form by Jeremy Bentham, and championed by such economists as Mill, Edgeworth, Sidgwick, Marshall, and Pigou." Amartya Sen, 'On the Foundations of Welfare Economics: Utility, Capability, and Practical Reason', in Farina, Hahn and Vannucci, 50-65 (50).

⁴¹ As Sugden explains, Bentham marks a distinct shift from Hume and Smith, both of whom were sceptical about the limits of reason, while "the Benthamite tradition appeals to universal principles of rationality and favours stylised models of human psychology" (64).

⁴² See Josephine M. Guy, *The Victorian Social-Problem Novel: The Market, the Individual and Communal Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985); and Brantlinger, *Fictions of State*.

⁴³ Brantlinger, *Fictions of State*, includes a chapter on 'Benthamite and Anti-Benthamite Fiction' of the 1830s and 40s.

the dominance of classicism, enshrined in Mill's *Principles*, was – as I describe in chapter 1 - coming to an end. Widespread general agreement on a number of macroeconomic issues, including free trade and the maintenance of the gold standard, could no longer obscure growing methodological fractures and the emergence of a radical new interpretation of microeconomic theory.⁴⁴ Meanwhile – and somewhat ironically given the new alliance that was forged – Mill's adaptation and resuscitation of Utilitarianism had established it as a serious and credible ethical system with a level of acceptance way beyond that prevailing thirty years earlier. J. B. Schneewind quotes letters from Mill in 1861 and F. H. Bradley in 1876 to illustrate how the former's efforts had succeeded over that period in transforming an insignificant minority school into “our most fashionable philosophy.”⁴⁵ Stefan Collini has drawn attention to the “broadly Utilitarian considerations” of Fawcett's *The Economic Position of the British Labourer* (1865), which Eliot was reading during the composition of *Felix Holt*.⁴⁶ For my economic-ethical purposes, therefore, the periods of composition and setting combine in most interesting ways.⁴⁷

Much has been written about the nature, limits and social implications of the political ‘radicalism’ presented in the novel, with an obvious focus on the duality of reference to the First and Second Great Reform Acts. Far less attention has been given to Eliot's richly-perspectival analysis of individual and social ways of dealing with money. Central to the representation and development of the novel's characters is the particularity of their financial situations, motivations and aspirations: in short, what place money plays in their individual value systems. To some extent then, the novel is all about money and, as it relates to the individual in a society that is itself being transformed by the forces of the market and industrial capital, *Felix Holt*'s inclusion in the earlier industrial genre is justified. Well-established critical consensus links the novel closely to the concerns of

⁴⁴ Jevons was publishing somewhat unrelated work (known to Lewes) in the 1860s, though *The Theory of Political Economy* did not appear until 1871.

⁴⁵ Schneewind, 174. Schneewind concludes that Mill's incorporation of common sense morality, while, as we have seen, unacceptable to Jevons, opened the door for Sidgwick's definitive work on Rule Utilitarianism.

⁴⁶ Collini, *Public Moralists*, 176. Collini quotes Fawcett's use of explicitly Benthamite terminology: “the greatest happiness to the community in general”; “this augmented wealth has tended not to promote but to diminish the comfort and happiness of the people.”

⁴⁷ Mill, whom she was re-reading at the time of writing *Felix Holt*, again provides a significant link. See *Letters*, 4, 208.

Eliot's essay 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), particularly in the common opposition established between an 'organic' community subject to gradual, consensual development and a 'mechanistic' society, characterised by rapid and dislocating change and a general descent to the common value scale of money.

The novel describes the transformation of Treby from an agrarian to an industrial society and accurately traces the economic history of post-war England, establishing permeating links with social and political development. The much-quoted dictum at the heart of the narrative progression – “there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life” – depends crucially on conceptions of wealth, class and value.⁴⁸ The process Eliot traces in her review of Riehl's history is repeated in the development of Treby from an “old-fashioned, grazing, brewing, wool-packing, cheese-loading” (41), essentially agrarian community to first an extractive industrial region and finally the site of Jermyn's dubious tourism speculation. The progress towards modernity and money-centring is again marked by Eliot's ironic employment of Utilitarian terminology: the new market-driven conditions “gradually awakening in [Treby] that higher consciousness which is known to bring higher pains” (41). As ancient links between social classes weaken, the local economy is subsumed by “the great circulating system of the nation” (43) in which money becomes the single measure of value. The morally corroding impact of the ascent of money crosses all social boundaries, with even the noble Sir Maximus Debarry eventually succumbing to Jermyn's promise of “an unprecedented return for the thousands he would lay out on a pump-room and hotel” (42). Significantly, the portrayal of Sir Maximus's son, Philip, as a man whose honour and virtue transcend personal material gain is completed by the narratorial aside that he died in Rome “fifteen years later, a convert to Catholicism”.⁴⁹

Felix Holt is not unusual in associating Utilitarian ethics with the pursuit of wealth under the guidelines of self-interested economics. One aspect in which it differs from and greatly extends the critique of the industrial novel, however, is in its exploration of the pervasion of mono-value consequentialism across social classes and professions. The traditional, morally-deficient capitalist is here left largely in the shadows while, as with

⁴⁸ *Felix Holt*, 45. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

⁴⁹ An unusual nod to the ideals of the Young England and medievalist movements.

my earlier example from *The Mill on the Floss*, a range of apparently minor characters reveal how money can infiltrate and dominate individual value systems.⁵⁰ Of these, Chubb, the publican, is the most straightforwardly driven by economic self-interest. His position in the community enables him to help orchestrate the unenfranchised miners in the service of the best-paying candidates while, through the supply of cheap beer, maintaining the class from which he has emerged in ignorant subjection.⁵¹ His great political idea – “that society existed for the sake of the individual, and that the name of that individual was Chubb” (113) – is a masterful subversion of liberal thinking. His main occupation notwithstanding, he counts himself among “those as work with your brains” (115), in some sense an accurate description of the time and mental effort he devotes to securing “the best livelihood with the least possible exertion” (115).

He shares this calculated avoidance of authentic labour, so starkly contrasted with Felix’s philosophy of work, with two other characters, whose methodical pursuit of selfish ends drives some of the novel’s most pivotal plot developments: Philip Debarry’s manservant, Maurice Christian (for whom “secrets were often a source of profit, of that agreeable kind which involved little labour” [211]), and the political agent and sometime accomplice of Jermyn, Johnson. It is a critical orthodoxy that a central theme of the novel is the conflict and shifting balance between will and destiny; the illusion, for example of Harold Transome “trusting in his own skill to shape the success of his own morrows, ignorant of what many yesterdays had determined for him beforehand” (161-2). Eliot’s first exposure to philosophical determinism dates back to Charles Bray’s *The Philosophy of Necessity*, published in 1841, the same year she entered the Rosehill circle. Her first *Westminster Review* article ten years later reiterated its central belief, that “human deeds and aspirations” are determined by “that inexorable law of consequences”.⁵² A revised second edition of Bray’s work appeared shortly before she started writing *Felix Holt*, in which money in various forms of acquisition and distribution – debt, embezzlement, inheritance, Eastern speculation – binds present consequences to past actions. Hence

⁵⁰ Note also the tradesmen in *Felix Holt*, who discuss politics and economics on election day (ch. 20). They represent embodiments of Adam Smith’s butcher, baker and brewer described in *Wealth of Nations*, whose “regard to their own interest”, rather than benevolence underlies their social interaction (vol 1, 27).

⁵¹ See Pamela Gilbert, *The Citizen’s Body: Desire, Health, and the Social in Victorian England* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007). Gilbert perceptively addresses intoxication and addiction in *Felix Holt*, esp. 156-172.

⁵² *Essays*, 31.

Jermyn's realisation that "he had sinned for the sake of particular concrete things, and particular concrete consequences were likely to follow" (104).

Aside from the somewhat implausible instances of chance and convenience which carry the inheritance plot forward, the realisation of Jermyn's feared "concrete consequences" is largely effected by the calculated self-interest of Christian and Johnson. Yet again, however, even the scheming of the shadowy Johnson in his decision to betray Jermyn, while lacking any identifiably virtuous impulse, is revealed to spring from a complex motivational composition. The narrator's implication that such unsystematic decision-making was a characteristic of a past generation serves to emphasise that little in human psychology had changed in the intervening thirty years, beyond the inclination of gentleman to wear whiskers:

Under the stimulus of small many-mixed motives like these, a great deal of business has been done in the world by well-clad and, in 1833, clean-shaven men, whose names are on charity-lists, and who do not know that they are base. Mr. Johnson's character was not much more exceptional than his double chin (304).

Christian and Johnson are by no means the only characters whose actions are described as calculating – a term, along with its variants, that recurs frequently in the novel – although their single-minded pursuit of personal gain combines with chance to make them more than averagely successful in their strategies.⁵³ Christian, a skilled gambler, is, in many senses, a schematised Utilitarian. He has given up the "more impulsive delights of life" to "become a sober calculator" (211) and, because "he knew the price-current of most things" (288), he is able to base everything to a single monetary scale. The illness for the relief of which he takes opium is a disutility because it is both painful and, if perceived by others, would diminish his "market value" (125). His strict application of egoist hedonism contradicts Mill's theory of why those "who are capable of the higher pleasures" are tempted to postpone these in favour of "the lower". Christian does not elect for "the nearer good" ('Utilitarianism', 212), knowing it to be less valuable than

⁵³ See Gilbert on the high incidence of calculation in the novel, indicative of "mathematical imagination" (167).

some higher pleasure.⁵⁴ In fact his every action is a probability-weighted calculation of personal bodily interest and yet, tellingly, we are told that his meeting with Johnson – the event which Jermyn had considered then discounted – came about “by means that were quite incalculable” (242). *Felix Holt* compels us to recognise the limits of calculation and system, thereby striking at the foundations of both economics and Utilitarianism. In the period during which *Felix Holt* is set, the populisers of political economy sought to reassure and placate a populace confronted by change on a previously unseen scale with the enumeration and certainty of precise, calculable statistics.⁵⁵ Eliot had already portrayed the dangerous ethical implications of relating moral evaluation to calculation in her first full novel. Arthur Donnithorne, seeking self-justification for his seduction of Hetty, reasons with Mr Irwine: “It’s a desperately vexatious thing, that after all one’s reflections and quiet determinations, we should be ruled by moods that one can’t calculate on beforehand. I don’t think a man ought to be blamed so much if he is betrayed into doing things in that way, in spite of his resolutions”⁵⁶

Indeed, part of Eliot’s intellectual journey towards becoming a novelist was the realisation of the possibilities of a form that stands outside system. The novel, and its cumulative, uneven transmission of authoritative and implied knowledge is mimetic of the unsystematic accumulation of ethical understanding we experience outside the text.⁵⁷ In 1855, she had begun her review in *The Leader* of Otto Friedrich Gruppe’s ‘The Future of German Philosophy’ by approvingly quoting the author: “The age of systems is passed...System is the childhood of philosophy; the manhood of philosophy is investigation”. While her specific target here is Kantian *a priori* thought, the criticism could equally apply to an empiricism that attempts to contain individual human

⁵⁴ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 212. Mill makes specific reference to a natural human awareness “that health is the greater good”, which Christian contradicts. His health is merely a means to an end with no intrinsic worth.

⁵⁵ See Elaine Freedgood, *Victorian Writing About Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. ch. 1, which examines the popular writings of Harriet Martineau and J. R. McCulloch. Freedgood concludes that “the theories of political economy...were quite precisely an attempt to eliminate the possibility that things might go wrong. What classical political economy attempted to do, particularly in its popularizations, was to cleanse the economic realm of contingency and uncertainty, to make it predictable” (16).

⁵⁶ *Adam Bede*, 161.

⁵⁷ Dodd makes this central to her interpretation of Eliot’s intellectual and artistic development. In rejecting philosophy for the novel, she “ratified its conclusions about the inadequacies of the merely rational process as a way of contemplating the mysterious phenomena of mind and life” (315).

motivation and behaviour – including the economic – within a theoretical system.⁵⁸ Throughout her life, from Bray to Comte and Spencer, she was to recoil from any professedly complete system, whether in the moral or social sciences.

In *Felix Holt*, Harold Transome's attempts to apply what is essentially the Jevonian method has decidedly mixed results, its limitations exposed when he is confronted with characters such as Rufus Lyon, Felix and the enlightened Esther, all of whom would represent outliers in a statistical sampling of economic viewpoints. His complete misconstrual of Lyon's opinion on the ballot is based on "his best calculation of probabilities" (158), while minutes later his attempt to justify an ends-based justification of lesser evils is angrily attacked by Felix as "a handful of generalities and analogies" (160). His justification for engaging in electioneering abuses succinctly describes the moral hazard of an ends-based, consequential philosophy with an appropriate metaphor of commercial corruption:

it was if he had to show indignation at the discovery of one barrel with a false bottom, when he had invested his money in a manufactory where a larger or smaller number of such barrels had always been made. A practical man must seek a good end by the only possible means; that is to say, if he is to get into parliament he must not be too particular (162).

Like Christian, Harold conforms to a simplified, and limited, Benthamite model: as Esther comes to understand his nature, she recognises that he "had a way of virtually measuring the value of everything by the contribution it made to his own pleasure" (345). But unlike Christian, faced with the possibility of becoming complicit with Jermyn and destroying the evidence to Esther's claim on the Transome estate, his self-interest is, unexpectedly for both him and the reader, tempered and ultimately overcome by "his sense of honour and dignity."

And thus, as the temptation to avoid all risk of losing the estate grew and grew till scruples looked minute by the side of it, the difficulty of bringing himself to make a compact with Jermyn seemed more and more insurmountable (287).

⁵⁸ *Essays*, 148.

Harold's inward debate and decision closely match Jermyn's expectations, but his calculations are immediately upset by those of Christian, whose "complete...survey of probabilities" leads him to take his information to Harold. The meeting and negotiation between the two (chapter 36), which first presents Harold with the idea of offsetting Esther's claim by marrying her, is a masterly portrayal of the mental machinations of two clever and calculating individuals. As our understanding of their psychological processes is deftly managed by the interchange of dialogue, free indirect speech and narratorial reflection, the scene becomes a sharply perceptive exposition of high-stakes game theory.⁵⁹ Yet Harold's understanding of human motivation is again deficient when, in his observation of Esther's concern for Felix, he attempts to derive the particular from a general rule: "With all due regard to Harold Transome, he was one of those men who are liable to make the greater mistakes about a particular woman's feelings, because they pique themselves on a power of interpretation derived from much experience" (351).

For Harold Transome, power and position are determined in relation to material wealth and just as money establishes a standard measure of wealth, so, he believes, pleasure or utility can reconcile and rank apparently incommensurable values to determine any action. His language is infused with financial association and imagery and even his most intimate human relationships are defined as commercial transactions: his mother feels their relationship becoming increasingly imbalanced as he surrounds her with material luxuries, while both his first marriage (to a slave girl) and his planned union with Esther are motivated by his own comfort and convenience rather than higher emotions.⁶⁰ Similarly, the extent of the self-interested degradation of the once passionate affection Jermyn felt for Mrs Transome is emphasised by her use of language in their angry confrontation when she refuses to reveal Harold's parentage. His "tenderness had turned into calculation"; her love "into a good bargain"; she likens the process to "a lover pick[ing] one's pocket" (337).⁶¹ Harold, like the similarly good-natured Arthur Donnithorne in her earlier work, essentially believes that human affection can be

⁵⁹ See, for example, Anne E. Cudd, 'Game Theory and the History of Ideas about Rationality', *Economics and Philosophy* 9 (1993), 101-33.

⁶⁰ For marriage and the market and women as 'property', see Nunokawa and ch. 6 below.

⁶¹ Eliot frequently uses commercial language and imagery in emotional contexts to similar effect. See my comments on *The Mill on the Floss* and *Daniel Deronda* in ch. 6, below. Note also Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, ch. 10: in his contemplation of marriage, he expects a "compound interest of happiness" and a "large draft" to be issued.

bought.⁶² Just how antithetical this form of calculation is to Felix Holt is very cleverly expressed by Esther in her parodying of the type of mathematical formulation we might expect Harold to be continually constructing in his mind:

‘O there is no sum in proportion to be done there,’ said Esther, again gaily. ‘As you are to a peerage, so is *not* Felix Holt to any offer of advantage that you could imagine for him’ (352).

Felix literally renders any formula that attempts to equate self with “advantage” (at least Harold’s perception of advantage) not only unsolvable but meaningless. Bentham’s calculus - or rather a reductively simplistic and purely self-interested version of Bentham - breaks down.

Unlike the calculating characters I have discussed above, Felix is incapable of predicting and managing future consequences, particularly as they might affect his own self-interest. Consider the scene in which he assumes control of the rioters, putting his life and freedom directly at risk:

It was not a moment in which a spirit like his could calculate the effect of misunderstanding as to himself: nature never makes men who are at once energetically sympathetic and minutely calculating (268).

Like Adam Bede, his calculating is confined to the scientifically predictable physical world (they are both skilled craftsmen) and it is noteworthy that their inability to apply strategic, dispassionate thinking to human affairs leaves them both effectively helpless in the respective major crises that develop.⁶³ The saving of Hetty and Felix’s release from prison are both effected by rich, powerful men.

Whatever the limitations of Felix as a political and social radical, he undoubtedly stands radically apart from the mainstream economy in his location, or rather dislocation, of money in relation to the individual and society. Only in his support of the arguments against the abuses of monopolies and in his intention to educate working men in the

⁶² Arthur is “a handsome generous young fellow...who, if he should unfortunately break a man’s legs in his rash driving, will be able to pension him handsomely” (*Adam Bede*, 118).

⁶³ Note also that Lydgate doesn’t manage calculations. He wants “to live aloof from such abject calculations, such self-interested anxiety about the inclinations and pockets of men” (*Middlemarch*, 650).

basics of domestic economy is he allied to liberal economics (chapter 30). He rejects the market economy because of a fundamental inequity, whereby people are “paid out of proportion” (57). His active decision to remove himself “from the push and the scramble for money and position” (221) carries almost religious undertones of renunciation, but his distance from the eternal-ends-focused Christianity Eliot criticised in her essay on Dr. Cumming could hardly be more extreme.⁶⁴ His poverty rather “enables [him] to do what I most want to do on the earth” (225) and, in an uncanny foreshadowing of perhaps the most famous dictum of twentieth-century economics, his focus on effecting good in the short-term is emphatic: “But I care for the people who live now and will not be living when the long-run comes.”⁶⁵

Significantly, Felix’s motivations for action are not wholly incompatible with Utilitarianism, particularly as defined by Mill. In ‘Utilitarianism’, Mill deals specifically with sacrifice and renunciation and concludes that such actions are consistent with his philosophical definition of the good if they are intended to promote the greater happiness, which is indeed Felix’s ultimate aim.⁶⁶ His actions, however, illustrate the problems of applying even a Millian consequentialism to the incommensurable values of, say, money, leisure, education and political representation. By elevating “higher” or “mental” pleasures, Felix is motivated by the wider happiness of the working people. His personal utility is subservient, yet those whose happiness he is trying to promote derive pleasure from bodily, “lower” pleasures. Moreover, it is not clear that the course of action he takes to try and achieve his ends – working and preaching amongst them – is most likely to produce the best consequences. Rufus Lyon’s suggestion that he might achieve more good acting from a position of wealth and power is forcefully rejected by his determination to follow a path that suits his individual concept of value, thereby illustrating a circularity and contradiction inherent in solely ends-based ethical systems.

The distancing of Felix from classical liberal economics is further emphasised by the ironic use of his mother as the unwitting mouthpiece for the very theories her son is determined to undermine. Her incomprehension at his decision not to continue his

⁶⁴ See p. 50 above.

⁶⁵ *Felix Holt*, 222. Compare J. M. Keynes, *A Tract on Monetary Reform* (1923): “The long-run is a misleading guide to current affairs. In the long-run we are all dead.”

⁶⁶ Mill, ‘Utilitarianism’, *Collected Works*, vol. 10, 218.

father's business of peddling quack remedies is effectively a restatement of Say's Law that supply will inevitably create demand: "And what folks can never have boxes enough of to swallow, I should think you have a right to sell" (348). Indeed, she presents his actions as undermining a natural trading order, as "contrary to the nature of buying and selling" (299). For Felix, however, money represents not a natural order, but containment and an undermining of self. He refuses personally to return the notebook to the Debarry household because he fears being offered a demeaning money reward, while his impassioned public speeches highlight the corrosive influence of money in the practice and development of political representation (251).⁶⁷ In his very rejection of the constraints of money, Felix articulates an insightful psychological understanding of its power:

If I once went into that sort of struggle for success, I should want to win – I should defend the wrong that I had once identified myself with. I should become everything that I see now beforehand to be detestable (222).

For all Felix's idealism, however, Esther's understanding of how to deal with money is a more satisfying portrayal and, through the description of her awakening understanding, more ethically enlightening. It is significant that Esther's unknown mother, Annette, reaches a new level of vitality and independence only when, faced with her husband's incapacitating illness, she assumes a level of financial responsibility.⁶⁸ Esther is financially self-sufficient and, from a very different starting point from both her mother and Dorothea Brooke, undergoes a moral awakening that crucially centres on an understanding and better positioning of materiality within her personal and social ethics. Her early meeting with Felix (ch. 10) opposes his "thoughts about great subjects" with hers "about small ones; dress behaviour, amusements, ornaments". Her enlightenment is

⁶⁷ Money is more than once associated with restraint or imprisonment, particularly at Transome Court. Thus, Mrs Transome, surrounded with luxuries by her son: "The finest threads, such as no eye sees, ... may make a worse bondage than any fetters" (99); and later Esther, imagining married life in the same location: "she saw herself in a silken bondage that arrested all motive, and was nothing better than a well-cushioned despair" (390).

⁶⁸"I have sold some of the books to make money...and I have looked into the shops where they sell caps and bonnets and pretty things, and I can do all that, and get more money to keep us'" (*Felix Holt*, 79). For Dorothea and the material, see my ch. 6 below.

secured by a realisation that diverse material and human values cannot be measured on a single scale. Much of the later commentary on the Transome household is actually managed through the indirect reflections and speech of Esther rather than direct narratorial observation: she identifies “an air of moral mediocrity” and formulates an academic analogy to illustrate what Eliot herself later described as the “debasement [of] the moral currency”:

All life seemed cheapened; as it might seem to a young student who, having believed that to gain a certain degree he must write a thesis in which he would bring his powers to bear with memorable effect, suddenly ascertained that no thesis was expected, but the sum (in English money) of twenty-seven pounds ten shillings and sixpence (341-2).

Felix Holt portrays how rigid Utilitarian ethics can combine with mechanistic economic systems to cause this very debasement. Felix, in the extremity of his opposition to that combination, serves to highlight its systemic limitations. A normative economics is therefore implicit but, in practice, remains distant and, like the novel’s eponymous hero, somewhat abstract.⁶⁹ *Felix Holt* champions renunciation but ultimately promotes political inaction: in ethical terms it better describes how not to live than how best to live. My next chapters will consider whether her next two novels, by incorporating the economic into competing ethical systems, provide any more positive guidance.

⁶⁹ Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation*, talks of the otherness of Felix’s “pure value” (244). See also Guy: “Felix’s moral goodness is a negation of ... materialism” (199).

**Testing the Kantian Pillars: Debt Obligations and Financial Imperatives in
*Middlemarch***

Early in 1876, the first two editions of the newly-launched *Mind* featured essays, which Eliot read, on the history and present state of philosophy at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.¹ Their inclusion is a good reminder of the common sources of and close association between psychology and philosophy during the period, while the author of the Cambridge article, Henry Sidgwick, represents the very embodiment of that connection between nineteenth-century moral philosophy and economics that underlies much of my thesis.² It is notable that both Sidgwick and his Oxford counterpart, Mark Pattison were well acquainted with the Leweses and were regular companions during the couples' visits to their respective universities: Eliot's ethical and wider intellectual opinions were as respected and sought after at both institutions as Lewes's in the scientific fields.³ The *Mind* articles, while, by definition somewhat parochial in their detailed assessments and criticisms, nevertheless hint strongly at the issue that dominated nineteenth-century academic moral philosophical debate: the competing claims of Utilitarianism and intuitionism.

Pattison, bemoaning the "atrophy of philosophy here", looks enviously towards Sidgwick's Cambridge, and the Moral Sciences Tripos, whose "exactness of method and certainty of view is unfavourable to the ambitious constructions of post-Kantian

¹ Mark Pattison, 'Philosophy at Oxford', *Mind* 1, 1 (Jan. 1876), 82-97, and Henry Sidgwick, 'Philosophy at Cambridge', *Mind* 1, 2 (Apr. 1876), 235-246. Eliot received Pattison's article the month before publication and on 27th December, 1875 Lewes wrote to him: "Last night Mrs Lewes read aloud your remarkable paper on Philosophy at Oxford and I must scribble you a line to say how delighted and gratified we were with it" (*Letters*, 4, 202).

² While best known for his moral philosophical writings, most notably *The Methods of Ethics* (1874), in 1883 Sidgwick produced *The Principles of Political Economy*. In the *Mind* article, he describes the Moral Sciences Tripos "where exceptional stress is laid on Logic (including Methodology) and Political Economy, which are made departments co-ordinate with the larger but vaguer subjects of Mental Philosophy (Psychology and Metaphysics), and Moral and Political Philosophy" (245).

³ See Barrett for an interpretation of F.W. H. Myers's famous account of his "God, Immortality, Duty" conversation with Eliot in the Fellows' Garden of Trinity College. The terms of Myers's recollection, Barrett argues, "allows the Cambridge man to appropriate George Eliot rather than to admit how thoroughly out of place she was in the Fellows' Garden and how, by becoming the leading novelist of her day, she had in fact appropriated what had traditionally belonged to the Fellows" (10).

metaphysics.”⁴ His review of recent publications by his own academic colleagues includes a critical appraisal of probably Oxford’s leading moral philosopher of the period, T. H. Green, whose book-length introduction to *Hume’s Philosophical Works* is, Pattison angrily concludes, “nothing less than a treatise on the insufficiency of empirical metaphysics, of the philosophy of experience.”⁵ For most of the third quarter of the century, the claims of empiricism - “the philosophy of experience” - had been championed by Mill in his public battles against the intuitionist beliefs of Adam Sedgwick, William Whewell and Sir William Hamilton.⁶ Pattison now calls on a new challenger to the threat epitomised by Green: “Under the disguise of an introduction, Mr. Green has in fact issued an declaration of war, from an idealist point of view, against the reigning empirical logic. To this challenge, Mr. Lewes’s *Problems of Life and Mind* may serve as the ready-made rejoinder.”⁷ Needless to say, George Eliot’s position in the ensuing battle of words between Lewes and Green was unequivocally by her husband’s side. Considerations of loyalty and duty aside, Lewes’s insistence on the inseparability of psychology and ethical judgment (moral philosophy and moral psychology as two sides of the same coin), was the scientific formalisation of a relationship she had recognised, and expressed in her writing, for many years.⁸ In 1860, she was strongly critical of a narrow and experientially inaccurate concept of ethics that failed fully to embrace “a widening psychology.”⁹

My previous chapter considered how, in *Felix Holt*, George Eliot tested the limitations of Utilitarian ethics. This chapter will explore further the location of her thought in relation to the two competing schools by examining how she exposed the

⁴ Sidgwick, ‘Philosophy at Cambridge’, 245.

⁵ Pattison, ‘Philosophy at Oxford’, 95.

⁶ See ‘Sedgwick’s Discourse’ (1835), and ‘Whewell on Moral Philosophy’ (1852), in Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 10, ‘Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society’, 165-201, 31-74. By the 1870s, the influence of Mill at the very university where many of these adversaries had earlier held sway is noted by Sidgwick: “I should be disposed to think that no indigenous thinker, for 150 years, has had an influence in Cambridge at all equal to that recently exercised from a distance, by John Stuart Mill” (‘Philosophy at Cambridge’, 244).

⁷ Pattison, ‘Philosophy at Oxford’, 96.

⁸ See Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture 1850-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 311-318, for an account of the confrontation between Lewes and Green.

⁹ *Letters*, 3, 318. In response to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s criticism of Maggie Tulliver, she writes: “If the ethics of art do not admit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble but liable to great error – error that is anguish to its own nobleness – *then*, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow, and must be widened to correspond with a widening psychology.”

claims of intuitionist, rational (as opposed to empirical) ethics to complex financial scenarios through the medium of fiction. It will again conclude that her syncretic mind defies categorization within a single ethical system. As I have argued earlier, her main intellectual associations and her position at the *Westminster Review* would seem firmly to align her to the Utilitarian tradition, particularly in the form modified by Mill and further developed by Sidgwick.¹⁰ As I have also argued, however, even the evaluative hedonism they formulated was, for Eliot, an insufficient ethical principle.

Her opposition to Green's neo-Kantianism was, at one level, as unequivocal as her earlier criticism of Whewell and other anti-empiricist thinkers.¹¹ In her essay 'The Future of German Philosophy' she is directly critical of Kant and is emphatic that experience and *a posteriori* method represent the only valid epistemological path. In this, she largely follows Lewes's assessment of Kant in the 1845 *Biographical History of Philosophy*, which argues against the existence of *a priori* ideas.¹² My earlier reference to Eliot's description of her novels as "experiments in life" clearly aligns her ethical purpose to the empirical method. Further, her connection of the moral and natural sciences is a presupposition in opposition to what Kant expressed in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* as "the utmost necessity to work out for once a pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical".¹³ Precepts based on experience rather than reason, he argued "can indeed be called a practical rule

¹⁰ If *The Methods of Ethics* does not attempt a full synthesis of the competing ethical schools, Sidgwick is anxious to examine different principles and methods "from a neutral position." See Schneewind, esp. part 2, ch. 6, 'The Aims and Scope of *The Method of Ethics*.' Sidgwick opens his posthumously published lecture on Green by locating himself in relation to two opposing positions: "Spencer and Green represent two lines of thought divergent from my own in opposite directions, but agreeing in that they do not treat Ethics as a subject that can stand alone. Spencer bases it on Science, Green on Metaphysics." Henry Sidgwick, *Lectures on the Ethics of T. H. Green, Mr. Herbert Spencer, and J. Martineau* (London: Macmillan, 1902), 1.

¹¹ See Schneewind, part 1, ch. 3, 'The Cambridge Moralists'.

¹² *Essays*, 148-53. Eliot praises the subject of her review, Otto Friedrich Gruppe, who "renounces the attempt to climb to heaven by the rainbow bridge of 'the high *a priori* road', and is content humbly to use his muscles in treading the uphill *a posteriori* path" (153).

¹³ As I note later in this chapter, scientific empiricism and ethics are frequently directly and metaphorically linked in Eliot. In *Middlemarch*, Lydgate's realisation of the wider implications of his part in the events leading to Raffles's death represents a tainting of the scientific objectivity which was the bedrock of his ethics: "the scientific conscience had got into the debasing company of money obligation and selfish respects" (729). Lydgate's rational error was not to locate and accommodate financial obligations and responsibilities within that ethical framework.

but never a moral law.”¹⁴ In both her essays and fiction, Eliot frequently links, either directly or through metaphor, sensory experience and morality. In her critical review of Charles Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* (1855), for example, she contrasts the author with an artist in his “true sphere”, who assumes the role of teacher “in the sense in which every great artist is a teacher – namely, by giving us his higher sensibility as a medium, a delicate acoustic or optical instrument, bringing home to our coarser senses what would otherwise be unperceived by us.”¹⁵

However, it is notable that both Eliot and Lewes direct most of their criticism of Kant against his epistemology rather than the content of his ethics. Lewes concludes his remarks on ‘The Consequences of Kant’s Psychology’ in *The Biographical History* with the regret “that our space will not permit us to enter further into Kant’s system of morality, and his splendid vindication of the great idea of duty.”¹⁶ Both agreed that the prevailing British criticism of Kant was generally misguided and based on insufficient knowledge of his work.¹⁷ Given the influence of eighteenth and nineteenth-century German thought on Eliot’s intellectual development, something of an ambivalence towards Kant should not come as a surprise. Rosemary Ashton has traced the pervasive German influence, with particular focus on the work of Strauss and Feuerbach, both of whom Eliot translated.¹⁸ While pervasive Feuerbachian traces in her thought have been

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4:389. Following standard method, all references are to the pagination of the standard German edition of Kant’s works by the German Academy. Subsequent references will be parenthesised in the text.

¹⁵ *Essays*, 126. The reference to the “optical instrument” reminds us of the constant references to and questioning of the optical in the novels and most notably *Middlemarch*. Rylance grounds her preoccupation with visual perception and illusion in contemporary philosophical and psychological debate: “[Eliot] who, thoroughly acquainted with philosophical debate in this area, is preoccupied, almost, it sometimes seems, above all else, by issues relating to how we see, what we see, and the points of view that allow or disallow that always-limited vision” (44).

¹⁶ G. H. Lewes, *A Biographical History of Philosophy*, 1845 (London: Routledge, 1892), 561.

¹⁷ For example, in her 1865 article for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, ‘A Word for the Germans’, Eliot insists: “the most eminent of German metaphysicians, KANT, is cloudy in no other sense than that a mathematician is cloudy to one ignorant of mathematics...The recipe for understanding KANT is first to get brains capable of following his argument, and next to master his terminology” (*Essays*, 387-8).

¹⁸ Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Strauss’s criticism, she writes, “follows Kant’s great critical method” (151). However, Ashton argues that the greatly more pervasive influence of Feuerbach was at least in part because his “welcome religion of humanity was built on an empirical base” (159).

well acknowledged, Kant's influence is largely disregarded.¹⁹ It is, I think, significant, in regard to her overt criticism, that Kantian thought was largely promoted in England by the Cambridge moralists, one of whose major purposes was to preserve the authority of the established church; a purpose at odds with Eliot's own move away from established religion and its institutions.²⁰ However her search for "the moral motive", a concept both at the heart of Kant's deontology and absent from ends-based Utilitarianism, was central and critical to her own ethical theory. In her *Autobiography*, Edith Simcox recalls her meeting with Eliot in 1878 in which this very reservation was expressed: "She thought the weak point of Utilitarianism, in Sidgwick and others, lay not in taking human welfare as the standard of right but in their trying to find in it the moral *motive*."²¹ For the Utilitarian, motive, while indicative of character, has no bearing on the goodness of an action, which is determined solely by its outcome. Such philosophy runs counter to Kantianism and the "kingdom of ends" (4:433) and for Eliot, literature's moral value lay not only in the artistic presentation of realistic, empirical human action but of the motive both real and imagined that lies behind this:

...my writing is simply a set of experiments in life – an endeavour to see what our thought and emotion may be capable of – what stores of motive, actual or hinted as possible, give promise of a better after which we may strive.²²

Her appreciation of the complexity of motive distances her from instrumentalism, subjective egoism and any other rule system of ethics. It thereby establishes a crucial, though clearly incomplete, philosophical alignment with Kant. Themes of motive, duty

¹⁹ See, however, Carroll, *Conflict of Interpretations*, in relation to Eliot's partial reassessment of Lewes's position in the Utilitarianism versus intuitionism debate: "Eliot clearly felt that Lewes had misrepresented the situation by coming down too firmly on the side of the former, underestimating the 'a priori' principles that make moral experience intelligible in the first place" (22).

²⁰ Ashton makes a similar point with regard to Eliot's ambivalence over Strauss: "Strauss's clinging to... [Christianity]...did not have her full approval. Nevertheless, she was aware of Strauss's immense importance for the progress of historical research, and was wise enough to see that if German transcendental philosophy and its heirs had some shortcomings, what was nonetheless needed in England was a fair welcome to such works as Strauss's, which were far in advance of British notions" (*The German Idea*, 153).

²¹ *Letters*, 9, 217. Eliot's insistence on the "moral motive," however, was essentially in line with Mill. See, for example, my discussion of 'Utilitarianism' in ch. 4 above.

²² *Letters*, 6, 216.

and renunciation, which she was later to incorporate at the ethical heart of her fiction, are urgently expressed in her 1855 review of Geraldine Jewsbury's *Constance Herbert*:

It is not the fact that what duty calls on us to renounce, will invariably prove 'not worth the keeping'; and if it *were* the fact, renunciation would cease to be moral heroism, and would be simply a calculation of prudence...The notion that duty looks stern, but all the while has her hand full of sugar-plums, with which she will reward us by-and-by, is the favourite cant of optimists, who try to make out that this tangled wilderness of life has a plan as easy to trace as a Dutch garden; but it really undermines all true moral development by perpetually substituting something extrinsic as a motive to action, instead of the immediate impulse of love or justice, which alone makes an action truly moral."²³

My previous chapter explored the link between Utilitarianism and classical economics. Deontological ethics has no corresponding theoretical economic relation, yet, by examining Eliot's thought and artistic method in relation to Kantian principles, I hope to reveal strong and illuminating insights into wider economic ethics. My close reference to the *Groundwork* reflects both its status as the most succinct statement of Kant's ethics and its use of financially-informed theoretical situations to illustrate and test the validity and application of the categorical imperative.²⁴ The most successful of these illustrations describes a man who borrows money secured on a knowingly false promise to repay; a situation that is closely paralleled in *Middlemarch*, as I describe below.

By following my examination of economic ethics in *Felix Holt* with a somewhat parallel treatment of *Middlemarch*, I am responding to Eliot's suggestion that her novels, representing "successive mental phases", benefit from being read in the order in which they were produced. The gap between the publications of these novels was the longest in her career and the nature and range of her reading in preparation for and during the composition of *Middlemarch* is informative. William Lecky's *History of European Morals* (1869) reveals a focus on the historical development and temporal relativity of

²³ *Essays*, 134-5. I think this passage has a particularly Kantian tone. Note also that Kant contrasts prudence and duty (4:402), and later stresses prudence is "always hypothetical" (4: 416). It is significant, therefore, that when her family is discussing Dorothea's decision to marry Ladislaw, Cadwallader admits that she may have acted "imprudently", but not that she committed a "wrong action" (875).

²⁴ See note 36 below for Kant's financially-informed value system in the "kingdom of ends". He distinguishes between "market price", "fancy price" and "inner worth".

morals within a wider context of comparative method that links many of the other works referenced in her preparatory notebooks.²⁵ Lecky's hostile criticism of Utilitarian ethics and promotion of an *a priori* moral sense in his long introductory survey, is a further reminder of Eliot's close familiarity with the battle lines of contemporary ethical debate.²⁶

As a text through which to explore the complexity of economic motivation and action and the limits of any associated ethical system, *Middlemarch* offers an almost uniquely rich seam. All of the major and many of the minor characters in the novel either exercise inter-personal money power or are compelled to make ethically significant financial choices.²⁷ Yet none of them (apart from the wonderful Joshua Rigg, who literally converts property into gold) is driven solely or even primarily by the acquisition of money.²⁸ As such, the novel marks a significant advance in the depth and complexity of Eliot's economic ethics from her earlier fiction. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot is able to explore the attractions and limitations of deontological, rational ethics - built largely on the Kantian pillars of normative universality - as an alternative to Utilitarianism and naturalistic empiricism.

As in my previous chapter, my reading will focus closely on Eliot's imagined characters, thinking and making decisions about money in both neutral and more morally charged situations. I am therefore reiterating my claim for Eliot's brand of psychologically insightful realist novel as an enlightening ethical medium. As Robert Audi has written "the literature of ethics is dominated by problems awaiting judgment; it pays too little attention to conditions under which moral decisions or action is called for in the first place. Not everything we do is morally significant."²⁹ While *Middlemarch* is not free from moments of "crisis ethics" (Mary Garth at Featherstone's deathbed and

²⁵ See the perceptive 'Introduction' in John Clark Pratt and Victor A. Neufeldt (eds.), *George Eliot's Middlemarch Notebooks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

²⁶ William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, 1869 (London: Longman, Green 1892).

²⁷ Eliot's analysis of the material concerns of many of the novel's characters perceptively anticipates aspects of modern adaptation and aspiration level theory. See Bruno S. Frey and Alois Stutzer, 'Testing Theories of Happiness', in Bruni and Porta, 116-146.

²⁸ "But as Warren Hastings looked at gold and thought of buying Daylesford, so Joshua Rigg looked at Stone Court and thought of buying gold" (*Middlemarch*, 509). Subsequent references will appear in the text.

²⁹ Robert Audi, 'A Kantian Intuitionism', *Mind*, 110. 439 (2001), 601-33, (630).

Dorothea grappling with her husband's final request are obvious examples, which will form part of my discussion), in general, attitudes and motivations are seen to evolve gradually with each layer of mental description.³⁰ By contrast, the imagined agents central to the theoretical illustrative dilemmas of the moral philosopher are uncoloured by context or psychological dimension and yet often confronted with extreme and morally-loaded choices. Iris Murdoch draws the distinction in her argument that literature can capture a “sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons...Through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our lives.”³¹ The “opacity of persons” is as absent from Kant and Mill as it is from academic ethicists in our own age.³² It is clearly a technique not without value. As Kwame Anthony Appiah writes in his analysis of the use of “trolley problems” in the work of many moral philosophers of the last half-century: “It is an interesting and unobvious assumption, which hasn’t had the attention it deserves, that our responses to imaginary scenarios mirror our responses to real ones.”³³ Novels also use “imaginary scenarios” to lead the reader to ask “what would I do?”, but potentially in ways that both enrich and expose the limitations of any ethical theory that attempts a normative solution to the question. This potential is most fully realised in *Middlemarch*.

I would like to start with an example from *Middlemarch* to illustrate the novel-form’s ability to unravel the finer points of theoretical distinction. Just prior to his decision to terminate his contract with Bulstrode, Caleb Garth proposes that Fred Vincy be installed as the estate manager of Stone Court.³⁴ Garth’s suggestion is driven purely by a concern for Fred's welfare and advancement and has no self-interested motivation. The reader has formed an understanding of Garth’s particular virtues and circumstances and registers his

³⁰ As such, Eliot shared the ethical precision she attributed to Goethe’s writing: “...his mode of treatment seems to us precisely that which is really moral in its influence. It is without exaggeration; he is in no haste to alarm readers into virtue by melodramatic consequences; he quietly follows the stream of fact and life; and waits patiently for the moral processes of nature as we all do for her material processes” (*Essays*, 146-7).

³¹ Iris Murdoch, ‘Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch’, *Encounter*, 16.1 (1961), quoted in Jane Adamson, ‘Against Tidiness: Literature and/versus Moral Philosophy’ in Adamson, Freadman and Parker, 85.

³² The scenarios presented are often so far removed from everyday contemporary life that they sometimes go beyond parable to fairy tale, e.g. Mill’s consideration, in ‘Utilitarianism’, of the case of the motive and intention of an evil tyrant rescuing his enemy from drowning. (Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 10, 219).

³³ Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, 100.

³⁴ *Middlemarch*, ch. 68.

request as that of a good man acting with a good will towards a good end for the benefit of others. Bulstrode, however, in agreeing to Garth's suggestion is motivated by selfish calculation: not only does he want to secure Garth's support in what he perceives as a gathering storm around Raffles, he also perceives this as a way of deflecting his wife's criticism against his negligence of her family, in particular, his refusal to offer financial assistance to the Lydgates.

In Utilitarian terms, Garth's request and Bulstrode's acquiescence have equivalent value: both combine to secure the intended beneficial consequence for Fred, while also supporting Bulstrode's selfish ends. By contrast Kant states as a fundamental proposition in the *Groundwork*: "an action from duty has its moral worth *not in the purpose* to be attained by its part in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon, and therefore does not depend upon the realisation of the object of the action but merely upon the *principle of volition* in accordance with which the action is done without regard for any object of the faculty of desire" (4: 400). A good act is conditional not in the realisation of its ends, but in its very motive for action and, for Kant, the motive and the willing of the ends are rationally inseparable. In Kantian terms, Bulstrode's violation of moral law is implicit in his failure of reason. When he first contemplates the possibility of Raffles' death, the reader is allowed to follow the cognitive train of a moral psychology that seeks justification in the separation of motive and content: "intention was everything in the question of right and wrong. And Bulstrode set himself to keep his intention separate from his desire" (692-3). Bulstrode is here guilty of a practical, rational contradiction by willing the end (Raffles death) and not the means (his own intervention), even though the latter is conceptually contained in the former.³⁵ He employs a similar line of reasoning when contemplating the source of his wealth and desperately attempts to secure the boundaries of moral responsibility by reference to philosophical principle, in this case the concept of unintended consequences: "is it not one thing to set up a new gin palace and another to accept an investment in an old one? The profits made out in lost souls – where can the line be drawn at which they begin in human transaction?" (603). The authorial intervention, after a long series of free indirect speech, powerfully captures the morally flawed reconciliation he attempts to make between two fundamentally

³⁵ Kant, Section II.

incompatible paths: "Bulstrode found himself carrying on two distinct lives; his religious activity could not be incompatible with his business as soon as he had argued himself into not feeling it incompatible" (603).

This attempt to (ab)use reason to correct intuitive feelings of right and wrong strikes at the heart of Kantian ethical theory. Contrary to an ethics grounded in empiricism, Kant argues that non-contingent duties (the categorical imperative) lie "prior to all experience, in the idea of a reason determining the will by means of a priori grounds" (4:408). Eliot writes famously in *Middlemarch* that "We are all of us born into moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves" (205), but her most sympathetic characters in the novel all show an intuitive and deeply felt sense of duty and right which seems to transcend practical experience. Once again the point is best articulated by Caleb Garth, here explaining to his wife how he came to the decision to employ Fred Vincy: "It's my duty Susan...I've got a clear feeling inside me, and that I shall follow" (551-2). His words are later echoed when, despite admitting to an intuitive sympathy for Bulstrode's anguish, his decision to leave his employment is secured by a greater law: "Caleb felt a deep pity for him, but he could have used no pretexts to account for his resolve, even if they would have been of any use." He tells Bulstrode, "I have that feeling inside me, that I can't go on working with you... Everything else is buried, so far as my will goes" (684).

Throughout the novel this assertion of the preeminence of intuitive moral feeling is signaled by an explicit rejection of material reward.³⁶ Caleb's disregard for money is a repeated motif of his moral integrity and elsewhere we see Lydgate and Ladislaw standing apart from commercial concerns.³⁷ Lydgate is morally differentiated from his fellow practitioners by his abhorrence of the commerce of medicine, which is shown to severely compromise their medical vocation. As I explain below, Lydgate's flawed reason in his handling of his financial affairs comes to threaten the autonomy and integrity of his will, but his fundamental sense of duty towards his fellow man is preserved throughout

³⁶ Compare Kant in the *Groundwork*, 4:434: "In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity."

³⁷ Note, however, Ladislaw is conscious of his financial obligations, while Garth's determination to make good the creditors of his failed building business while continuing a virtuous, observant life is in stark contrast to Mr. Tulliver's tortured road out of bankruptcy.

his fall from grace. The instinct physically to support the disgraced Bulstrode overcomes the practical and self-interested realisation that such a gesture is likely to support the widespread opinion that he has been corrupted by Bulstrode's financial patronage.³⁸ It is an essentially Kantian demonstration of motive and will independent of self-interested outcome. In fact, according to Kant, Lydgate's "unspeakable bitter[ness]" in assisting Bulstrode actually elevates the moral content of his action because it was done not from inclination but from a duty that transcends sympathy: "It is just then that the worth of character comes out, which is moral and incomparably the highest, namely that he is beneficent not from inclination but from duty" (4:399).³⁹ A similar dilemma is dramatically framed in the scene of Peter Featherstone's deathbed. While Mary Garth is aware of the likely positive consequences to Fred of following Featherstone's instruction to burn one of his wills, her choice of action comes "imperatively and excluded all question in the critical moment" (311). Mrs. Garth's later assessment of the incident asserts the independence and preeminence of categorical duties over specific practical consequences and is again explicitly Kantian: "a loss which falls on another because we have done right is not to lie upon our conscience" (397).

In Section 2 of the *Groundwork*, Kant famously reformulates the categorical imperative around specifically human ends: "so act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (4: 429). The extent to which characters in *Middlemarch* adopt ethical standards in accordance with this "principle of humanity" or "kingdom of ends" is marked by monetary motives and actions. Those with money, most notably Bulstrode and Featherstone, but also Casaubon, use it directly as a means of attempting to control the actions of others.⁴⁰ Monetary behaviour in the novel therefore becomes a primary indicator of the level of adherence to Kant's principle of humanity. In the case of Fred

³⁸ "What could he do? He could not see a man sink close to him for want of help. He rose and gave his arm to Bulstrode, and in that way led him out of the room; yet this act, which might have been one of gentle duty and pure compassion, was at this moment unspeakably bitter to him" (718).

³⁹ I discuss the distinct absence of eudaimonistic content in Kantian duty and Eliot's likely reservations thereon below.

⁴⁰ This power structure is of course inverted and taken to a criminal extreme by Raffles who, lacking money, uses secret knowledge to extort it from Bulstrode. See Welsh, 243-55. Note also that Lydgate's awareness of his dwindling power in his marriage finds focus and becomes apparent in financial disagreements: "There was gathering within him an amazed sense of his powerlessness over Rosamond" (572).

Vincy, what he thinks of, says about and does with money is central to a process whereby he comes to elevate other people from means of serving his personal pleasures to ends in themselves. Indeed, the incident that epitomises his flawed, or rather absent sense of duty early in the novel closely resembles one of the examples Kant uses to illustrate how the "willed universal law" principle of the categorical imperative can help identify non-contingent duties. Although, unlike the agent in Kant's example, Fred does not take a loan from Caleb Garth in conscious and certain knowledge that he will be unable to repay, the maxim by which he might seem to justify his choice of creditor could be formulated as: "When I believe myself to be in need of money, I shall borrow money and promise to repay it without any certain means of repayment from the least demanding, most trusting person I know who can least afford the loss." It is equally logically incapable of being willed as a universal law.⁴¹ Fred's moral enlightenment following his partial default on the loan is gradual and uneven but is marked by a growing understanding of his financial obligation to others. He comes to equate his financial irresponsibility, which transgresses moral law, with a breach of criminal law and recognises the wider implications of not honouring its commitments: "I have already a debt to you but you will never be discharged, even when I have been able to pay it in the shape of money" (549).⁴²

It should be noted that Kant's formulation grounds the principle of humanity in actions both towards other people and to "your own person". Indeed Mary Garth, while acting under the compulsion of an intuitive sense of right in refusing to follow Featherstone's deathbed instruction, also admits to a self interested motive: "I will not let the end of your life soil the beginning of mine". Her words are later echoed by Ladislav in his rejection of Bulstrode's offer of money and inheritance: "my unblemished honour is important to me" (611). Ladislav's positioning of money is significant in establishing his wider scale of values. Rather than accept money from a dishonourable man, he would pay everything he has to eradicate his maternal association with the sources of Bulstrode's

⁴¹ In Kant's example, the maxim "when I believe myself to be in need of money I shall borrow money and promise to repay it, even though I know it will never happen" is shown to be logically incapable of being universalised (4:422).

⁴² "[Fred] suddenly saw himself as a pitiful rascal who was robbing two women of their savings" (244).

wealth.⁴³ However, the character who, in following her chosen marital and philanthropic paths of duty, shows least observance to Kant's duty towards self, is Dorothea.⁴⁴ Her struggle through much of the novel is to find a way of living that unites doing most good with doing what is most right. In some sense, therefore, she strives to combine consequentialist and Kantian ethics and Eliot explores that attempted resolution partly by reference to attempted monetary and economic solutions. Specifically, her quest brings her to higher levels of enlightenment on two parallel and economically-related tracks, which I discuss below: an understanding of the limits of consequentialism; and the achievement of full moral autonomy by the assumption of monetary choice and responsibility.

There is also a Kantian dimension to Dorothea's greater acceptance, or de-alienation of material things in her life, which accompanies these developments. Celia notes early in the novel that her sister "likes giving up" (18) and Dorothea's rejection of most of her mother's jewelry is related to her disdain for the "miserable men" who "find such things, and work at them, and sell them" (14). Elaine Freedgood has noted Dorothea's "highly personal and largely confused (and confusing) approach to the interpretation of objects" and nicely concludes that her attempts to stand outside materiality and the market leave her with "the overwhelming task of having to decide the value of things on a thing-by-thing basis."⁴⁵ Andrew H. Miller has also observed how "Dorothea represents herself in her dress by renunciation or negation", a form of repression that is contrasted with Rosamond's dress and spending habits in which she becomes "fully associated with commodified goods."⁴⁶ Miller skillfully traces how Eliot suggests Dorothea's changing position in relation to material culture by reference to nuanced details of and modifications to her dress, culminating in the scene with Ladislav in which she embraces

⁴³ Note also his hope that material and transcendent values might be reconciled in a kind of formulaic equation: "The secret hope that after some years he might come back with the sense that he had at least a personal value equal to her wealth" (613). Both Ladislav and Caleb Garth subvert recognised conceptions of wealth and fortune: "to have within him such a feeling as [Ladislav] had towards Dorothea, was like the inheritance of a fortune" (460); while Caleb comments on a job well done: "I'd sooner have it than a fortune" (393).

⁴⁴ Valerie Wainwright: *Ethics and the English Novel from Austen to Forster* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), includes a Kantian reading of Dorothea's struggle to reconcile duty and well-being and draws some similar conclusions, esp. 130-134. She also traces the influence of Spinoza's ethics in this regard, the subject of Elizabeth Deeds Ermath's essay, 'Negotiating *Middlemarch*' in Chase, 133-156.

⁴⁵ Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 118, 127.

⁴⁶ Miller, *Novels Behind Glass*, 196, 197.

the responsibilities of domestic economic management in a house “in a street” (809), on “seven-hundred-a-year” and promises to “learn what everything costs” (801).⁴⁷

Despite her repeated efforts both before her marriage and after her husband’s death, Dorothea fails to find a model of action that embraces political economic principles in support of a Utilitarian outcome of greater good. Her encouragement of Chettam’s attempts to improve the living conditions of the farm labourers, which, because they do not lead to any corresponding increase in rent, fall outside of political economic theory and are therefore misunderstood and dismissed by her uncle.⁴⁸ Even late in the novel we find Dorothea “sat down in the library before her particular little heap of books on political economy and kindred matters, out of which she was trying to get light as to the best way of spending money” (796) for the benefit of all. In her ideals of redistribution, effectively striving for the greatest financial good for the greatest number, she demonstrates the limits of theoretical consequentialism.⁴⁹ Her attraction to and concern for Ladislaw inspires her first attempts to locate economic ethics in a more immediate, familial context, as she ponders “with a sympathy that grew to agitation” (362-3) questions of duty and inheritance in relation to law and natural justice. The description of her agitated thoughts is shot through with Kantian language: the responsibility to recompense Ladislaw is from “the fulfillment of claims founded on our own deeds”; a “just view” must be taken in order to restore a “right footing” and the “unfair concentration” of wealth must be redistributed to provide him with a “rightful income”. Ironically, Casaubon’s realisation of the categorical nature of Dorothea’s concepts of right and duty, “her power of devoting herself to the idea of the right and best” (467), inspires his attempt to commit her to a promise that will bind her future in accordance with his will.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Miller, *Novels Behind Glass*, 192-214.

⁴⁸ “‘Young ladies don’t understand political economy, you know,’ said Mr Brooke, smiling towards Mr Casaubon” (17).

⁴⁹ And is accordingly teased by her sister:

“‘Oh, all the troubles of all people on the face of the earth,’ said Dorothea, lifting her arms to the back of her head.

‘Dear me, Dodo, are you going to have a scheme for them?’ said Celia, a little uneasy at this Hamlet-like raving” (765).

⁵⁰ Later on: “She yearned towards the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her, and rule her errant will” (777). Significantly, the epigraph heading this chapter (80) is from Wordsworth’s *Ode to Duty*.

The key to Dorothea's enlightenment is the Kantian realisation that the claims of an unspoken promise to a dead husband are contingent and inferior to the duty to treat oneself as an end; to strive for a personal flourishing in the widest sense. This realisation is paralleled by a modification in her money-giving plans and actions, away from the impartial spread of her "greatest good" philanthropic dreams to the personal, focused gifts and assistance she directs to Farebrother (through the Lowick living), Lydgate's hospital project and finally Lydgate himself.⁵¹ As her ambitious and idealistic philanthropic plans are by necessity reined in, the true nature of the duty of beneficence, framed in Kantian rather than impartial Utilitarian terms, emerges. In her union with Ladislaw, the essential emotional component of her moral psychology is enriched by a proper "beneficent activity" (822).⁵²

The minutely-described process by which Dorothea comes to recognise the misguided hopes and expectations on which she had based her decision to marry Casaubon is marked by the use of the language and imagery of confinement; the spatial dimension of her life seems to shrink with her opportunities to do good and thrive. Her attempts to rationalise her confinement by asserting the supremacy of marital duty is thwarted by the renewed and amplified pressure her husband exerts in seeking agreement to his final request: she is "fettered" by the "yoke of marriage" he has made for her (472). Her emotional and intellectual imprisonment becomes increasingly associated with her increased wealth as she concludes "[my] own money buys me nothing but an uneasy conscience" (364). Ironically, as I will discuss below, the same language of fettering and confinement is increasingly used in relation to Lydgate as his financial situation deteriorates. In both cases, changing material circumstances have the effect of

⁵¹ Christianson describes Dorothea's movement to more targeted giving and makes a wider conclusion that "Eliot's articulation of partiality, sympathy, and moral agency constitutes a practical and conceptual basis for philanthropy" (162).

⁵² See David O. Brink, *Perfectionism and the Common Good: Themes in the Philosophy of T. H. Green* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Brink makes the same point in relation to Green's philosophy and the "distributionally sensitive" nature of Kantianism: "Utilitarianism is an agent-neutral form of consequentialism, because it says that an agent has the same reason to be concerned about anyone independently of the relationship in which he stands to that person. By contrast, both Green's ethics of self-realization and self-referential altruism are agent-relative in so far as they claim that an agent's reasons to be concerned about someone depend essentially on the nature of the relationship that exists between the agent and that person" (77).

constraining the freedom of the will. Autonomy, central to Kant's conception of the rational moral agent, becomes limited and impinges upon moral motive and action.

The description of one of the money-giving acts of the more enlightened Dorothea to which I earlier referred, the appointment of Farebrother as the rector of Lowick, is significant in emphasising the recovery of her moral autonomy. She explains to Farebrother: "I think it would be easier to give up power and money than to keep them. It seems very unfitting that I should have this patronage, yet I felt that I ought not to let it be used by someone else instead of me" (501). This description of a financially related motive, informed by personal responsibility and duty, in turn contrasts sharply with Bulstrode's earlier rationalisation and justification of his moneymaking activities. He effectively detaches moral autonomy from financial motive by establishing divine providence as the deterministic force behind all his actions, even those he recognises as "misdeeds", for "... even when committed -- had they not been half sanctified by the singleness of his desire to devote himself and all he possessed to the furtherance of the divine scheme?" (515).

Bulstrode's ethical scheme is consequential but substitutes the pleasure principle, which is the motivational bedrock of Utilitarianism, with a rigid adherence to divine providence. It is strongly reminiscent of the Evangelical morality of which Eliot was so scathingly critical in her 1855 essay on Dr. Cumming, whose "perverted moral judgment" she ascribed to "egoistic passions and dogmatic beliefs".⁵³ Bulstrode's financial misdeeds, both in the accumulation of his wealth and in his attempts to preserve the providentially appointed power and social position that wealth has created, are consequently shorn of autonomous moral responsibility.⁵⁴ Thus, when he recognises the desirability of securing Lydgate as an ally during Raffles' final illness and reverses his decision not to advance a loan: "He did not measure the quantity of diseased motive which had made him wish for Lydgate's goodwill, but the quantity was none the less actively there, like an irritating agent in the blood" (695)⁵⁵.

⁵³ *Essays*, 184, 186.

⁵⁴ Again foreshadowed by the Dr. Cumming essay. He too subjugates autonomous reason under "a formula of imprisoning the intellect, depriving it of its proper function – the free search for truth – and making it the mere servant-of-all-work to a foregone conclusion" (*Essays*, 167).

⁵⁵ Another natural scientific image in relation to moral motive.

Although desire for financial gain does not, *per se*, motivate Bulstrode's actions, money assumes for him a level of critical instrumentality which leads him greatly to elevate its contingent nature. This is also the case for those characters who, from widely different ethical positions, attempt to control the actions of others by the assertion of financial obligation, such as Featherstone and Casaubon. Indeed, the contrasting moral autonomy of characters such as Caleb Garth and Ladislaw is emphasised by their adherence to non-contingent, or categorical, values that transcend the material. Thus Caleb Garth is beyond the influence of Featherstone, who "felt himself ill at ease with a brother-in-law whom he could not annoy, who did not mind about being considered poor, had nothing to ask of him, and understood all kinds of farming and mining business better than he did" (251). In his relationship with Casaubon, Ladislaw is required to weigh duty against individual will and freedom in specific relation to money obligation and, because he genuinely does not "care for prestige or high pay", is able to reject Casaubon's demands because: "an obligation of this kind cannot fairly fetter me" (367).

In relation to their positioning of money in their overall ethical schemes, most characters in *Middlemarch* remain largely consistent.⁵⁶ The greatest exception to this generalization is Lydgate, through whom Eliot most closely explores the wider implications of debt obligations and their threat to moral autonomy. The early depiction of Lydgate standing outside the money economy – "bent on doing many things that were not directly fitted to make his fortune or even secure him a good income" (93) – is reinforced by his unique (in Middlemarch environs) position in the medical profession. His sense of vocation and belief that medicine can best combine science and emotion establishes him as an idealist set apart from the various medical practitioners who unite in their condemnation of his "ungentlemanly attempts to discredit the sale of drugs", by which they profit handsomely (257).⁵⁷

Notably, following the first of several conversations with Farebrother, which trace and measure the opposite trajectories in their relative fortunes, we learn that Lydgate has

⁵⁶ See Nina Auerbach, 'Dorothea's Lost Dog', in Chase: "actually, the characters in Middlemarch change very little; they simply reveal facets of themselves" (103).

⁵⁷ All commerce in *Middlemarch*, from Vincy's exploitative dyeing business (funded by Bulstrode) down to "that greater social power, the retail trader" (490) is tainted. Mr. Mawmsey, in failing to understand Lydgate's reluctance to prescribe and take payment for useless or inappropriate medicines, expresses the need of the 'age of capital' to quantify and measure all service in cash-equivalent terms, "so that for every half-crown and eighteenpence he was certain something measurable had been delivered" (436).

a disdain for gambling. What for the vicar is a necessary means of supplementing a meager income, for Lydgate represents a “meanness” and a “subservience of conduct” to material gain. Because he has never wanted for it, “he had no power of imagining the part which the want of money plays in determining the actions of men” (175). When that very “want of money” comes to dominate his waking existence, he is tempted by the quick potential gains of the billiard room, where Fred Vincy sees a physically transformed Lydgate, “excited and betting” and “acting, watching, speaking with that excited narrow consciousness which reminds one of an animal with fierce eyes and retractile claws” (661).⁵⁸ Even when he starts to lose “Still he went on, for his mind was as utterly narrowed into that precipitous crevice of play as if he had been the most ignorant loungeur there” (661). What Lydgate had earlier considered - with simplifying ethical detachment - a morally reprehensible activity, becomes a compulsive psychological and physiologically-manifested necessity in which moral sense is apparently suspended. The psychology of gambling, which Eliot was to explore further in *Daniel Deronda*, was informed by the author’s familiarity with contemporary advances in both psychological and probabilistic understanding and introduces a pathological element into considerations of money-motivation that Kantian (or indeed any extant) ethical theory could not fully incorporate.⁵⁹

This is not to say that a large part of Lydgate’s flawed financial choices and actions cannot be analysed and judged by reference to Kantian principles. His justification for allowing himself to be supported by a benefactor of whose character and integrity he was uncertain, clearly fails Kant’s test of willing a universal law out of the maxim on which he acted. As he attempts to justify his position to Ladislav:

⁵⁸ Mind and body connections, including physical manifestations of heightened emotional states, recur in *Middlemarch* and Eliot’s understanding was undoubtedly informed by Lewes’s physiological work and reading. In *The Physiology of Common Life* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1859-60), he wrote:

“Mental agitation will suddenly arrest or increase the secretions; imperfect, or too abundant secretion will depress or confuse the mind. An idea will agitate the heart and disturb the liver...So indissolubly is our mental life bound up with our bodily life” (vol. 2, 106-7).

⁵⁹ Compulsive gambling is, of course, but one manifestation of how financially-related actions can represent the abandonment of reason, an increasingly researched field in experimental psychology and experimental (behavioural) economics. See Isabelle Brocas and Juan D. Carillo (eds.), *The Psychology of Economic Decisions*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003-2004).

a man may work for a special end with others whose motives and general course are equivocal, if he is quite sure of his personal independence, and that he is not working for his private interest – either place or money (458).

He later reflects on his inability to preserve two parallel moral realms in such an interconnected relationship: “Bulstrode’s character has enveloped me, because I took his money” (753). Further, the quotation above describing his mind as “utterly narrowed” is characteristic of the language Eliot uses to describe not only his gambling, but his entire mental state during this period: he feels himself in a “vile yoke” and “his self was being narrowed into the miserable isolation of egoistic fears” (635). As elsewhere in the novel, we see the inability to control financial motivation and action as not only indicative of but as a critically contributory element in the loss of moral autonomy. Eliot’s narrative technique (both for Lydgate and Bulstrode) serves to create a sense of slow but mounting inevitability as narrative time is split between the ‘present’ and explanatory scenes from the recent past. The effect is that real-time is periodically frozen and then resumed with the informed reader even more certain of the slow-motion ‘crash’ that is approaching. In fact, the repossession of his house and property is averted and Lydgate’s fundamental sense of acting in accord with duty is preserved, but the survival of financial crisis establishes a new and pragmatic set of practical ethics in his domestic and professional life. His idealism gives way to skepticism as he informs Dorothea of his intention to pursue “what will please the world and bring in money.” This, if not a crime or sin has, for the flawed Kantian, a distinct sense of moral failing: “I have not taken a bribe yet. But there is a pale shade of bribery which is sometimes called prosperity” (758).

Mr Farebrother’s observation on the malleability of character loses nothing for its frequency of quotation: “character is not cut in marble – it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing, and may become diseased as our bodies do” (725). Dorothea, speaking, as it were, for Kant, protests against Farebrother’s suggestion that “a man of honourable disposition” might succumb to dishonourable action “under the pressure of hard circumstances” (724).⁶⁰ The natural scientific image

⁶⁰ Dorothea’s ant-utilitarianism is emphasised by her opposition to ‘calculation’ in human affairs: “She disliked this cautious weighing of consequences, instead of an ardent faith in efforts of justice and mercy,

might suggest that the scientifically-practiced Farebrother might here be speaking for his creator, but I would suggest that Eliot's position lies somewhere between her two characters. Farebrother surely underestimates Lydgate's ability to resist what he knows to be bribery, which I equally believe Eliot would have regarded as a universal moral law. And yet there seems a psychological astuteness and accuracy underlying Farebrother's assertion that captures the complexities of practical ethics, which he earlier expressed in reflecting on his own success at the whist table: "It's a rather strong check to one's self-complacency to find how much of one's right doing depends on not being in want of money" (633). Lydgate remains, even in Kantian terms and despite the rationally debilitating effect of the "money craving" (635) to which he is driven, a 'good' man consistently observant of the imperative of duty. But by becoming simultaneously bound by a financial debt that changes the nature of his obligation to Bulstrode (he is shocked, on receiving the banker's £1,000 loan "that he should be overjoyed at being under such a strong personal obligation" [695]), his scope for "right doing" is massively shrunk. The narrowing of his professional ideal is fittingly marked by his submission to the commerce of medicine and a specialisation in gout, "a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side" (821).

Neither, notwithstanding her realisation of an imperative duty to self, can Dorothea's merging of an active beneficent activity with a life of emotion be fully attributed to an adoption of Kantian principles. Ultimately, I feel, Eliot's criticism of Kant lies not *in* what his ethics teaches, but what it leaves out. What Ladislav describes as Dorothea's "fanaticism of sympathy" (214) is something that needs a corrective to enable the attainment of a wider personal thriving or flourishing. This points more closely to classical concepts of eudaimonism, which I believe informed Eliot's ethics as surely as they were rejected within Kant's. Ironically, this would serve to align her more closely not to Sidgwick, who continued to struggle with the "dualism of practical reason" (self-interest versus altruism) but to Lewes's adversary, T. H. Green.⁶¹ That Green valued

which would conquer by their emotional force" (723). The novel's final sentence appropriately describes the "effect of her being on those around her" as "incalculably diffusive" (825).

⁶¹ See Brink: "In this respect, Green's form of perfectionism fits within the Greek eudaimonistic tradition of which Kant is so critical" (100).

highly Eliot's artistic mediations on practical ethics is evidenced by his intention to include the quotation from *Romola* in his unfinished Prolegomena:

We can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see it as good.⁶²

⁶² T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, ed. David O. Brink (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 445. Green's intention to include the quotation is asserted by A. C. Bradley, who arranged for the posthumous publication of the work in 1883.

Being Good and Doing Good with Money: Incorporating the Bourgeois Virtues

Then I told [George Eliot] of a controversy as to whether Morals should be taught as a lesson in schools and that a friend of mine (Adelaide) was going to do it. She said at first that she thought it would be a most dangerous thing to do, but explained afterwards that she meant that, if it was as a set of dry maxims...She hoped my friend would not teach the girls to think too much of political measures for improving society – as leading away from individual efforts to be good, I understood her to mean.¹

- Emily Davies, 1876

Seeing that Morality and Morals under their *alias* of Ethics, are the subject of voluminous discussion, and their true basis a pressing matter of dispute – seeing that the most famous book ever written on Ethics, and forming a chief study in our colleges, allies ethical with political science,...one might expect that educated men would find reason to avoid a perversion of language which lends itself to no wider view of life than that of village gossips.²

- George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 1879

...matters concerned with conduct and what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health. The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or precept, but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion.³

- Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*

The previous two chapters have argued that while Eliot drew substantially from the theories of the two main competing schools of teleological and deontological ethics, she ultimately regarded neither as adequate or complete. Utilitarianism's attempt to quantify

¹ Emily Davies to Annie Crow, 24th September 1876, reprinted in *Letters*, 6, 284.

² *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 130.

³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. David Ross, ed. J. L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 30. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

good on the basis of outcome was incompatible with a plurality and hierarchy of values and, in common with Kantianism, denied a moral primacy to the flourishing, or eudaimonism, of the individual agent. Both she saw as ultimately bound by their respective rule-based formulations: a restriction she tested in the novels by reference to a wide and complex range of intuitive and reasoned motivations through the thoughts and actions of intricately psychologically-realised fictional characters. This chapter considers how Eliot used the novels to evaluate morality and the economic through a set of alternative, less systemised principles: by switching the ethical spotlight more directly on the notion of ‘character’ itself.

Through readings of *The Mill on the Floss* and *Daniel Deronda*, I will attempt to show how Eliot explored economically-related motivation and action by reference to moral, intellectual and commercial *virtues* rather than ethical rules from duty or concepts of good outcome. By incorporating virtue concepts into the novels, she raises a number of inter-related questions : what is, and how does one become a virtuous character? is an ethics of virtue an adequate alternative to the two main competing systems? and, within any theory of virtue, how important are those traits that relate to the economic (what Deirdre McCloskey calls the “bourgeois virtues”), including prudential self-interest?⁴ That these questions were repeated more than seventy-years after Eliot’s death by moral philosophers seeking to reassert the normative claims of an ethics of virtue reflects a common Aristotelian inspiration and grounding, in particular *The Nicomachean Ethics*.⁵ In July 1852, Eliot tells Charles Bray that she is “reading Aristotle to find out what is the chief good”, and, as the quotation heading this chapter from *Impressions of Theophrastus*

⁴ McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues*.

⁵ The literature relating to virtue ethics, much of which has an Aristotelian grounding is extensive. In addition to those works directly referenced, my understanding owes much to the following: Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), and *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981); Roger Crisp, *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); and Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Note also the explicit connection between the turn to ethics in literary studies, most prominently in the work of Martha Nussbaum, and Aristotle’s theory of the virtues.

Such indicates, his guidance (not rules) continued to influence her moral philosophical thought and writing throughout her life.⁶

In Book 1 of *The Ethics*, Aristotle defines “human good” as “activity of soul in accordance with virtue [arete], or, if there be more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete” (vii, 14). The Greek concept of *arete* does not carry the heavy moral connotations of modern usage and is often translated as “excellence.” However, as I will argue that Eliot’s understanding of the concept, while clearly drawing on Christian appropriations, matches and even, in relation to commercial applications, extends Aristotle’s in scope, “virtue” remains a meaningful translation. Aristotle distinguishes moral from intellectual virtue but, in Book 6 explains why the truly virtuous agent must combine both in the exercise of choice and action, which are driven by desire and reason: “This is why choice cannot exist either without reason and intellect or without a moral state; for good action and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character” (139). Moral virtue he describes as a “state of character”, the exercise of which “both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well” (36). This internal and external promotion of the good is achieved only when the agent acts voluntarily and with deliberation *from* virtue. Robert Audi explains how this distinction links Aristotle to Kant:

Aristotle distinguishes between acting from virtue and acting merely in accordance with it. This wording, though true to Aristotle, recalls Kant’s distinction between acting from duty and merely acting in conformity with it. On the plausible assumption that acting from duty is, often, acting from moral virtue, Kantian actions from duty are often similar in important ways to Aristotelian actions from virtue.⁷

On this reading, my contention that Eliot, while convinced of the primacy of character in ethics, was more attracted to and influenced by Kantian deontology than she openly

⁶ *Letters*, 2, 26. The link between *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* and Aristotle is explicit: the historical Theophrastus was an important student of Aristotle. His *Characters* comprises “thirty sketches of ‘types’ observed in the city of Athens”. Nancy Henry, ‘Introduction’, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, xii.

⁷ Robert Audi, *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 174.

admitted, seems reasonable. However, the differences between the two are crucial in explaining the greater appeal of the kind of virtue ethics that Eliot adapted.

A central differentiation is in the two philosophers' relative positioning of the agent. Aristotle's concept of acting from virtue positively promotes the good of the agent, whereas a Kantian act from duty is an others-regarding imperative that, in effect, simply exemplifies virtuous character and action. For Aristotle, character and the nurturing of the virtues is an antecedent and pre-requisite of determining right motive, rational choice and good action. As Gary Watson describes it (conflating the good and the right): "how best or right or proper to conduct oneself is explained in terms of how it is best for a human being to be."⁸ My reading of *Daniel Deronda* is crucially informed by this Aristotelian framework. Another important departure is the description of the dutiful Kantian agent acting against any pleasurable inclination. For Aristotle, "the man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good; since no one would call a man just who did not enjoy acting justly, nor any man liberal who did not enjoy liberal actions and similarly in all other cases. If this is so, virtuous actions must be in themselves pleasant" (16). Pleasure is therefore a good, although still only one component of eudaimonia, thus simultaneously linking and differentiating his ethics from Utilitarianism. The virtuous act may coincide with that of the Utilitarian calculating an aggregate, pleasure-referent outcome, but their respective scales of moral evaluation will be completely different. Nevertheless, I believe Eliot would have welcomed (indeed I think she pre-empted) attempts to more precisely locate virtue ethics in relation to other ethical systems. Watson, for example, resists the traditional opposition between consequentialism and deontology to distinguish a third ethical way. Virtue ethics simultaneously stands apart from and incorporates certain teleological and Kantian aspects. He distinguishes:

an ethics of requirement, an ethics of consequences, and an ethics of virtue or character. This classification enables us to observe that while both ethics of consequences and ethics of virtue are

⁸ Gary Watson, 'On the Primacy of Character', in Owen Flanagan and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990), 451.

teleological insofar as they are guided fundamentally by a notion of the good, Aristotle is nonetheless closer to Kant than to Bentham on the question of consequentialism.⁹

Aristotle's account of those virtues attendant on economic behaviour in *The Ethics* is somewhat partial, particularly in relation to the age of widely permeating commerce into which George Eliot was writing. The Greeks had money, on which Aristotle wrote, but not capitalism. His conclusion in regard to the acquisition of material wealth in the opening Book is unequivocal: "The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking" (7). Such a life, which Aristotle portrays as akin to slavery ("under compulsion"), is incompatible with moral virtue, which requires that the agent's action is voluntary, taken with knowledge of the circumstances, and the result of previous deliberation (48-53). He has more to say about how the virtuous man should distribute his wealth, establishing a mean of liberality, midway between the (vicious) extremes of prodigality and meanness. The economically-virtuous agent who has sufficient wealth must meet this base case of liberality but, by nature of his greater distributional capacity, can achieve magnificence. The rich man whose expenditure falls below or exceeds the standard of magnificence is guilty, respectively, of niggardliness and vulgarity (79-89). As with his early statement of the incompatibility of profit and virtue, his discussion of liberality and magnificence speaks to a patrician distaste of proper money management and implies that the greater risk to virtue is spending too little rather than too much.

In this respect, Aristotle seems not fully to extend the scope of practical wisdom (142, *phronesis*), one of the intellectual virtues – or, more precisely, "a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods", - to the sphere of wealth and commerce.¹⁰ McCloskey traces the historical process whereby practical wisdom came to embrace financial prudence, identifying a pivotal moment of intervention by Aquinas, who sanctioned the profits of trade, including the charging of interest. This development, she argues (quoting Lester K. Little), "brought about the emancipation of Christian

⁹ Watson, 450.

¹⁰ Audi, *Moral Knowledge*, elaborates: "Practical wisdom is not a specifically moral virtues but a higher order one applicable to reflections and decisions concerning moral and other kinds of virtues" (186).

merchants.”¹¹ In the hands of Adam Smith, described by McCloskey as “a virtue ethicist for a commercial age”, prudence, one of the four cardinal or pagan virtues, assumed a central place in Britain’s fast growing money economy.¹² McCloskey’s claims for the scope of prudence are worth spelling out, as part of my argument is that Eliot was both a natural successor and literary counterpart to Smith in presenting a commercially-broadened, neo-Aristotelian unity of the virtues:

The bourgeois virtues, derivable from the seven virtues but viewable in business practice, might include enterprise, adaptability, imagination, optimism, integrity, prudence, thrift, trustworthiness, humor, affection, self-possession, consideration, responsibility, solicitude, decorum, patience, toleration, affability, peacibility, civility, neighborliness, obligingness, reputability, dependability, impartiality. The point of calling such virtues ‘bourgeois’ is to contrast them with nonbusiness versions of the same virtues, such as (physical) courage or (spiritual) love. Bourgeois virtues are the townspeople’s virtues, away from the military camp of the aristocrat or the commons of the peasantry or the temple of the priest or the studio of the artist.¹³

Smith, of course, believed firmly in the ennobling potential of trade and commerce which, in an open economy, were driven by the individual profit motive, rather than any national or social character: “whenever commerce is introduced into any country, probity and punctuality always accompany it.”¹⁴ His great achievement, as McCloskey explains, was to embed prudential self-interest within a range of social virtues, particularly justice and temperance; a synthesis that weakened through the course of the nineteenth-century (despite Mill’s best attempts) and largely disintegrated in the professionalised economics that was emerging towards the end of Eliot’s life. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he insists that “[t]he wise and virtuous man is at all times willing that his own private interest should be sacrificed to the public interest of his own particular order or society”,

¹¹ McCloskey, 485.

¹² McCloskey, 306.

¹³ McCloskey, 350. My claims relate to the incorporation of commercial virtues within a wider moral philosophy. Eliot was not uncritical of the more purely economic arguments of *The Wealth of Nations*, particularly as they were adopted, shorn of that wider moral context, by the political economists of her own century.

¹⁴ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael and P.G. Stein (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 538.

and he begins Section 3 of the work, 'Of Self Command', with: "The man who acts according to the rules of perfect prudence, of strict justice, and of proper benevolence, may be said to be perfectly virtuous." That this balance can be tested, Smith writes, "nowhere but in the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well informed spectator"¹⁵ gives a strong steer to how a far-reaching exploration of the virtues in a commercial age can be achieved through imaginative literature. Moreover, as Stephen Darwall has observed, "As Smith sees it, moral judgement is always addressed to and regulated by a community of interlocutors. This makes rhetoric an important aspect of ethics for Smith."¹⁶

With this in mind, I will consider Eliot's rhetorical examination of economic ethics via two novels from opposite ends of her novelistic career. *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) provided Eliot with her first large advance, part of which funded her first stock investments.¹⁷ The novel's early-century setting enables her to explore a number of financially-related transitions, as the emergence from mercantilism to a more recognisable capitalist economy sees local custom and superstition threatened and individual ways of money-making expand. Using Aristotle's classifications, the book's almost exclusive focus on the trading and merchant classes points the reader to consider the requirements of liberality and its co-existence with other virtues. *Daniel Deronda* (1876), written at the height of its author's wealth and fame, explores both liberality and, in relation to its rich and titled characters, magnificence. Uniquely among Eliot's novels, *Daniel Deronda* is set less than a decade in the past in a probabilistic, limited liability 'economy of wants'.¹⁸ Both novels align commercial pursuits with religious traditions, but with very different outcomes, and both examine character development, in which dealing with financial loss, gain and inheritance are seminal. The money-economy, whose social infiltration we observe in *The Mill on the Floss* has, by the time of *Daniel*

¹⁵ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 235-7, 294.

¹⁶ Stephen Darwall, 'Sympathetic Liberalism: Recent Work on Adam Smith', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 28. 2 (1999), 139-64, (160).

¹⁷ See ch. 2 above.

¹⁸ See Gallagher, *Body Economic*, 118-55. She relates Eliot's concern that she was merely adding to the "heap of literature" when she wrote the novel to her portrayal of Gwendolen Harleth's fear of personal marginalisation or redundancy. Creator and creation, she argues, are influenced by Jevons's recently formulated theories of marginal utility.

Deronda's setting, become hegemonic. As I have shown earlier, despite her liberal inclinations and strong personal financial prudence, in both her essays and novels Eliot was not uncritical of the effects of this change; it gave rise to what she called, in her final work, a "debasement [of] the moral currency".¹⁹ She also recognised the increasing complexity of economic choice and responsibility for the individual in society. Social and economic flux meant that individuals of all classes and professions (including artists such as Eliot herself, immersed in the 'commerce of literature') addressing the question 'how best to live' needed both to adapt particular concepts of balanced financial prudence and incorporate those traits within a broad range of virtues.

In her journal for January 23rd, 1862 Eliot wrote: "Mr Smith the publisher called and had an interview with G. He asked if I were open to a 'magnificent' offer. This made me think about money – but it is better for me not to be rich."²⁰ For better or worse, the success of *The Mill on the Floss*, following on from *Adam Bede*, had secured her high market value. While George Smith is unlikely to have framed the 'magnificence' of his proposed offer within a context of Aristotelian ethics, Eliot's reaction to it seems to draw on the earlier-mentioned conclusion of Book 1 of *The Ethics* that "wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking" (7). As I have argued earlier in this work, she thought a great deal about money and I think it is likely that part of her reluctance to give Smith's approach her immediate consideration owes less to the prospect of a further acceleration in her already fast-growing wealth than a realisation that changing her publisher could conflict with her other, non-financial values. Abandoning Blackwood for largely economic reasons (which she temporarily does for the publication of *Romola*) risked undermining the Aristotelian means of justice, temperance and benevolence towards a loyal and trusted partner, who had initially risked his own money in first publishing her work. Any justification that gave excessive ethical weight to the forces of the free market could make her complicit in the debasement of the moral currency. This concern would have been heightened by the fact that she had recently illustrated and explored the implications of constructing an ethical system on a single foundation of self-interested prudence in the

¹⁹ *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ch. 10, 'Debasement the Moral Currency'.

²⁰ *Journals*, 108. See also p. 62 above.

novel whose great success had inspired Smith's "magnificent offer," *The Mill on the Floss*.

According to Aristotle, the fully virtuous individual embraces a balance and completion of all the moral and intellectual virtues and always acts according to the appropriate virtue; the exclusion or underweighting of some at the expense of others can tip virtue into vice. These requirements of universality and consistency have, since Eliot's time, been challenged as psychologically untenable. Drawing on experimental results, situationists claim that the behaviour of individuals varies significantly according to external, non-moral factors; character traits are simply not fixed at a certain level.²¹ Eliot would not have been surprised by such empirical findings and fully recognised the difficulty even in differentiating virtue and vice in a particular situation. As she wrote in her 1855 essay, 'The Morality of Wilhelm Meister', "the line between the virtuous and the vicious, so far from being a necessary safeguard to morality, is itself an immoral fiction."²² But neither would the experimental evidence have dissuaded her that, whatever its practical limitations, an ethics of virtue in which the aspiration towards a full and balanced range of inward and outward-facing, well-developed and rationally-motivated character traits has considerable value.

Her portrayal of the Dodson sisters and their husbands in *The Mill on the Floss* offers a compelling illustration of how a narrowly-conceived prudence can give rise to the ascendancy of the lesser side-virtues: thrift, caution and foresight. The extended Dodson family are firmly rooted in the traditions and localised economy of pre-industrial Britain. Three of the husbands have worked at occupations attached to the land that have changed little in generations – milling, wool stapling and farming – with only Mr Deane, a self-made partner in an expanding trading company, representing the transition to a modern commercial economy. Guest & Co. represents the archetypal, conglomerating merchant-house of the mid-century, whose trading origins were extending into a wider range of

²¹ For a good summary, see Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, esp. ch. 2, 'The Case Against Character'.

²² *Essays*, 147. E. S. Dallas, in his review of *The Mill on the Floss* for *The Times* (19 May, 1860), recognises a similar blurring. He praises Eliot's delineation of "the sort of life which thousands of our countrymen lead – a life that outwardly is most respectable, but inherently is most degraded – so degraded, indeed, that the very virtues which adorn it are scarcely to be distinguished from vices." Reprinted in Laurence Lerner and John Holmstrom (eds.), *George Eliot and Her Readers: A Selection of Contemporary Reviews* (London: The Bodley Head, 1966), 36.

financing and banking activities. While the merchant class to which Deane belongs has emerged from a tradition of “industrious men of business of a former generation, who made their fortunes slowly”, it is also looking forward to “these days of rapid money-getting”; the developed cash-economy from which Eliot is writing.²³ His sisters-in-law and their husbands have no such progressive concept of money and wealth. Mr Pullet could “not see how a man could have any security for his money unless he turned it into land” (85) and, while they would “put out” money at a minimum of five per-cent interest (and only on the strongest security), Mrs Glegg conceals any surplus funds in various locations around the house, “for, to [her] mind, banks and strong-boxes would have nullified the pleasure of property – she might as well have taken her food in capsules” (111).²⁴

Deane’s financial prudence is more sophisticated. His plan to buy Dorlcote Mill and merge its operations with another Guest property based on their “value as investments” (213) lay beyond the imagination of Mrs Glegg, but, in common with all his relations, he exercises prudence beyond the sphere of business so that it becomes the dominant motivation in his inter-personal conduct. Eliot captures this imbalance of the moral virtues by incorporating the language and images of finance into their social and familial interactions. Every aspect of their lives becomes subject to what the author, in an earlier essay, described as “calculations of prudence.”²⁵ For Mr Glegg, these calculations were at the fore in his choice of a wife who, as the “embodiment of female prudence and thrift” best matches his own “money-getting, money-keeping turn” (106). He advises his wife against calling in her loan to Tulliver, not on the basis of compassion or benevolence, but because finding a suitably secure investment paying the same rate of interest would be timely and expensive.

In relation to an ethics of virtue, the unfortunate Mr Tulliver falls equally short in approaching Aristotle’s mean of liberality. The inadequacies and imbalances of his in-laws, however, are largely inverted in a character with a tendency towards what they

²³ *The Mill on the Floss*, 106. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

²⁴ An extreme later-century contrast to Mrs. Glegg, in her need for the tangible and intimate presence of her wealth, is Ferdinand Lopez, who asks “What’s the use of money you can see? How are you to make money out of money by looking at it?” Anthony Trollope, *The Prime Minister*, ed. Jennifer Uglow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), vol. 2, 58.

²⁵ *Essays*, 134.

regarded as the vice of “generous imprudence” (240). Kathleen Blake, in a recent economically-focused reading of the novel, takes as her starting point “an audit of Mr Tulliver’s accounts, with an eye to his discrepant accounting between loans and gifts.”²⁶ His leniency towards the impoverished Moss family marks a suspension of commercial practice and legal claim in the face of familial compassion. This benevolent generosity, however, is inadequately balanced either in the moral or intellectual sphere; his temper and impulsiveness serving to undermine his practical wisdom. His concern with reputation and shows of supposed wealth are antithetic to the guiding principles of his wider family “to be honest and rich”. Tulliver’s affront to prudent wealth management – “to seem rich though being poor” (239) – is exemplified by the financial risk that leads to his bankruptcy. By taking out a transferable mortgage, an intangible financial claim, he exposes his own credit to those individuals who have provided collateral for his own loan and deprives himself of any control over his property.²⁷ His ignorance of the financial risk to which he has become exposed mirrors his blindness to his deficiency in the virtues and, in this at least, he is closer to his thrifty relations than they perceive.

The Mill on the Floss, in fact, leads us to an understanding of Aristotelian liberality by way of vivid psychological insights into its perversions - meanness and profligacy - that the fictional agents themselves do not recognise. In this respect, Eliot is using the medium of imaginative literature to illustrate a central theme of her important, previously-cited 1855 essay, ‘Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming’, which argues that “[t]here is not a more pernicious fallacy afloat in common parlance, than the wide distinction made between intellect and morality.”²⁸ The overt juxtaposition is Aristotelian and the subject of the essay, the popular Evangelical preacher, promotes not virtue but “intellectual and moral distortion.”²⁹

The essay and the novel, therefore, implicitly argue that a properly virtuous individual should practice liberality as part of comprehensive balance of the moral and intellectual virtues. Moreover, the exercise of practical wisdom, while incorporating a prudential self-

²⁶ Blake, 111.

²⁷ Mary Poovey, ‘Writing about Finance in Victorian England: Disclosure and Secrecy in the Culture of Investment’, in Henry and Schmitt, explains the difficulty of reconstructing the exact details of Tulliver’s failure which “turns on securities that Tulliver has guaranteed to back other people’s debts and bills of sale he has offered as security on loans he has taken” (53).

²⁸ *Essays*, 166.

²⁹ *Essays*, 166.

interest appropriate to a competitive market economy, should continue to embrace the social, outward-facing guidance of *The Ethics*. Tom Tulliver never attains this status, but in some ways he approaches it and does so, contrary to his aunt's assertion that his Dodson genes were finally asserting themselves, by adapting his character according to Aristotelian principles. Aristotle insists that "all who are not maimed as regards their potentiality for virtue may win it by a certain kind of study and care" (18), leaving the path to virtue open to all, irrespective of their individual dispositions. Later in *The Ethics*, he writes that "we are adapted by nature to receive [the virtues], and are made perfect by habit" (28). This question of how pre-disposition, choice and practice combine in the development of the virtues (which is, as I will argue, crucial to an ethical understanding of the character of Gwendolen Harleth) is one that Eliot was able to explore through the novel in ways very similar to those which Martha Nussbaum identified in relation to the form of Greek tragedy, which "does not display the dilemmas of its characters as prearticulated; it shows them as searching for the morally salient; and it forces us, as interpreters, to be similarly active."³⁰

The external trigger for Tom Tulliver to seek out "the morally salient" is his father's bankruptcy, an enlightenment signalled by his simultaneous, newfound expressions of financial and ethical understanding. He quickly recognises the potential liability to his Aunt and Uncle Moss if the administration of his father's estate were to include the outstanding loan-note against them and asserts the moral probity of destroying the note. His appeal to honour and duty, insisting this would be his father's wish, combines with a compassionate benevolence and contrasts with the more legalistic considerations of his uncles and aunts (192).³¹ Tom's courageous stance is taken out of generous and selfless motives that link the moral and intellectual virtues in precise Aristotelian ways. Significantly, his 'intellectual' understanding relates here to the practical financial, rather than academic pursuits to which he was so unsuited: "There were subjects, you perceive, on which Tom was much quicker than on the niceties of classical construction, or the relations of a mathematical demonstration" (196).

³⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 14.

³¹ See p. 49 above.

The further development of Tom's "bourgeois virtues" is marked by his business partnership with Bob Jankin. Jankin combines loyalty and natural affection with prudence in practical, business matters which both promote his own self-interest and preserve the ethics of localised trading practices that rely in large part on personal relationships and trust. He belongs to the world of Adam Bede, of "pack-horses, and ... slow wagons and ... pedlars who brought bargains to the door on sunny afternoons."³² While his knowledge of the price of the goods he trades is precise and detailed, his gift of books to Maggie stands outside the market and, not for the last time, Eliot uses books as a motif to represent higher, non-commoditised value: "'I'd ha' gev three times the money if they'll make up to you a bit for them as was sold away from you, Miss'" (247).³³ Tom's decision to risk money in his small-scale trading venture with Jankin puts scarce capital at risk, but the enterprise is soundly-based, stepped-up gradually and leveraged by outside investment from the Gleggs. Mr Tulliver, however, shows the inertia that is the consequence of complete risk aversion. In an obsession reminiscent of Silas Marner, he reverts to keeping the slowly accumulating cash savings in a tin box, from which he regularly counts it out.³⁴

In the support of Glegg and Deane for Tom's determined efforts to save enough money to pay back his father's creditors in full, there are reminders that, at least in the hard practicalities of everyday life, their limited concept of the virtues carries value. The "oppressive narrowness" (238) of their moral framework contains a series of traits that equates closely to McCloskey's earlier-quoted list of the bourgeois, prudential virtues; here, "a core of soundness" that includes "obedience to parents, faithfulness to kindred, industry, rigid honesty, thrift" (239). Again, note how their ambivalent virtues are infused with financial imagery: "The Dodsons were a very proud race, and their pride lay in the utter frustration of all desire to *tax* them with a breach of traditional duty and propriety"

³² *Adam Bede*, 476.

³³ Later on, when Maggie rediscovers Thomas a Kempis, the narrator comments: "I suppose that is the reason why the small old-fashioned book, for which you need only pay sixpence at a book-stall, works miracles to this day, turning bitter waters into sweetness" (254).

Elsewhere in the novels, Daniel Deronda is surprised at Mordecai's inability to give him a price for the book he wants to buy from him: "Don't you know how much it is worth?" "Not its market-price" (*Daniel Deronda*, 326).

³⁴ "It was always an incident Mr Tulliver liked, in his gloomy life, to fetch the tin box and count the money" (307).

(239); and how the family's characteristic "vices and virtues alike were phases of a proud, honest egoism, which had a hearty dislike to whatever made against its own *credit* and *interest*" (240, my emphasis). Tom too remains unable to escape a narrowly oppressive concept of the good: in Aristotle's terms, he never approaches eudaimonism through the practice of moral and intellectual excellences. His sister recognises this when she complains to him that "[y]ou thank God for nothing but your own virtues – you think they are great enough to win you everything else" (305). As he succeeds, through prudence, in redressing his father's financial *imprudence*, that same restrictive concept of intellectual morality, which he had earlier checked in his mother's relations, becomes ascendant in him, unbalancing his temperance, benevolence and justice.

In his meditations on the question "What is temper?" Theophrastus Such bemoans "a peculiar exercise of indulgence towards the manifestation of bad temper which tends to encourage [the bad-tempered], so that we are in danger of having among us a number of virtuous persons who conduct themselves detestably".³⁵ Such an opposition is insupportable within an ethics of virtue and Eliot's complaint, via her eponymous and final narrator, is against any moral evaluation that attempts to dissociate character from conduct. A virtuous act is what a virtuous person performs, and a virtuous person is someone who possesses and acts from the virtues. In the novel that preceded *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot offers an extensive examination of the relation of character to financially-related action in the attainment of the good.

Because of its near-contemporary setting, the novel addresses more specifically than any of the earlier works the question (referencing Trollope) how best to live *now*. In 1876, this question raised a particular set of economically-related issues which, I believe, still resonate strongly today. Following the pattern of my previous readings in this section, I will attempt to show how Eliot constructed and tested the ethical implications of how the individual 'deals' (by being good and doing good) with money and materiality by close reference to the characters she created, here focusing on how that 'dealing' process is promoted and hindered by the development of and deficiency in the relevant

³⁵ *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 'Only Temper', 56.

virtues.³⁶ Partly in anticipation of the socially and politically-informed chapters that follow, I will also consider how *Daniel Deronda* explores cultural representations of late nineteenth-century trade and commerce and how its scale of values both infiltrated and was distinguished from that of more transcendent and absolute states, including marriage, art and religious inheritance.

The necessity of good character as antecedent to good conduct is embodied in the creation of Gwendolen Harleth, a girl convinced of her destiny to live a greater life than other young ladies but unclear “how she should set about leading any other, and what were the particular acts which she would assert her freedom by doing”,³⁷ Gwendolen’s early character lacks the foundations and capacity for virtuous action: when she answers enquiries as to her future “flightily”, “[h]er words were born on her lips, but she would have been at a loss to give an answer of deeper origin” (57). However, Eliot’s acute psychological perception, which always resists reductive descriptions of human motivation, here precludes simple and conclusive definitions of virtue and vice.³⁸ An almost instantaneous mutability of feeling, which defies any straightforward action from virtue or vice, is beautifully evoked by the narrator at the end of chapter 4, in reference to Gwendolen’s “contrary tendencies” and “what may be called the iridescence of her character”: “We cannot speak a loyal word and be meanly silent, we cannot kill and not kill in the same moment; but a moment is room wide enough for the loyal and mean desire, for the outlash of a murderous thought and the sharp backward stroke of repentance” (33). Admirable character traits are not wholly absent, but, lacking practical wisdom and the habitual practice of liberal or benevolent action, Gwendolen’s potential virtues are either unrealised or tip over into egotism and vice.

³⁶ I have argued in earlier chapters that ethics – and from my perspective, economic ethics in particular – can be treated in richer, more perspectival ways through the long, realist novel which, I believe, reached its peak in Eliot. As the ethical probe now shifts directly to the consideration of what constitutes a virtuous character, this argument is reinforced - see Nussbaum note 30, above. In this respect, Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), in its consideration of ‘mind reading’ is interesting. As neuroscience reveals more about why we care about literary characters, so the ethical importance of the novel seems to be reinforced, even if the question of, for example, whether empathy is self or other-seeking (or, indeed, is biologically determined) becomes more uncertain. Vermeule speculates that considerations of ethics and literature will be increasingly grounded in scientific method and points to the work of Suzanne Keen, “a prominent mainstream theorist, [who] is now seeking to place the study of narrative empathy on firmly scientific grounds” (248).

³⁷ *Daniel Deronda*, 43. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

³⁸ See p. 136, note 22 above.

Financial ignorance becomes a motif for her deficient intellectual virtue. The scope of her intelligence and inquisitiveness is confined to her immediate sources of self-interested pleasure and control, so that “it had [not] occurred to her to inquire into the conditions of colonial property and banking, on which, as she had had many opportunities of knowing, the family fortune was dependent” (51).³⁹ And, lacking prudent judgement, her moral virtues in relation to money are so ungrounded that the only response to the news that her servant has offered her entire savings to support the financially ruined family is to suggest that she be offered for the position of governess to the Bishop’s daughter for which Gwendolen has been recommended. To fill the void created by the absence of intellectual virtue, the principles of the gaming table dictate Gwendolen’s interaction with the world. From the novel’s opening scene, the language and uncertain motivations of gambling inform her thoughts and actions.⁴⁰ She prefers to “do what is unlikely” (56) and repeatedly assesses risk, particularly in relation to Grandcourt: “she was aware that she was risking something” (111); she is made “more conscious of the risks that lay within herself” (120); and later realises “[t]he chances of roulette had not adjusted themselves to her claims” (201).

Ironically, this gambling association links Gwendolen to Lush, whose complete deficiency of the moral virtues even she intuitively senses. Unlike Gwendolen, however, Lush has consciously adapted the calculating reason of the gaming table to general life, with the sole aim of maximising his self-interest. “With no active compassion or goodwill, he had just as little active malevolence, being chiefly occupied in liking his particular pleasures, and not disliking anything but what hindered those pleasures” (511). Every assessment or action he makes is framed as a probability-weighted bet, although, like several other characters in the novel, his assessment of odds does not always properly account for human irrationality or the unpredictable occurrence of the improbable.⁴¹ The epigraph from Aristotle at the head of Book VI points to the centrality

³⁹ Even her less than worldly-wise mother comments, “You never did learn anything about income and expenses” (197).

⁴⁰ I use “uncertain” to indicate that people gamble for different reasons, as is apparent in *Daniel Deronda*.

⁴¹ Lush twice offers (121, 243) to “take odds” that the marriage between Grandcourt and Gwendolen will not happen. He is more successful in his prediction that Grandcourt would eventually sell his interest in Diplo to Sir Hugo – a subject he addresses in a letter that includes no less than three gambling and betting references (270).

of this theme within the novel: “This, too, is probable, according to the saying of Agathon: ‘It is a part of probability that many improbable things will happen.’”⁴²

A realisation of the inadequate and flawed nature of the gambling model as applied to a wide and virtuous life therefore becomes an important marker in Gwendolen’s moral development. This gradual and uneven process begins with her first meeting with Deronda at Diplo, soon after she becomes engaged. Already questioning her motivations for and the wider implications of her forthcoming marriage, she has come to a financially-centred resolution that she will “urge [Grandcourt] to the most liberal conduct towards Mrs Glasher’s children” (264). Deronda perceives an alteration in her manner and that “the struggle of mind attending a conscious error had wakened something like a new soul, which had better, but also worse, possibilities than her former poise of crude self-confidence” (280). The nature of this “conscious error” assumes clearer definition when she insists that Deronda explain his ethical objection to gambling, which is essentially that it is a zero-sum game: one person’s gain is another’s loss. His acknowledgement that, in life, another’s loss is often the unintended consequence of a particular action, serves to strengthen his conviction that “[b]ecause of that, we should help it where we can” (285).

Nevertheless, by the time of her marriage the image of herself at the table, the centre of all attention, temporarily re-asserts itself. Her growing agitation “was surmounted and thrust down with a sort of exulting defiance as she felt herself standing at the game of life with many eyes upon her, daring everything to win much – or if to lose, still with *éclat* and a sense of importance” (299). However, when she next meets Deronda, he is struck by her repetition of the terms of his own earlier condemnation of gambling – “when their gain is your loss”; “if they injure you and could have helped it” (353) – which he rightly suspects are now being painfully and repeatedly applied to the choice and consequences of her marriage. Significantly, her sense of guilt towards those she believes herself to have wronged by her actions extends, by sympathetic association, to Deronda himself and what she wrongly perceives to be his deprived inheritance. Her growing sense of justice, part of a wider moral awakening, finally comes to subvert within her the motivation and

⁴² Meditations on probability recur throughout the book, e.g. “a great deal of what passes for likelihood in the world is simply the reflex of a wish” (82); “In this way it happens that the truth seems highly improbable” (203); “those endless things called probabilities” (320). See also p. 56 above.

ends of gambling. As she awaits Lush's explanation of "some business about property", she realises that the terms of her husband's will, including the allocation of his property "was all part of that new gambling in which the losing was not simply a *minus* but a terrible *plus* that had never entered into her reckoning" (511). Later still, after her husband's death, the inversion of notions of loss and gain is even more emphatic: "I meant to get pleasure for myself, and it all turned to misery. I wanted to make my gain out of another's loss – you remember? – it was like roulette – and the money burnt into me" (593).

Over the brief time frame in which *Daniel Deronda* is set, Gwendolen does not attain, certainly not in Aristotelian terms, a properly virtuous state of character. She learns much about how not to act and, in imitating Deronda, develops a sense of what it is to live for the good, without forming any distinct course of action which would accommodate the necessary virtuous practice and habit.⁴³ Aristotle allowed for imitation in the development of the virtues, but maintained that any virtuous action must be wholly voluntary. The discrimination required both in the development of a particular character trait and in the exercise of a specific choice or action must be, at least primarily, that of the agent himself. In relation to good financial action, Gwendolen certainly displays generosity in money gifts to her family, but never having developed any practical understanding and appreciation of money, she ultimately relies on Deronda to make a decision for her concerning her inheritance.⁴⁴ His advice against her renouncing all but an amount that would support her mother with an appropriate income is based on justice and benevolence. His solution offers her the independent, voluntary opportunity to exercise prudence, temperance and liberality: "The future beneficence of your life will be best furthered by your saving all others from the pain of that knowledge. In my opinion you ought simply to abide by the provisions of your husband's will, and let your remorse tell only on the use that you will make of your monetary independence" (657).

The combination of virtues implied in this short piece of financial advice, including a self-regarding prudence, marks an important stage in Deronda's own quest for eudaimonia, which Aristotle precisely defines as good *activity*. By nature and

⁴³ For Gwendolen and the narrowing possibilities for action, see Markovits, 108-118.

⁴⁴ Deronda's influence on her moral aspirations is extensive, symbolised by the image of him as a "redeemer" figure.

temperament he is well disposed to virtue and his character is seen to develop under the prescribed Aristotelian influences of habitual practice and voluntary deliberation. However, it is not until the end of the novel that he has managed to align the moral and intellectual spheres in such a way as to effectively guide him how best to live. Mordecai is the catalyst for that alignment. Prior to meeting him, an important passage I have previously cited sees Deronda drifting in a

sort of contemplative mood perhaps more common in the young men of our day – that of questioning whether it were worth while to take part in the battle of the world: I mean, of course the young men in whom the unproductive labour of questioning is sustained by three or five per cent on capital which somebody else has battled for. It puzzled Sir Hugo that one who made a splendid contrast with all that was sickly and puling should be hampered with ideas which, since they left an accomplished Whig like himself unobstructed, could be no better than spectral illusions (157).

Until he discovers his Jewish inheritance, Deronda is unable to determine how best to employ his financial inheritance. He cannot find a route from the three professional vocations Sir Hugo presses him towards – the law, writing and politics – to what he aspires to become, “an organic part of social life, instead of roaming in it like a yearning disembodied spirit, stirred with a vague social passion, but without fixed local habitation to render fellowship real” (308). In Aristotelian terms, Deronda is not seeking a liberality, but magnificence of action, a goal that is hindered by “a many-sided sympathy, which threatened to hinder any persistent course of action” (307). Virtuous character and action, as defined in *The Ethics*, are characterised by benefiting and serving the needs of both the virtuous agent and other people. Deronda’s “many-sided sympathy”, however, risks creating what Michael Slote calls “agent-sacrificing self-other asymmetry”.⁴⁵ Slote argues that the conditionality (non-categorical) of the self-regarding virtues, such as prudence, in a Kantian ethical system tends to promote such asymmetry; a tendency that a sufficiently broad ethics of virtue, in which prudential self-interest is more fully harmonised within the moral and intellectual virtues, can correct. Sir Hugo’s warning to Deronda, who has effectively sacrificed his own scholarship hopes in support of the

⁴⁵ Michael Slote, ‘Some Advantages of Virtue Ethics’, in Flanagan and Rorty, 437.

incapacitated and financially needful Hans Meyrick, is well aimed: “it is good to be unselfish and generous; but don’t carry that too far. It will not do to give yourself to be melted down for the benefit of the tallow-trade; you must know where to find yourself” (156). Deronda’s quest is for a cause “that would justify partiality” (308). The discovery of his birthright answers that cause and thereby sets the terms – physical, economic and emotional – on which he is to engage in “the battle of the world”:

It was as if he found an added soul in finding his ancestry – his judgement no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy, but choosing, with that noble partiality which is man’s best strength, the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical – exchanging that bird’s-eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and loses all sense of quality, for the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder with men of like inheritance (638).

If Deronda aspires to a concept of magnificence, the far wealthier Grandcourt represents a perversion of the lesser liberality with which the external world generally credits him. Grandcourt has no care for money *per se* (which is why the maximising Lush gets him wrong so often), and so exercises no intellectual virtue in its administration and distribution. Any moral virtue attendant on these acts is largely accidental. Descriptions of Grandcourt often incorporate direct reference to the virtues of *The Ethics*, emphasising the extent to which he subverts them. Mr Gascoigne justifies his discounting of the gossip surrounding Grandcourt’s affairs by reference to “the view of practical wisdom” (118) and asks Gwendolen to consider her “future husband’s delicate liberality” (260), echoing Mrs Glasher’s reflection that, despite his otherwise disgraceful treatment of her, “he had always been liberal in expenses for her” (288). Even after his death Gascoigne continues to “feel confident that Gwendolen will be liberally – I should expect, splendidly – provided for” (609), before finally, and reluctantly, admitting his negligence in his “reliance on Mr Grandcourt’s liberality in money matters” (648).

Beyond his personal financial situation, with which (and usually through the agency of Lush) he is occasionally forced to deal, Grandcourt avoids all engagement with wider economic or social concerns. Ezra Cohen, with particular reference to the possession of a pawn shop, but speaking for commerce generally, tells Deronda: “It puts you in connection with the world at large” (330). Grandcourt has little interest even in the

banking crisis without which Gwendolen would have escaped him and classifies “all commercial men...under the general epithet of ‘brutes’” (499). Eliot’s treatment of the same class of men in the novel is, however, more nuanced.

Chapter 16 of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ‘Moral Swindlers’, begins with an account of the narrator’s conversation with a friend, Melissa “in a time of commercial trouble”. Melissa is bemoaning the fate of Sir Gavial Mantrap, a man of impeccable character, charitable and an excellent family man, disgraced and reduced to living on his wife’s great fortune solely “because of his conduct in relation to the Eocene Mines, and to other companies ingeniously devised by him for the punishment of ignorance in people of small means.” No such sympathy, however, is extended to Mr. Barabas, whose honesty in matters of business is in no way brought into question, but “whose life”, allegedly, “is most objectionable, with actresses and that sort of thing. I think a man’s morals should make a difference to us.”⁴⁶ In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot explores the implications of the acceptance of parallel moral spheres by reference to secular British and Jewish businesses.

Prior to his friendship with Mordecai and his growing fondness for the Cohen family, Deronda’s impressions of and prejudices against Jews are representative of his time and class. A much younger Eliot herself admitted that her “gentile nature kicks most resolutely against any assumption of superiority in the Jews” and that “[e]verything *specifically* Jewish is of a low grade.”⁴⁷ Deronda’s general repugnance (176) finds a more specific objection in the stereotypical image of the “grisly tradesman...combining advantages of business with religion” (309). His heart sinks when he supposes Ezra, a pawn broker and representative of the “vulgar Jews” of his imagination, to be Mirah’s brother. Eliot’s exploration, largely through the eyes of the novel’s eponymous hero, of the apparent dichotomy between the commercial and metaphysical elements of Judaism is a central ethical theme. While Mordecai and Cohen (the two Ezra Cohens) ostensibly represent opposite ends of this dualism, the novel works against reductive oppositions

⁴⁶ *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 129-30. Mrs Davilow’s understanding of the collapse of Grapnell & Co bears relation to Sir Gavial’s schemes: “There were great speculations: he meant to gain. It was all about mines and things of that sort” (199).

⁴⁷ *Letters*, 1, 246-7. The letter was written in February 1848.

and, through a wider concept of the virtues, towards a synthesis and reconciliation: what Daniel Hack describes as the “fusion of the domains of prophecy and profit.”⁴⁸

It is only when he comes to see Cohen in a domestic setting that Deronda starts to shed his prejudice and even “thought that this pawnbroker proud of his vocation was not utterly prosaic” (335). In return, Cohen suspends his commercial scale of value when he admits that Deronda’s return to the shop was worth more to him and his excited family than any extra money that would have been otherwise earned on the pawned ring. However, even in this warm domestic sphere – in which family activities and religious observance are seamlessly linked – the language and images of commerce continue to pervade. Cohen’s first, triumphant thought when Deronda prepares the family for the discovery which he tells them will substantially change Mordecai’s life is “Relations with money, sir?” (490) and the realisation that he will be leaving them to join Mirah is bemoaned as the loss of “a property bearing interest” (491). The point Eliot is making is not that (to use her own chapter title in *Impressions*) the Cohens are thereby debasing the moral currency, but that in the commercial, domestic and wider communal spheres (and here the communal is crucially informed by ancient religious rites and traditions), the full range of virtues can be consistently and universally applied.

The same harmonious engagement of virtues is implicit in the banking house of Joseph Kalonymos (a financier and “wanderer”) in Mainz, whose solidity and traditions contrast with the novel’s representative British bankers, Grapnell & Co. Just as Lush and the unenlightened Gwendolen illustrate the corruption of individual morality by a wider adoption of the ethics of gambling, so too the blurring of the boundaries dividing investment from speculation from gambling in the commercial sphere here causes the complete collapse of an institution. The individuals responsible thought, like delusional gamblers, “of reigning in the realm of luck” (132). A danger that Eliot seems to be highlighting is that, as institutions develop that are formalising and quantifying risk and

⁴⁸ Hack, 163. See also Mary Wilson Carpenter, *George Eliot and the Landscape of Time: Narrative Form and Protestant Apocalyptic History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), esp. 131-53. Hack notes the recurrent narratorial critique of the pervasiveness of the market in contemporary society and perceptively concludes that “even as the narrator continues to treat market exchange as vulgar, materialistic, unfair and dishonest, the novel has been charting several forms of traffic between prophet and merchant” (167-8). In this context, it is interesting to note that Daniel’s first conversation with Mordecai takes place in a bookshop, in an exchange that hovers around the practice of market exchange (*Daniel Deronda*, 325-7).

probability across a wide area of experience - casinos, stockmarkets, life insurance offices, – so their underlying guiding principles, which may lack strong moral or virtuous foundations, are likely to spread and undermine more traditional ethical norms. Klesmer recognises this very tendency in British political life, provoking his outburst against the pragmatic and opinionated politician, Mr Bult (who is being introduced as a suitor for Miss Arrowsmith) as a representative of “the lack of idealism in English politics, which left all mutuality between distant races to be determined simply by the need of a market” (205).⁴⁹

At a more individual level of motivation and choice, the novel presents the incursion of ethically-shallow or flawed market principles into an institution close to the heart of national culture, marriage. One of the wonderful ironies in the novel is that two characters standing at opposite extremes in relation to the virtues, Grandcourt and Miss Arrowsmith, are united in their determination, against the wishes of those around them, not to marry for money. Gascoigne is, though completely inadvertently, quite right when he reassures Mrs Davilow concerning Grandcourt’s motivation for marrying her daughter: “few women can have been chosen more entirely for their own sake” (301). However, while Grandcourt’s motives are unrelated to the acquisition of money, both his marriage and his alliance with Mrs Glasher carry wider acquisitive associations and both women become, to some extent, commoditised and merely instrumental to what Jeff Nunokawa describes as a “yearning for [a] more tenacious mastery” than material property can satisfy.⁵⁰ In the early stages of his passion for Mrs Glasher, we are told he “would willingly have paid for the freedom to be won by a divorce” (287), while he later effectively pays for her compliance (through his continued, “liberal” payment of her living expenses) in not interfering with his marriage to Gwendolen. Gwendolen herself is groomed for the match by her uncle, who suspends the ethics of virtue (by ignoring the guidance of practical wisdom that Grandcourt is an unsuitable husband) to follow what he considers a utilitarian, ends-based strategy valorised by social rank and money.⁵¹ His indulgence to his niece, including the provision of a horse he can ill-afford, is part of a

⁴⁹ In Mr Bult’s defence, it is not clear that Klesmer’s outburst fully captures Bult’s political views.

⁵⁰ See Nunokawa, ch. 4, ‘*Daniel Deronda* and the Afterlife of Ownership’, 77-99 (70).

⁵¹ “And in considering the relation of means to ends...Mr Gascoigne’s calculations were of the kind called rational” (30).

campaign of 'speculative investment' aimed at securing the return of a husband, "not to a poor man, but one who can give her a fitting position" (65). When he fears her wilfulness may be putting his investment strategy at risk, he calls on her to accept Grandcourt's proposal as a matter of duty and responsibility under the guiding light of Providence. The exercise of voluntary, deliberative virtues (including the Christian ones) finds no recommendation. The Rector is here no more acting *from* virtue than Lapidoth is when he tries to "sell" his daughter in marriage to a Count in Vienna (185); a union which would also presumably have solved the financial difficulties of the bride's family.

Having linked the motivations for marriage of Grandcourt and Miss Arrowsmith in the previous paragraph, I now hasten to emphasise the latter's high moral standing and assert that her marriage to Klesmer, as much as, if not more so than Deronda's to Mirah, offers a powerful and alternative affirmation of transcendent, non-material values. Mr and Mrs Arrowsmith, in the face of an event far outside any of their calculated probabilities, believe that their power to disinherit their daughter gives them a decisive advantage in determining events. The terms of their opposition again serve to emphasise an intractable perceived connection between money and marriage. Their suggestion that Klesmer is counting on them to relent on that decision provokes his wonderful retort, asserting the unassailable value of love (the Christian virtue) and art (one of Aristotle's chief intellectual virtues):

"Madam," said Klesmer, "certain reasons forbid me to retort. But understand that I consider it out of the power either of you or your fortune to confer on me anything that I value. My rank as an artist is of my own winning, and I would not exchange it for any other. I am able to maintain your daughter, and I ask for no change in my life but her companionship" (212).⁵²

What Klesmer leaves unsaid is that the religion to which he belongs also represents a value which material wealth can neither add to nor subtract from. It is a collective, inherited wealth that goes back longer than Mrs Arrowsmith's half a million, the result of

⁵² Significantly, Klesmer's ability to maintain his wife (which ultimately isn't tested as she retains her fortune) is supported by the supplementing of his artistic excellence with prudence. During his frank appraisal of Gwendolen's chances of building a sufficiently remunerative career on the stage, he shows a strong grasp of the business side of his profession and the relative wages of working women in other fields. He reaches his final judgement only after "measuring probabilities" (221).

“some moist or dry business in the city” (35); longer even than the great estates of the Mallingers, now subject to the legal twists of entailment and Sir Hugo’s strategic negotiations with an amoral nephew. Ultimately, that which is of greatest value, what Eliot calls “the treasure of human affections”(103) is passed through history by stories of individual lives, an historical process whose codification is both described through the written and memorised ancient Judaic texts and represented imaginatively through the novel itself.⁵³ It is a process that Nancy Henry describes as “positing the role of collective memory in the future of national cultures, and the power of literary texts in creating and preserving both.”⁵⁴

⁵³ ““The boy will get them engraved within him,’ thought Mordecai; ‘it is a way of printing’” (408).

⁵⁴ Henry, ‘Introduction’, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ix. For *Daniel Deronda* and concepts of inheritance that, by fusing “separateness with communication”, point to aspects of Eliot’s social and political vision (which I discuss in the following two chapters), see: Wilson Carpenter, ch. 5; Hao Li, *Memory and History in George Eliot: Transfiguring the Past* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), ch. 6; Lisabeth During, ‘The Concept of Dread: Sympathy and Ethics in *Daniel Deronda*’, in Adamson, Freadman and Parker, 65-83; and Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 119-146. Anderson persuasively describes Eliot’s “complex attempt to construct an ideal modern relation between identity and cultural heritage” (124).

The Individual and the State: Economic Sociology in *Romola*

This may be where economic sociology differs most starkly from neo-classical economics – in the idea that the scripts for achieving goals are social phenomena that become embedded in cognitive schemas. The idea is that scripts are no more given by nature than goals are.¹

- Frank Dobbin, 2004

The succession of societies cannot be represented by a geometrical line; on the contrary, it resembles a tree whose branches grow in divergent directions.²

- Emile Durkheim, 1895

...my predominant feeling is, - not that I have achieved anything, but - that great, great acts have struggled to find a voice through me, and have only been able to speak brokenly. That consciousness makes me cherish the more any proof that my work has been seen to have some true significance by minds prepared not simply by instruction, but by that religious and moral sympathy with the historical life of man which is the larger half of culture.³

- George Eliot on *Romola*, 1863

In an 1876 review of Herbert Spencer's *The Principles of Sociology*, Alexander Bain traces an intellectual evolution and synthesis of ideas which find a particular culmination in his subject's most recent work:

Mr. Spencer's competence for rearing an advanced scheme of Sociology rests upon his having worked his way through the various preparatory stages, in a series of treatises, each admirable in itself, and all pointing to this consummation. The science that Sociology immediately reposes upon is Psychology; and in his systematic handling of this branch, Mr Spencer, while doing

¹ Frank Dobbin, 'Introduction', in Frank Dobbin (ed.), *The New Economic Sociology: A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 31.

² Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, tr. W. D. Halls, ed. Steven Lukes (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 64.

³ Letter to Richard Holt Hutton, 8 August 1863. *Letters*, 4, 97.

justice to the wide field of mental facts, has made his expositions point, by anticipation, to Sociology.⁴

The serialisation of *Daniel Deronda* began in the month following Bain's article in the inaugural edition of *Mind*. While not suggesting that Eliot's work followed a strictly linear development – an astute sociological understanding characterised even her earlier works, – the trajectory of my own work traces a similar path to that described by Bain. In particular, this chapter will attempt to relate my examination of Eliot's explorations of financial moral psychology in the previous three chapters to a consideration of her portrayal of how social networks and institutions simultaneously shape and are shaped by individual and collective economic behaviour. Eliot was not a sociologist any more than she was either a theoretical economist or a moral philosopher.⁵ However, the centrality of her position in the rise of sociological thought, or, as Wolf Lepenies characterises it, the formation of a middle ground “between literature and science”, should not be underestimated.⁶

Eliot was well acquainted with the main intellectual underpinnings of early British sociology. The first article she wrote for the *Westminster Review*, in January 1851, demonstrates a not wholly uncritical awareness of the social theories of Comte. She associates his views with those “thinkers who are in the van of human progress” and hold that “theological and metaphysical speculation have reached their limit, and that the only hope of extending man's sources of knowledge is to be found in the positive science, and in the universal application of its principles”.⁷ While it might be expected that Herbert Spencer would be prominent amongst these modern, scientifically-oriented social thinkers, it is significant that Eliot's comments pre-date Spencer's first reading of Comte, which occurred in 1852, when Lewes's series of articles in *The Leader* was followed by

⁴ Alexander Bain, ‘The Principles of Sociology by Herbert Spencer’, *Mind*, 1.1 (1876), 128-31, (128).

⁵ Although it is worth bearing in mind that the first two disciplines only really emerged as specialised academic schools in the decades following Eliot's death and, to a large extent, evolved out of the third.

⁶ Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1. While tracing the roots of the discipline back much further, Lepenies identifies the mid-nineteenth century onwards as the crucial period for his study, when “literature and sociology contested with one another the claim to offer the key orientation for modern civilization and the guide to living appropriate to industrial society.”

⁷ *Essays*, 28.

Harriet Martineau's first English translation of the *Cours de Philosophie Positive*.⁸ Therefore, while Spencer was starting to develop societal theories related to evolutionary science in his own early-1850s articles for *The Leader* and the *Westminster Review*, Eliot was one of a very small group in Britain familiar with the positivism of Comte, which was to prove seminal in the emergence of academic sociology.⁹ Prominent among that group, of course, was her future 'husband', although, while strategising how the *Westminster Review* might best incorporate articles on Comte in 1852, Eliot observes that Lewes's early pieces in *The Leader* "do not promise well" and concludes that Mill remains "the chief English interpreter of Comte."¹⁰ Almost a quarter of a century later, Bain begins his *Mind* review of Spencer by locating Mill's importance in the development of the embryonic social science: "in the *Logic*, Mill, having imbued himself with Comte's speculations, presented a summary of theoretical Sociology, which served as a sort of text-book or compendium to a generation of learners."¹¹

While Eliot was a great admirer of the *Logic*, the importance of Comte in her intellectual life owes less to Mill's interpretation than to her direct familiarity with the texts themselves.¹² John Cross remembers her high admiration for all Comte's writing: "I do not think I ever heard her speak of any writer with a more grateful sense of obligation for enlightenment."¹³ In the summer of 1861, just prior to beginning the writing of *Romola*, she interrupts her extensive Florentine research to return to the *Cours*: "I have just been reading the survey of the Middle Ages contained in the 5th volume of the *Philosophie Positive*, and to my apprehension few chapters can be fuller of luminous

⁸ See Peel: "[Spencer] began at George Eliot's instigation to read the *Politique Positive*, disagreed with Comte's classification of the sciences, was glad to drop it, and then, like any self-improving mechanic, proceeded to pick up the outlines of Comte's system from a popular summary by Lewes in *The Leader*" (27-8). As Peel notes, Spencer consistently distanced himself from Comte and positivism generally.

⁹ Haight, 'Introduction', *Letters*, 1, xlv: "In 1852 Herbert Spencer...published in *The Leader* 'The Development Hypothesis,' which contains the germ of his whole system of philosophy, and in the *Westminster Review* 'A Theory of Population,' in which for the first time the development of species is linked with the survival of the fittest."

¹⁰ Letter to George Combe, 22 April 1852. *Letters*, 8, 44.

¹¹ Bain, *Mind*, 128.

¹² Eliot mentions the *Logic* several times in her letters and journals. In 1875, she writes that she had studied the book "with much benefit" (*Letters*, 6, 163).

¹³ J.W.Cross, *George Eliot's Life As Related in Her Letters and Journals*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1885), 620.

ideas. I am thankful to learn from it.”¹⁴ Lewes’s conviction of the importance of Comte’s analysis of social development (at least up to and including the *Cours*) is even stronger:

with regard to History I venture to say that no philosopher has ever laid so much emphasis on it, no one has more clearly seen and expressed the truth, that the past rules the present, lives in it, and that we are but the growth and outcome of the past.¹⁵

As I will later discuss, Eliot’s opinion of Comte’s concept of history and society was more reserved. These reservations will form part of my argument that her sociological thought – and, in particular as that incorporates the economic – is more aligned to, indeed foreshadows the work of the European sociologists who built on and greatly extended the work of Comte, Spencer and others in the decades following Eliot’s death.

Eliot concludes her 1855 essay, ‘The Future of German Philosophy’ with a call for the extension of empirical, scientific method beyond the natural sciences and formal logic “to the investigation of Psychology, with its subordinate department Aesthetics; to ethics; and to the principles of Jurisprudence.”¹⁶ In taking up this call, and despite their widely divergent styles, methodologies and conclusions, Comte, Mill and Spencer had a common purpose. Each sought to identify and formulate, along scientific principles, laws governing social development and individual action. While their respective investigations undoubtedly influenced Eliot’s sociological thought, as was the case with the moral philosophical systems considered in the earlier chapters of this work, she discarded aspects of what she saw as partial or incoherent social theories. In her major novels, she came to synthesise her own multi-dimensional and dynamic (though necessarily incomplete) model of social interconnectedness. In this respect, Cross’s description of her admiration for Comte is significantly qualified: “But the appreciation was thoroughly selective...Parts of his teaching were accepted and other parts rejected.”¹⁷ To some extent, her reservations over attempts precisely to formulate a causal and predictive social

¹⁴ *Letters*, 3, 438.

¹⁵ *Letters*, 3, 320. The letter, to Sara Hennell, is predominantly by Lewes, although Eliot does conclude it with a few light-hearted lines. Lewes is both animated and critical of what he perceives as Sara’s misinterpretation of Comte: “it is obvious you cannot have read Comte or you would not commit such a glaring mistake as to accuse him of not taking the element of History into account.”

¹⁶ *Essays*, 153.

¹⁷ Cross, 620.

science share common ground with her scepticism towards the 'laws' of political economy. As we have seen, Eliot characterised her particularisation of character and society as experimental. However, both the conditions underlying these experiments and their outcomes she presents as so complex and variable as to defy the natural-scientific method, that tests hypothesis by empiricism to establish general predictive laws of cause and effect. By 1866, when Frederic Harrison tried to persuade her to share his "ever present dream...that the grand features of Comte's world might be sketched in fiction", she had concluded that the creation of a novel overtly informed by positivist principles would be an aesthetic compromise that would transform "the picture to the diagram", and thereby reductively misrepresent life.¹⁸

Her more direct qualification of Spencer's ethics and sociology is as much rooted in his idiosyncratic intellectual approach as his particular scientific method: "His mind rejects everything that cannot be wrought into the web of his own production."¹⁹ Nancy Paxton argues that, as Spencer's evolutionary scientific system and biological determinism became the increasingly overarching aspect of his work, Eliot became increasingly distanced from a social philosophy which "rigorously excluded emotion."²⁰ Robert M. Young neatly summarises how Spencer attempted to spin this self-produced web, connecting ethics, economics and society: "Throughout his mature life he was seeking a scientific basis for a doctrine of inevitable progress which would justify his belief in an extreme of laissez-faire economics and social theory."²¹ Young's characterisation of Spencer echoes Durkheim's own assessment at the beginning of the twentieth-century:

¹⁸ *Letters*, 4, 287, 300. See, however, J. B. Bullen, 'George Eliot's *Romola* as a Positivist Allegory', *The Review of English Studies* 26. 104 (1975), 425-35. Bullen argues that the structure of the novel and the heroine's progression to liberation and enlightenment have strong affinities with Comte's interpretation of history.

¹⁹ *Letters*, 6, 426.

²⁰ Nancy L. Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer: Feminism, Evolution and the Reconstruction of Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

²¹ Quoted in Paxton, 5.

It is abundantly plain that Spencer worked on sociology as a philosopher, because he did not set out to study social facts in themselves and for their own sake, but in order to demonstrate how the hypothesis of evolution is verified in the social realm.²²

Like Eliot, Durkheim was critical of both Spencer and Comte (whom he nevertheless recognises as the greatest of the “founders of the new science”), disputing aspects of their sociological method and their very different attempts “to discover the law which governs social evolution as a whole.” Of Comte he writes:

the law of the three stages, which dominates the *Cours de philosophie positive* throughout, is essentially a sociological law. Moreover, since the demonstration of this law relies on philosophical considerations which relate to the conditions of knowledge, it follows that positivist philosophy is wholly a sociology and Comtean sociology is itself a philosophy.²³

Eliot’s investigations into the individual, economics and the evolution of society go beyond both Comte’s stadial historical theory and Spencer’s deterministic evolutionary progression from militancy to industrialism. In some important respects, they look forward to both Durkheim and Weber.

Bruce Mazlish in *A New Science: The Breakdown of Connections and the Birth of Sociology* is explicit in locating Eliot as an important link in the discipline’s development during the late nineteenth century. If, as I believe, Mazlish is correct in his assessment that she represents “[a]n especially good bridge...between what can be called sensibility...and sociology”, an important foundation in that bridge is her 1856 *Westminster Review* essay, ‘The Natural History of German Life.’²⁴ The essay has been exhaustively analysed and mined, most often to provide evidence of Eliot’s “social-political-conservatism” and as her clearest statement on the moral imperative for the creation of realist art and literature as “a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.”²⁵ It also has,

²² Durkheim, 179.

²³ Durkheim, 176, 182, 176.

²⁴ Mazlish, 138.

²⁵ *Essays*, 271, 287. Subsequent references to the essay will appear in the text.

however, significant value as a pointer to the trajectory of sociological thought over the following half-century and as a guide to Eliot's position in that development. Significantly, her commendation of Riehl establishes a link between literature and social studies in which the latter, rather than standing in rational opposition to, is given greater clarity by the adoption of a literary style.²⁶ The corollary, of course, is that art and literature assume high value only by the true and realistic portrayal of both the external workings of society and the inner life of those individuals, of all classes, who comprise that society. Eliot argues that Riehl, whose work "would be fascinating as literature, if it were not important for its facts and philosophy" (294), achieves this synthesis and thereby an "awakening of social sympathies" more completely than Dickens (271).²⁷ Eliot's claim in relation to the English realist novel that "[w]hat we are desiring for ourselves has been in some degree done for the Germans by Riehl" (273) invests considerable importance in the content of his social observation and analysis. Midway through the essay she inserts an explanatory note that "in our statement of Riehl's opinions, we must be understood not as quoting Riehl, but as interpreting and illustrating him" (287). However, it is apparent that she finds Riehl's analysis of German society both compelling in its specificity and of equal value as a model for studying the development of other nations through history. It thus crucially informs not only many of her 'English' novels but also the one which most specifically addresses the "conception of European society as incarnate history" (289), *Romola*.

Eliot clearly sets Riehl apart from those who have come, "by the splendid conquests of modern generalisation, to believe that all social questions are merged into economical science" (272). She traces Comte's classification of the sciences, all of which advance from the "general" to the "special", in her characterisation of the complexity of the social sciences and the reductiveness of applying a single, economic interpretation to its study (290). However, she is equally dismissive of those who seek a solution to the social problems brought about by industrial capitalism in a return to a pre-market, patronistic economic system; what she wonderfully describes as "the aristocratic dilettantism which

²⁶ See both Lepenies and Mazlish for detailed analysis of the literary origins of sociological writing and the relationship between the two disciplines as the latter developed.

²⁷ Lepenies claims success along these lines for Balzac: "for what sociologist of the mid-nineteenth century could compete with the analytical insight of this novelist and his '*science sociale*'...?" (5). Balzac was greatly admired by Eliot and Lewes.

attempts to restore the ‘good old times’ by a sort of idyllic masquerading, and to grow feudal fidelity as we grow prize turnips, by an artificial system of culture” (272). What her ‘interpretation and illustration’ of Riehl offers, by comparison, is a nuanced analysis of economic influences and consequences in an inevitably transforming and urbanising society. Indeed, her observation that changes occurring in Germany in the 1850s mirror those “in England half a century ago” (i.e. around the time she set her early novels) inadvertently links Riehl’s sociological project to her own as a novelist, with both writers exploring the tensions created at the transition points into modern, money-economies (273). Riehl’s description of the peasant class is unsentimental and Eliot applauds his criticism of those novelists who impose their own emotions on their creations. In so doing, Riehl himself writes, “they obliterated what is precisely his most predominant characteristic, namely, that with him general custom holds the place of individual feeling” (280). This observation explains why the adoption of a full market economy for the transfer of agricultural produce becomes a “disintegrating” force for both the individual and the community. Individual responsibility comes to take the place of custom, communal action and non-cash transactions, resulting in “demoralization”, debt and ruin (281). Economic change is presented as part of a wider political and institutional transformation that replaces “the healthy life of the Commune” with a bureaucracy controlled by the “patent machinery of state-appointed functionaries” (282).²⁸

Riehl’s descriptions of the peasantry within the structure of German society are largely drawn from the first volume of his *Natural History, Die Burgerliche Gesellschaft* (1851). Almost forty years later, Ferdinand Tonnies’ highly influential *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* acknowledges a debt to Riehl and his ethnographic and sociological descriptions of rural communities in transition.²⁹ The link from Riehl to Tonnies and thereon to Simmel, Durkheim and Weber tangentially connects Riehl’s first British reviewer with the great tradition of European sociological thought.³⁰ Ironically, the relatively youthful Tonnies drew the economic inspiration for his criticism of modernism

²⁸ This passage is discussed further in ch. 8 below.

²⁹ The link is extensively explored in Suzanne Graver, *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), esp. ch 2, 28-80.

³⁰ See Mazlish, 161-78.

and individualism, embodied by money-exchange and the cash nexus, from Marx.³¹ Eliot's review of Riehl had made much of the peasantry's ignorance of theoretical Communism, with any urge to revolt inspired solely by material self-interest (284). Eliot distances herself from Riehl's argument that the preservation of the aristocracy is defensible on both historical and rational grounds but seems happy to accept his contention that, in Germany, the revolutionary tendencies of the 'Fourth Estate' represent the will not of a displaced proletariat of labourers but an educated group of discontents from across the social spectrum that he describes as the "intellectual proletariat." As Eliot summarises his position: "Germany yields more intellectual produce than it can use and pay for" (297-8).

Regardless of the varying political interpretations surrounding the shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, Riehl's insistence that social change could only be understood by reference to a detailed and specific knowledge and study of a particular society was the most lasting influence on Eliot's progression as a novelist. Moreover, she realised that particularism must be historically rooted, and informed by inherited social conditions:

The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium, and development can only take place by the gradual consentaneous development of both (287).

The gradualist social change she here expresses underlies her socio-political position in *Felix Holt*, while the organic imagery to describe the interconnectedness of the individual in society recurs throughout the novels. In *Romola*, book 2 opens with another image from nature to suggest the inseparability of private and public lives, here in a period and society far removed from the provincial surroundings of nineteenth-century England:

Since that Easter a great change had come over the prospects of Florence; and as in the tree that bears a myriad of blossoms, each single bud with its fruit is dependent on the primary circulation

³¹ Mazlish, 169-70, describes a moderation of Tonnies' enthusiasm for Marx later in his life.

of the sap, so the fortunes of Tito and Romola were dependent on certain grand political and social conditions which made an epoch in the history of Italy.³²

In the earlier cited letter to Sara Hennell, Eliot's praise of Comte's survey of the Middle ages is tempered by her admission that she agrees with her friend "in regarding positivism as one-sided". Her reservation seems to relate to Comte's stadial historical theory, as she explains:

I hope we are well out of that phase in which the most philosophic view of the past was held to be a smiling survey of human folly, and when the wisest man was supposed to be one who could sympathise with no age but the age to come.³³

Her point is that merely subjecting a particular period of social history to the template of a presentist historical theory – either cyclical or progressive – will give only a partial understanding of the past. This was why she was so attracted to Riehl's method: "He sees in European history *incarnate history*, and any attempt to disengage it from its historical elements must, he believes, be simply destructive of social vitality" (287). Five years earlier, in 'The Progress of the Intellect', she warned of a modern tendency, which she links to Comtean positivism, to "under-rate critical research into ancient modes of life and forms of thought", believing it to be "a very serious mistake to suppose that the study of the past and the labours of criticism have no important practical bearing on the present."³⁴ Eliot's journals document the immense reading in Florentine history she undertook both during her trips to Italy in the early 1860s and back in London in preparation for the composition of *Romola*. The process of writing the novel was arduous and, during its serialisation, Lewes was even more anxious than usual to protect Eliot from any unfavourable reviews as "she has all along resisted writing it on the ground that no one would be interested in it."³⁵ It was an important work for her and, while the novel's treatment of the individual making (often economically-related) ethical choices in

³² *Romola*, 207. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

³³ *Letters*, 3, 320, discussed on p. 156 above. See also Collini, Winch and Burrow, ch. 7, for the importance of Sir Henry Maine and the Comparative Method in the early 1860s, which influenced Eliot's historical thought.

³⁴ *Essays*, 28.

³⁵ *Letters*, 4, 58.

an intricately interconnected social environment links it particularly to the novels that followed it, the fact that Eliot conducted her “experiment” under such unusual historical conditions is significant. My argument is that this significance is chiefly located in the economic realm, which the particular circumstances of a city republic, with complex social networks and institutions at a period of transition into an identifiable form of early-modern capitalism, allowed the author to explore in ways that resonated strongly with her own period.

By the 1860s, capitalism - that is private ownership of the means of production and its attendant, profit-focused practices, including the division of labour, market expansion and innovation - had developed in Britain to a largely unrestricted form, in which social and political controls were limited. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, this process enabled the developing field of economics to theorise generalised models of the functioning of market exchange driven by supply and demand and measured by a single scale of money value. As social controls effectively narrowed to the hegemony of the market, so too the conception of what constituted the ‘economic’ largely narrowed its focus to the rational allocation of resources to maximise production and meet demand. However, in a society in which the market is part of a much broader-based institutional framework controlling the exchange of goods, the conception of the economic retains a wider meaning and is embedded in the needs and wants of individuals in the production, distribution and exchange of all goods and services. Florence in the 1490’s provides a period in which economics had not yet established a theoretical grounding and become increasingly autonomous of other social structures.

Yet crucially, in attempting to infuse the motivations and actions of her characters with relevance to the contemporary reader, many of the characteristics of modern capitalism were clearly emerging. In *Economy and Society* (1922), Max Weber defined three principle varieties of capitalism: political, traditional commercial and rational.³⁶ The first two types, which, Weber contends, can be traced very far back, are still apparent in the Florence of *Romola* through the power and intervention of the state and military

³⁶ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), vol. 1, 164-6. See also Richard Swedberg, ‘Max Weber’s Economic Sociology: The Centerpiece of *Economy and Society*’, in Charles Camic, Philip S. Gorski and David M. Trubek (eds.), *Max Weber’s Economy and Society: A Critical Companion* (Stanford: Stanford university Press, 2005), esp. 131-2.

factions, while the city's commercial activities are, at least in part, localised and small scale. Richard A. Goldthwaite in his recent *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* writes, in Weberian terms, that the Florentine commercial class "were somewhat lacking in their 'spirit of capitalism.'"³⁷ He describes a system in which participants in the city's dominant manufacturing industry, textiles, took too little risk and employed only small amounts of capital by 'putting-out' most of their production, while deferring to the guilds (themselves a somewhat protectionist group of institutions at odds with more developed, free market capitalism) to make collective policy decisions. The model is one of co-operation rather than individual profit maximisation. Goldthwaite concludes:

One might even go on to say that in a sense these men, however much their business practices anticipate modern capitalism, were still strongly tied into the medieval tradition of guild corporatism, a state of mind that may not have been altogether irrelevant to the dense networks that so characterized their social and political life as well.³⁸

Yet, as Goldthwaite suggests, in other ways this was a society already meeting several of the requirements of the rational capitalism that Weber actually pinpoints as coming into being in the West in the sixteenth century. Florence was a city state under a fairly transparent and impartial rule of law with only limited governmental interference in trade and finance. The state had a monopoly on the issuance of money and the Florin was widely accepted as of equal or superior standing to the currencies of the other leading Italian city states. While, as noted, the domestic sector was relatively conservative, a substantial and entrepreneurial international wool and textile industry operated and supported the growth of Europe's largest and most powerful banking sector. By the time the action of *Romola* commences, the Medici were pre-eminent amongst these extensive, family-run banking networks.³⁹ Florence was also instrumental in the development of capital accounting and double-entry book-keeping which are prerequisites for mature, rational capitalism. It is against this fluid and minutely described socio-economic

³⁷ Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 588.

³⁸ Goldthwaite, 590.

³⁹ It is also significant that, in the previous century, the Bardi family were among several equally prominent firms, before being brought down by their exposure to the English crown, an episode Eliot accurately describes in *Romola*, 45-6.

background, at once remote and pointedly relevant to her readers, that Eliot's characters are set in motion.⁴⁰

The opening paragraph of the 'Proem' establishes this duality of what Eliot calls "the broad sameness of the human lot" within a particular physical and temporal location. It is not only the architecture and landscape of the city that are still clearly recognisable; "those other streams, the life-currents that ebb and flow in human hearts, pulsate to the same great needs, the same great loves and terrors" (3). Not all her contemporary critics were convinced. *The Westminster Review* argued that the moral questions raised in the novel "are of very modern growth and...would have been more appropriately displayed on a modern stage." Both Tito and Romola, the reviewer contends, are essentially mid-nineteenth-century characters in distracting and unnecessary disguise and Eliot is simply wrong "to plead that the great features of human life and character are determined by conditions too permanent to offer any radical distinctions between their manifestations from century to century."⁴¹ If Lewes failed to keep this article from Eliot's view, it is likely she would have considered it a good example of that "philosophic view of the past" of which she disparagingly wrote to Sara Hennell two years earlier.⁴² In a letter to Hutton, responding to a more positive *Spectator* article in which he too addresses the level of period detail in the novel, she is eloquently insistent that ethical constants can be meaningfully projected against a specific and particular historical background. I will later discuss Tito's economic behaviour as it relates to nineteenth-century political economy and Utilitarianism, but Eliot is right to insist that his actions and character development in the novel are not the simple consequences of an anachronistic economic individualism, but are crucially shaped by the social environment she describes; "the relation of the Florentine political life to the development of Tito's nature."⁴³

⁴⁰ A review of the novel by R. H. Hutton in *The Spectator*, 18 July 1863, describes the novel's setting as "...that strange era, which has so many points of resemblance with the present." Reprinted in Lerner and Holmstrom, 57. Eliot's descriptions of late fifteenth-century Florence in *Romola* occasionally resonate clearly with her own time, e.g. "Altogether this world, with its partitioned empire and its roomy universal Church, seemed to be a handsome establishment for the few who were lucky or wise enough to reap the advantages of human folly" (271); and "[Florence's] strange web of belief and unbelief." (48).

⁴¹ *Westminster Review*, 80 (Oct. 1863), 347.

⁴² See notes 15 and 33 above.

⁴³ *Letters*, 4, 97.

The importance of *Romola*, considered as a work contributing to the development of economic sociology, lies in the completeness of Eliot's descriptions of the institutions, more informal networks and power structures contained within the novel. Modern sociology defines a social institution as "a set of social norms which orient and regulate behaviour and which are based on sanctions which seek to guarantee compliance on the part of individuals."⁴⁴ This definition extends to the rules and norms of social behaviour and beyond the collective organisations that control and regulate them.⁴⁵ Institutions can therefore bridge the economy and society and, to be fully understood, need to be given precise historical context. In *Romola*, Eliot shows how economic practices both shape and are shaped by social, cultural and political institutions. Unusually for her time and foreshadowing the work of sociologists long after her death, she illustrates and examines the interconnection between economics and religion, where the latter exerts a powerful influence on social norms.⁴⁶ As I have already noted, her anticipation of Weber's famous theories in this area – albeit with a slightly different conclusion – was hinted at as early as the Riehl essay, where she compares social development in Europe with England: "for though our English life is in its core intensely traditional, Protestantism and commerce have modernised the face of the land and the aspects of society in a far greater degree than in any continental country". (288) As Mazlish comments in his description of Weber's pioneering work in developing a sociology of religion, unlike Spencer and, later, Durkheim he "was concerned almost exclusively with the great religions of the world."⁴⁷

My analysis in the previous chapter attempted to identify a particular connection between the faith of the Jews in exile and commerce as an integral and unifying communal social practice.⁴⁸ Eliot's portrayal essentially gels with Weber's conclusions in both *The Protestant Ethic and Economy and Society* that, contrary to accepted opinion, served to detach capitalism from Judaism *per se*. Weber argued that it was the Jews'

⁴⁴ Carlo Trigilia, *Economic Sociology: State, Market, and Society in Modern Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 4.

⁴⁵ Including the 'market' itself as a social institution not only shaping, but shaped by the decisions of its participants and wider cultural influences.

⁴⁶ Most famously in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Talcott Parsons (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930); and *Economy and Society*.

⁴⁷ Mazlish, 218.

⁴⁸ See also Mazlish on *Daniel Deronda*: "Eliot found in Zionism, before its actual establishment, an inspired answer to the problem of how to reconnect society and reconstitute community" (99).

minority status that largely determined their concentration in commerce: “National or religious minorities which are in a position of subordination to a group of rulers are likely, through their voluntary or involuntary exclusion from positions of political influence, to be driven with particular force into economic activity.”⁴⁹ In *Romola*, this social phenomenon is evident. While Florence admired success in business, the opposition of the Catholic Church to usury continued to hold a powerful grip on society. Thus, Jews are depicted as a minority, ‘pariah’ people beyond the economic moral pale: in the novel’s opening scene, the profit-obsessed Bratti decries “those dogs of hell that want to get all the profit of usury for themselves and leave none for Christians” (13).⁵⁰

The relationship between Catholicism and economics in the novel is pervasive and complex. The amassing of great fortunes, epitomised by the Medici, is tolerated only as long as an appropriate percentage is sanctified by being paid to the Church or diverted to works of art and public buildings for the communal good: “large gifts to the shrines of saints” and “liberal bequests towards buildings for the Frati” (7). Savonarola’s political radicalism is closely connected with his efforts to undermine and invert the established relationship between the Church and money. He is reported as “telling the people that God will not have silver crucifixes and starving stomachs; and that the church is best adorned with the gems of holiness and the fine gold of brotherly love” (345), and extends his message of redistribution to the wider society, “teaching the disturbing doctrine that it was not the duty of the rich to be luxurious for the sake of the poor” (346). The ever-simmering dispute between Savonarola and the Papacy symbolises a struggle for the hearts and minds of Florentine society that is at once political, economic and spiritual. Under Savonarola’s influence, Florentine society adjusts the accommodation it has made between earthly profit and heavenly reward but, significantly, his power finally collapses under the strain of a failing economy.⁵¹

While religion occupies a central position in the novel’s social and ethical investigations, a dual play of the economic infiltration of social institutions and the

⁴⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 39.

⁵⁰ The reference is to the notes to *The Protestant Ethic*, where Weber describes the attitude of English Puritans to Jewish commerce: “Jewish capitalism was speculative pariah-capitalism, while the Puritan was bourgeois organization of labour” (271).

⁵¹ “[B]ut now that belief meant an immediate blow to their commerce, the shaking of their position among the Italian States, and an interdict on their city, there inevitably came the question, ‘What miracle showest thou?’” (*Romola*, 514).

subsequent shaping of economic norms is at work throughout the novel. Florence's power and prosperity by the end of the fifteenth-century was built on its international trade. An outward-looking economic liberalism blended with a detailed commercial focus comes to define the city's citizenry, as embodied in the 'spirit' of the Proem: "[The old Florentine's] politics had an area as wide as his trade, which stretched from Syria to Britain, but they also had the passionate intensity, and the detailed practical interest, which could belong only to a narrow scene of corporate action" (6). Tito is socially adept and quickly wins friends and position, but his acceptance into the influential classes (which is never wholly achieved) requires him to acquire an understanding of Florentine economic subtleties that we feel belongs to the old-established families as a kind of collective inheritance. Once his betrothal to Romola is settled, "Tito set about winning Messer Bernardo's respect by inquiring...into Florentine money matters, the secret of the *Monti* or public funds, the values of real property, and the profits of banking" (195).

Ultimately, however, the external events presented in the novel are brought about by a reshaping of these traditional social economics. Financial wealth has enabled the Medici to exert a control over the physical institutions of the city which has undermined the value system on which the state was predicated. The assumption of a money value to measure or define areas that previously had a common, and therefore non-exchangeable value, are presented as institutional changes which comes to diminish the character of individual citizens: "For the citizens' armour was getting rusty, and populations seemed to have become tame, licking the hands of masters who paid for a ready-made army when they wanted it, as they paid for goods of Smyrna" (210). The street-trader, Bratti – whose periodic appearances in the novel, each time trying to sell something different, provide some structural continuity – is a mouthpiece for this subversion of values. In one of his final appearances, he is selling two types of handbills arguing the case of the forthcoming trial of the supposed Medici conspirators. One is titled 'Law' and the other 'Justice':

'Justice' goes the quickest, - so I raised the price, and made it two denari. But then I bethought me the 'Law' was good ware too, and had as good a right to be charged for as 'Justice;' for people set no store by cheap things, and if I sold the 'Law' at one denaro, I should be doing it a wrong. And I'm a fair trader. 'Law,' or 'Justice,' it's all one to me; they're good wares. I got 'em both for nothing, and I'll sell 'em at a fair profit (492).

Romola, in fact, is full of exchanges, although by no means all are for money or even made on conventionally rational economic grounds. Transactions are often personalised, reciprocal or merely distributive. Even Bratti following a practice of ‘earmarking’ discreet monies, doesn’t always seek to maximise his net returns.⁵² In his first meeting with Tito he tells of his uneasiness at his good fortune in finding the unclaimed body of a beggar whose cap was lined with coin. Mirroring the practices of casuistry of those wealthy Florentines troubled by guilt over their large commercial gains, he first finds a somewhat illogical argument to justify retaining the windfall and then, to hedge his bets, “buried the body and paid for a mass – and so I saw it was a fair bargain” (11). As the novel ascends the scale of the commercial classes, from the shopkeepers and small traders up to the wealthy merchants, Eliot illustrates the wide and often incalculable range of socially-informed and individual motivations and impulses that determine economic action. Niccolo Caparra, the inscrutable blacksmith and armourer, is prepared to sacrifice short-term commercial gains for the control and knowledge he achieves by selling only to customers he knows: “‘I’m rather nice about what I sell, and whom I sell to” (244). Caparra is unusual in not offering credit to anyone (“I trust nobody” [244]), but Tito benefits greatly from credit and advances often extended for non-financial reasons. His ‘capital’ is both intellectual and, by his looks and manners, human, even erotic.⁵³ Baldassarre’s jewels provide the main collateral for his money-raising, but Tito recognises and overtly links his most valuable “commodities”, his learning and his appearance, when he tells Nello: “It seems to me...that you have taken away some of my capital with your razor – I mean a year or two of age, which might have won me more ready credit for my learning” (35).⁵⁴

Tito recognises the social dimension of economic choice yet attempts to control his own behaviour according to a reductive and strictly individualistic interpretation of the greatest happiness principle. As Richard Goldthwaite writes of even the most successful

⁵² For earmarking in modern sociological thought, see Viviana A. Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 18-25.

⁵³ For a modern, and controversial, theory of this form of capital, see Catherine Hakim, ‘Erotic Capital’, *European Sociological Review* 26.5 (2010), 499-518.

⁵⁴ Tito had earlier told the barber he had received a recommendation that “Florence is the best market in Italy for commodities such as yours” (29).

bankers and merchants of that period: “whatever thoughts Florentines had about their economy, none of these men ever crossed the intellectual barrier to analysis. No one ventured to devise a scheme for the justification of business, let alone to develop a theoretical understanding of economic activity.”⁵⁵ Eliot does not attempt to impose a consciously thought-out philosophy on her character, but from the perspective of her own age of political economic theory she uses Tito to expose its empirical shortcomings and normative inadequacy. Under this reading, *Romola* provides a sociological refutation of individualistic economic determinism that complements the moral philosophical objections I have tried to describe in the earlier part of this work. In this respect, Eliot both presents a version of the economic sociology that Weber was to formalise and also foreshadows Durkheim’s criticism of the individualistic Utilitarian basis of social theory as promoted by Spencer.⁵⁶

While Weber clearly distinguishes his definition of economic action from economic *social* action, both, he concludes, have utility as their aim. It is relevant, therefore, in that context to compare the hedonistic Utilitarianism of Tito with Savonarola’s very particular strain of welfarism in search of the greater social good. Tito’s hedonism is expressed in explicitly, though reductive, Benthamite terms: “What, looked at closely, was the end of all life, but to extract the utmost sum of pleasure?” (117). The “Chief Good” is linked to no absolute value but is relative and wholly subjective, “a matter of taste” (119). For much of the novel, Tito is driven by impulse and seeks to justify and rationalise his actions retrospectively. However, in the scene in which he reveals to Romola that he has sold her father’s library, his hedonism assumes a more reflective and philosophical tone as he asks her to consider her father’s “real welfare or happiness”, to “discriminate...substantial good” and to question how best to extend the books’ “usefulness” and where “they will find the highest use and value” (288-90). Whereas Tito uses a philosophical construct (essentially an egoistic perversion of Bentham’s and Mill’s Utilitarianism) to valorise selfish ends, Savonarola’s ideal is the common good. This

⁵⁵ Goldthwaite, 591.

⁵⁶ Swedberg summarises and distinguishes Weber’s concept of economic social action: “Economic action, the key unit in economic theory, is...constituted by the action of an individual, to which meaning is attached. Unlike social action, however, economic action can only be rational, and it is always rational; also its aim is utility. Economic social action, in contrast, is explicitly oriented to others and very rarely, if ever, rational; it also has utility as its aim” (129). For Durkheim’s criticism of Utilitarian method, see Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, in Dobbin, 242.

idealism, “in which every man is to strive only for the general good” is mocked by Tournabuoni as both unworldly and masking the Frate’s own egotistical ends. Romola too comes to recognise some ambivalence in his purpose but is ultimately convinced of a motivation towards an end – “the moral welfare of men” - that transcends individual self-interest and rationality (577-9).

The clearest statement of Tito’s subversion of all socially-based motivation to the principle of maximising his own pleasure is brought about by a question of economics. His calculation that, on a risk-adjusted basis, he would derive more pleasure by selling Baldassarre’s gems for his own wants than by risking those same proceeds in an uncertain expedition to find and secure his adoptive father’s release gives rise to a consideration of the nature of individualism and the collective will. He is fully aware that his principle for action

was not the sentiment which the complicated play of human feelings had engendered in society. The men around him would expect that he should immediately apply those florins to his benefactor’s rescue. But what was the sentiment of society? – a mere tangle of anomalous traditions and opinions, that no man would take as a guide, except so far as his own comfort was concerned (118).

Tito’s self-exclusion from “the sentiment of society” represents an assertion of complete individual autonomy: what he is not contracted to, socially, he has no obligation towards. This atomism, which Eliot undermines through the action of the novel, is formally opposed by Durkheim’s alternative assertion of trust as the basis for social inter-relation and by the social underpinning of collective conscience. For Durkheim, “[s]ocial life comes from a double source, the likeness of consciences and the division of social labour”; the first representing what he calls mechanical and the second organic solidarity.⁵⁷ Romola, in chapter 68, embraces the collective conscience both through her acts of selfless citizenship during the famine and, after fleeing the city, by her work in bringing cohesion and communal action to the plague village. The social setting of this episode is significant: the community survives in a self-contained, completely money-free economy, in which the division of labour does not exist. In Durkheimian terms, all

⁵⁷ Durkheim, in Dobbin, 237.

that remains is mechanical solidarity.⁵⁸ Eliot takes the reader out of capitalism better to focus her concern as to how best to balance individualism with the demands of the common conscience. Again, she seems to anticipate Durkheim's recognition of this central sociological question, which he expresses as a kind of paradox: "In effect, on the one hand, each one depends as much more strictly on society as labour is more divided; and, on the other, the activity of each is as much more personal as it is more specialized."⁵⁹ My final chapter will consider further how the limits of market exchange need to be questioned and defined and how individual economic rights and freedoms can co-exist with wider social duties.

⁵⁸ One of Durkheim's many points of dispute with Spencer was on the latter's suggestion that the absorption of the individual into a common social conscience is characteristic of a militant phase of society: "...according to him, this absorption of the individual into the group would be the result of force and of an artificial organization necessitated by the state of war in which lower societies chronically live." Durkheim, in Dobbin, 235.

⁵⁹ Durkheim, in Dobbin, 235.

The Politics of Wealth: New Liberalism and the Pathologies of Economic Individualism

What, then, is the rightful limit to the sovereignty of the individual over himself? Where does the authority of society begin? How much of human life should be assigned to individuality, and how much to society?¹

- J. S. Mill, 1859

The most arrant denier must admit that a man often furthers larger ends than he is conscious of, and that while he is transacting his particular affairs with the narrow pertinacity of a respectable ant, he subserves an economy larger than any purpose of his own.²

- George Eliot, 1878

The result [*Middlemarch*] is a justification of all that it was then usual to sum up in the word altruism, which for this generation it is necessary to translate as meaning living for others, and for this justification George Eliot has been damned by those that have come after her.³

- L. T. Hobhouse, 1915

The dominant political figure of the second-half of the nineteenth century famously described John Cross's biography of George Eliot as "a reticence in three volumes." W. E. Gladstone did not open *George Eliot's Life* in search of an examination of the novelist's political theory. However, Cross's single reference to his wife's political opinions illustrates well the reserve that frustrated Gladstone along with many of the book's early readers. Cross's observation is accurate, as far as it goes. Her "many-sidedness", he writes, "makes it exceedingly difficult to ascertain, either from her books

¹ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works*, vol.18, 276.

² *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 63.

³ L.T.Hobhouse, *The World in Conflict* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1915), 35.

or from the greatest personal intimacy, what her exact relation was to any existing religious creed or to any political party.”⁴ In fact, to ascertain the exact relation of many politically-engaged individuals - and not least Gladstone himself - to a specific party during this period, was an increasingly difficult and complex exercise.⁵ Eliot was not politically active, even in the limited spheres open to women in her age, and, in her letters and journals, rarely propounds extensive personal views on contemporary political events and characters.⁶ However, this chapter will argue that Eliot’s moral and sociological concerns were informed by essentially political questions around the role of the state in the governance of individual citizens and that, moreover, these questions crucially hinged on aspects of economic duties and responsibilities.⁷ This process is evident in both her personal and early non-fiction writings and more fully explored in the novels.

The period her writing covers, up to her death in 1880, was one that saw great and seminal developments in concepts both of liberalism and of the Liberal party itself, whose main ideological underpinnings were increasingly strained by the policy demands of actual government in an age of widening enfranchisement. Eliot’s professional life in the 1850s and her main body of friends and acquaintances thereafter, presented her with an unusually prominent vantage point to observe the fast-flowing and eddying current of liberal thought. The influence of J. S. Mill has been discussed in my opening chapter, but it is worth recollecting that she re-read *On Liberty* alongside Henry Fawcett’s *The Economic Position of the English Labourer* while writing her most overtly political novel, *Felix Holt*, in 1865.⁸ Mill’s classic statement of individual rights and freedom from state interference - subject only to the absence of causing harm to others or to society - was written in response to the growth of democracy, which had served to replace the

⁴ Cross, 623.

⁵ Gladstone entered Parliament in 1832 as a Tory but became progressively liberal serving under Peel, who he supported in the economic debates that split the Conservatives in the mid-1840s. From 1859 he served as Chancellor in Palmerston’s administration and later succeeded Russell as leader of the Liberal party, serving four terms as Prime Minister between 1868 and 1894.

⁶ The few references to political events and personalities in her personal papers include some criticism of Gladstone, although these relate more to his foreign policy and personal style than his domestic liberal politics. The resolutely Tory John Blackwood often criticized Gladstone in correspondence and I do not believe too much should be read into his belief that *Felix Holt* was a flag-bearer for old-school Toryism: “I had nearly forgot to say how good your politics are. As far as I see yet, I suspect I am a radical of the *Felix Holt* breed, and so was my father before me” (*Letters*, 4, 246).

⁷ See Gilbert, 156, for how economics (embracing capitalism, self-interest and aspiration) links the individual to the social body.

⁸ *Letters*, 4, 208.

despotism of the absolute ruler with the equally powerful force of public opinion, what he called “the tyranny of the majority”.⁹ The assertion of individual rights was an extension of the principle of non-governmental intervention in trade and commerce, a triumph of economic liberalism that had been secured by the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. *On Liberty* emphasises the absolute right of *individuality*, but the hegemony of the free-trade doctrine served to secure the ascendancy of a less-nuanced economic *individualism* that underlay theoretical political economy and thereby came to define mid-century liberalism in overwhelmingly economic terms.¹⁰ The most prominent voice of economic liberalism, *The Economist* magazine, placed economic laws both ascendant and prior to social laws and institutions, insisting that “unerring natural laws determine the creation and distribution of wealth – that is, of subsistence and of all the products of industry – and determining these, must determine also all the subordinate phenomena of society”.¹¹ The intellectual biographer of the most influential advocate of individualism, Herbert Spencer, explains how the connection between economics and politics was theorised: “men who had acquired wealth by responding to the needs of the market deserved to possess political power, for they had thus shown their moral and intellectual worth”.¹²

By the late 1870’s, however, the experience of a number of Liberal administrations revealed that a non-interventionist political theory was becoming inconsistent with the realities of policy implementation. Spencer, echoing a number of the concerns voiced by Mill in *On Liberty*, predicted just such a dislocation in his 1860 *Westminster Review* article, ‘Parliamentary Reform: the Dangers and the Safeguards.’ The article reiterated

⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 18, 219.

¹⁰ The distinction is crucial and provides an important link from Mill to new liberalism. See, for example, Avital Simhony and David Weinstein (eds.), ‘Introduction’, *The New Liberalism: Reconciling Liberty and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16: “Reconciling individuality and sociability rests on the distinction new liberals drew between individualism and individuality.”

J. P. Parry, however, warns against reliance on “the simplistic equation between political Liberalism and classical economic liberalism”, arguing that the former had neither a monopoly on the free-trade rhetoric of the former nor a exclusive policy focus on narrow economic issues. J. P. Parry, ‘Liberalism and Liberty’, in Peter Mandler (ed.), *Liberty and Authority in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 71. See also Daniel Cottom’s added nuance on the distinction, which posits an elevated rank of “liberal intellectual”, transcending the concerns of both political and economic liberalism: “Although these intellectuals were generally in sympathy with those interests of the middle classes represented by Liberalism, they would take liberal intellectual values to be more comprehensive than - and thus a corrective to - Liberal political goals. It was precisely from this appeal to values transcending politics that they defined their intellectual liberalism” (21).

¹¹ *Economist*, 10th December 1853, quoted in Peel, 71.

¹² Peel, 71. See also my analysis of morals and the market in ch. 2 above.

the central principle of individualism and voluntarism against the coercion of the State which he had expounded nine years earlier in *Social Statics*. By 1884, his worst fears had come to pass:

Dictatorial measures, rapidly multiplied, have tended continually to narrow the liberties of individuals; and have done this in a double way. Regulations have been made in yearly-growing numbers, restraining the citizen in directions where his actions were previously unchecked, and compelling actions which previously he might perform or not as he liked; and at the same time heavier public burdens, chiefly local, have further restricted his freedom, by lessening that portion of his earnings which he can spend as he pleases, and augmenting the portion taken from him to be spent as public agents please.¹³

In the collection of articles that comprise *The Man Versus the State*, Spencer traces the development of Liberal government over the last twenty years of Eliot's life, which saw an increasingly positive concept of government translate into widening social legislation supported by escalating tax revenues.¹⁴ Whig and Radical policies following the First Reform Act of 1832 had been more focused on the repeal of restrictive laws both in the social and, more prominently, economic spheres. Spencer's attempt to answer the question "How is it that Liberalism, getting more and more into power, has grown more and more coercive in legislation?" identifies both Utilitarian and socialist explanations for the growth in essentially welfarist policies, indicative of the tensions within the party.¹⁵

¹³ Herbert Spencer, author's 'Preface', *The Man Versus the State*, (1884), (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 3-4.

¹⁴ The prominent new liberal and opponent of Spencer, D.G. Ritchie recognised the importance of *The Man Versus the State*, describing it as "the most conspicuous work of recent years in defence of Individualism and in opposition to the growing tendency of state intervention." *The Principles of State Interference* (London, 1891), quoted in Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L.T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England 1880-1914*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 154.

¹⁵ Spencer, *The Man Versus the State*, 10. Spencer's argument is that the success of earlier liberal policy to promote individual freedom by the repeal of restrictive laws had gradually given way to an expectation of positive legislation so that "the welfare of the many came to be conceived alike by Liberal statesmen and Liberal voters as the aim of Liberalism" (14). While his argument is much wider than a complaint against specific legislation (some of which he would have been in favour of), it is notable that a number of "coercive" laws that Spencer highlights in his post-1860 legislative history include those aimed at correcting harmful abuses of unregulated commercial practices, which Eliot herself had specifically criticised. For example, the 1860 extension of the restrictions of the Factories Act to bleaching and dyeing

Certainly, the atomistic economic individualism at the heart of the “old” liberalism which Spencer celebrates remained a target of Eliot’s satire and criticism to the end of her life.¹⁶ *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, written only two years before her death, includes a penetrating sketch of a rich industrialist. Spike, the eponymous ‘Political Molecule’ is variously self-described as a Progressive, a Liberal and a Radical, “who voted on the side of Progress”¹⁷. In reality his sole political philosophy is a crude *laissez-faire* capitalism to serve his own economic interests. Spike’s concept of well-being is strictly Benthamite: “his notions of human pleasure were narrowed by his want of appetite” (64-5), and it is by accidental circumstance rather than any positive motivation that he “becomes a representative of genuine class-needs” and is “raised...to a sense of common injury and common benefit” (66). There is more than an echo of Smith’s “invisible hand” and the laws of political economy in the conclusion that “the nature of things transmuted his active egoism into a demand for a public benefit (66).” Eliot, throughout her work, contests the idea that economic self-interest and egoism are either a necessary or sufficient basis of the common good. Part of my argument in this chapter is that, in her insistence that individual self-realisation is both an absolute end in itself and yet simultaneously constitutive of wider social benefit, she was morally and intellectually aligned with the new liberal theorists who, drawing on the work of Green and the English idealists, were starting to come to prominence around the time of her death.

This is not to argue that she was actually a new liberal or thought herself particularly aligned to that or any other branch of liberalism. Most readings of *Felix Holt* and the later ‘Address to Working Men’ conclude that the author’s politics matched exactly the “social-political-conservatism” she admired in Riehl.¹⁸ Certainly, her belief that political action and an enlarged democracy were insufficient *per se* to drive social progress is borne out in her 1878 letter to D’Albert-Durade: “You remember me as much less of a conservative than I have now become. I care as much or more for the people, but I

works (17) - Eliot is critical of the harmful abuses of the dyeing industry in *Middlemarch*, 667, and ‘Leaves From A Note-Book’, *Essays*, 439-40.

¹⁶ Further references to “old liberalism” in the text should be taken as a broadly-characterised individualistic form of liberalism epitomised by Spencer, rather than, for example, Mill. See, however, p. 176 below for the dangers of simplifying Spencer’s position.

¹⁷ *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 63. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

¹⁸ *Essays*, 287.

believe less in the help they will get from democrats.”¹⁹ However, social conservatism can wear many political colours and Donald Winch rightly reminds us of “the intellectual historian’s need to distinguish labels from those which the historical agents themselves would have recognised.”²⁰ In fact, influential voices from both ends of the contemporary political spectrum confirm that political parties and their contending philosophies were in a state of unusual flux at this time. One of Green’s earliest disciples, Arnold Toynbee, welcomed the very contradiction between old liberal principles and interventionist policy against which Spencer railed, as he describes “startling legislative measures [which]...have been defended by arguments in sharp contradiction to the ancient principles of those who have pressed these arguments into their service.”²¹

Toynbee and Spencer, from radically different perspectives, were in agreement on the ultimately socialist implications of an extension of such policies. Spencer, however, sees the very foundations of party politics and traditional labels becoming increasingly undermined. The mainstream liberalism of the 1880s he describes as “a new form of Toryism” and he presciently anticipates an inversion of the two parties in their location of individual rights relative to society and the State: “if the present drift of things continues, it may by and by really happen that the Tories will be defenders of liberties which the Liberals, in pursuit of what they think popular welfare, trample under foot.”²² In what follows, I will bring particular economic questions to bear on a consideration of how Eliot perceived this connection between individual liberties and “popular welfare”, how this perception changed during her writing life and how, towards the end of her life, it related to new liberal thought on land ownership, property rights and education.

¹⁹ *Letters*, 7, 47. See Evan Horowitz, ‘George Eliot: The Conservative’, in *Victorian Studies* 49. 1 (2006), 7-32.

Feminist critics, such as Deirdre David have also criticised Eliot’s conservatism, both in *Felix Holt*, in which “Eliot ends up subversively rejecting political action through the agency of her own sexual politics” (197), and, more generally, in her female characters “who often become metaphors for nostalgic conservatism, emblems of Eliot’s residual desire...to affiliate herself with the land-owning classes” (167). Dorothea Barrett, however, resists such generalization, describing her as, simultaneously both “radical and conservative” (13).

²⁰ Winch, *Wealth and Life*, 19.

²¹ A. Toynbee, ‘Are Radicals Socialists?’ *Industrial Revolution* (London, 1884), quoted in Andrew Vincent and Raymond Plant, *Philosophy, Politics and Citizenship: The Life and Thought of the British Idealists* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 35.

²² Spencer, *The Man Versus the State*, 30.

While recognising the dangers of over-simplifying complex historical processes and shifting political terminology, Stefan Collini, in his still-important study of new liberal thought, argues that the debate over the role of the state in the final decades of the nineteenth century was increasingly “conceptualized in terms of the opposition between Individualism and Collectivism.”²³ It was in this context that Spencer published *The Man Versus the State* and that Toynbee, Ritchie and later new liberals theorised an alternative vision of society. Both Spencerian individualism and new liberal collectivism, however, claimed to be the inheritors of an older liberal heritage, and there are strong threads of continuity running between the two camps that should warn against dichotomising their respective political visions. As Regenia Gagnier writes of the diverse mid-century theorists who preceded new liberalism - a list whose span includes Spencer, Mill, Smiles and Bagehot - “[i]n all cases the relative function of the individual and state were interdependent and mutually constitutive.”²⁴ The continuity with some branches of new liberalism was further advanced by Spencer’s appropriation of organicism in support of his theories of the individual in society in a biologically-informed, competitive social model. As Collini describes the popularity of his theories in the 1880s:

Here was a scientific description that Progress in the natural and social world alike resulted from the free adaptation of individual to environment; the laws of evolution prescribed a policy of Individualism.²⁵

Hobhouse was prominent among new liberals who took inspiration from Spencer’s organicism and expanded it into a more encompassing concept of the progressive social state. Hobhouse effectively reformulated evolutionary theory in a “co-operative-altruistic version of Darwinism.”²⁶

The liberal critical heritage to which Eliot was connected was, therefore, heterogeneous and complex. Her early periodical writings, at a time when, through the

²³ Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology*, 20.

²⁴ Gagnier, *Individualism*, 9.

²⁵ Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology*, 154. See also Gagnier, *Individualism*: “Herbert Spencer biologized the division of labor calling it the law of organic progress” (30).

²⁶ Michael Freeden, quoted in Gagnier, *Individualism*, 18. See also Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology*, 154-70.

Westminster Review, she was in close contact with Spencer and other Liberal and Radical intellectual figures, unsurprisingly show some alignment with a doctrine of ascendant individual rights, including economic freedom from government interference.²⁷ Even her literary reviews are informed by a political opinion that underpins wider ethical judgement. Thus, her criticism of Tennyson's *Maud* is based less on its poetic quality than on the distinctly anti-Liberal "ground-notes", which she regards as "nothing more than hatred of peace and the Peace Society, hatred of commerce and coal mines, hatred of young gentlemen with flourishing whiskers and padded coats, adoration of a clear-cut face, and faith in War as the unique social regenerator."²⁸ Her 1865 *Fortnightly Review* article, 'The Influence of Rationalism', shows her enthusiasm for the progressive aspects of the industrial, contract age still burning strong. Superstition, she writes, however much bound up in social custom is powerless against "railways, steam-ships, and electric telegraphs, which are demonstrating the inter-dependence of all human interests, and making self-interest a duct for sympathy."²⁹

This is undoubtedly a more optimistic image of how "self-interest" can serve the common good than the earlier example I cited from *Theophrastus Such*, where external, social benefit is presented as a merely accidental benefit of private industry. In the *Fortnightly* article, commerce embodies intrinsic qualities – sympathy and the promotion of inter-dependence - that elsewhere Eliot ascribes to art and literature. Thus, when liberalism (either political or economic) fails to produce good that transcends that of the self-interested individual agent, it becomes a subject not of praise but censure. Once again, her 1856 review of Riehl in 'The Natural History of German Life' is seminal. Close to the point of her transition into fiction, the article provides important markers of her developing political philosophy that were to be imaginatively developed in the novels. In this, as in all intellectual areas, Lewes was almost certainly a formative influence, and his interest in and attraction to the theory of socialism is of particular interest in the context of Riehl's work.³⁰ In her article, Eliot differentiates the movement,

²⁷ Again, Spencer's individualism was less simplistic than this might suggest: see p. 26 above describing his land nationalisation proposals in *Social Statics*.

²⁸ *Essays*, 197.

²⁹ *Essays*, 402.

³⁰ As Graver explains, "Lewes and Mill had also been attracted to socialism, but they brought to it many more reservations. While they favored voluntarily arranged cooperative associations, they did not propose,

on one level, from the abstract political theorising of the “democratic doctrinaires”. Their commitment “to inquire into the actual life of the people” she describes as “the glory of the Socialists” and an explanation of what she calls the “secret of their partial success”.³¹ The success is only “partial”, however, because, whatever the attractions of the doctrine, its practical application was, at best, unproven and, at worse, unworkable. Eliot is likely to have agreed with Lewes that “socialist systems [were] premature.”³²

The ‘Natural History of German Life’ article therefore serves to support two of the principal old liberal arguments against any tendency towards collectivism; the moral and the economic.³³ Moreover, the political developments that are shown to characterise the transformation from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* throughout most of Germany seem to exemplify aspects of the “modern liberalism” of which Spencer and others were so suspicious. Urban industrialisation has been accompanied by a growth in the size and power of the state so that the German peasant’s “chief idea of a government is of a power that raises his taxes, opposes his harmless customs, and torments him with new formalities” (282). The effect of an increased level of bureaucracy also supports Mill’s argument in *On Liberty* that the self-esteem and self-development of the citizen falls as the interference of the state rises. For Eliot, this is “the surest way of maintaining him [the citizen] in his stupidity” (282). What is interesting here is that her criticism of “modern liberalism” appeals both to the individualist tradition (limit state intervention) and the emerging communitarian branch of new liberalism, which strove to maintain and reinvigorate the finer elements of social custom and cohesion. To some extent this duality epitomises the ambivalence many liberals felt around the third quarter of the century when attempting to answer the questions posed by Mill which head this chapter. “How much of human life should be assigned to individuality, and how much to society?” Eliot’s own treatment of custom and tradition in *The Mill on the Floss* illustrates the point well. These communal functions simultaneously represent narrow and constraining forces and higher, cohesive values; they are seen as antiquated and out of place in an age of

as did Tonnies, ‘a new kind of *Gemeinschaft* based upon an organically developed combination of state and cooperative socialism.’...Lewes, though he looked favourably upon the ‘*doctrine*’ of communism, rejected ‘socialist systems as premature’” (16-17). Tonnies was, of course, greatly influenced by Riehl.

³¹ *Essays*, 289. Subsequent references to the essay will appear in the text.

³² Graver, 17.

³³ Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology*, identifies four types of individualist arguments against state-intervention: “the political, the economic, the scientific and the moral” (22).

widening trade and modern commerce and yet constitutive of individual and communal values that transcend the abstraction and atomism of a developing money economy.³⁴

Eliot the novelist was aware that the specific conditions created by the combination of industrial market capitalism and political reform complicated and called for a reassessment of the relationship between citizen and state in all spheres, including the economic. However, she recognised earlier in her career that the potential conflict between individual conscience and social obligations was one that was fundamental to any human community. Her 1856 *Leader* article, 'The Antigone and its Moral', goes beyond literary criticism to universalise the "dramatic collision" between individual impulse and "the duties of citizenship."³⁵ It is a conflict that will inevitably recur, subject to the particular social duties determined in any particular time and place: "Wherever the strength of a man's intellect, or moral sense, or affection brings him into opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned, *there* is renewed the conflict between Antigone and Creon."³⁶ Mill's rhetorical questions around the definition of individual and social assignment, therefore, were constantly in Eliot's mind and her inability definitively to answer them places her in company with a wide range of thinkers trying to navigate the individualist-collectivist divide. Indeed, Suzanne Graver argues that the shifting socio-political stress of the novels is an essential component of their enduring power: "The irresolutions force her readers to experience and confront the problems of community in the modern world, as is palpably evident from her Victorian readers' responses to her novels and modern critics' disagreements about whether her priorities lie with the individual or with community."³⁷

Graver's *George Eliot and Community* was published in 1984, and the "modern critics" to whom she refers included a number of Marxist commentators who, in general and in common with many political theorists of the day, perpetuated the established

³⁴ In 'The Natural History of German Life' Eliot acknowledges the social coherence custom supports, while demonstrating its limitations: "The peasant never questions the obligation of family-ties – he questions *no custom* – but tender affection, as it exists amongst the refined part of mankind, is almost as foreign to him as white hands and filbert-shaped nails" (*Essays*, 280).

See also Hao Li, *Memory and History in George Eliot*, for a discussion of "Communal memory", and Elizabeth Deeds Ermath, *George Eliot*, for how Eliot's concept of culture is rooted in tradition: "Tradition is its element, its determining and material condition" (30).

³⁵ *Essays*, 263.

³⁶ *Essays*, 265.

³⁷ Graver, 21.

dichotomy between communitarianism and liberalism.³⁸ In recent years, however, a growing body of scholars has sought to reconcile these theories, some by particular reference to the new liberal writings of the late nineteenth century.³⁹ The quotation from L. T. Hobhouse at the head of this chapter provides a tangible, if somewhat tangential link between Eliot and one of the most prominent new liberal thinkers.⁴⁰ Hobhouse was greatly influenced by Mill and, particularly, Green, under whom he studied at Oxford. In his most enduring work, Hobhouse links the two in his analysis of what he sees as the very heart of liberalism, wherein lies “the organic conception of the relation between the individual and society – a conception toward which Mill worked...and which forms the starting point of T. H. Green’s philosophy”.⁴¹ Hobhouse, like Green asserted the supremacy of morality within political theory and explains how the morally informed action of the individual is necessarily compatible with the good of the society within which he is acting: “in Green’s phrase, he finds his own good in the *common good*.”⁴² It is a concept at the very heart of new liberalism.

I have discussed Eliot’s partial yet significant intellectual alignment with Green in an earlier chapter and here wish to posit a further crucial connection.⁴³ I believe that the “altruism” which, for Hobhouse writing from the dark days of 1915, Eliot’s novels embodied, represents the same reconciliation of individual self-realisation and promotion of the common good which underpinned Green’s philosophical idealism and which was to crucially inform new liberal theory. Avital Simhony’s analysis of Green’s “complex” concept of the common good offers the following succinct summary: “Green’s common good aims at rejecting private society as the ethical basis of liberalism.”⁴⁴ As I will later discuss, Green does not reject individual rights, including those to private property ownership. He argues rather that these rights can be consistent with a wider concept of

³⁸ Graver cites works by Raymond Williams, Ian Milner, William Myers and Graham Martin.

³⁹ A good summary of the debate is provided in Simhony and Weinstein. Anthony Kwame Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) locates the philosophical reconciliation of communitarianism and liberalism some years earlier than the new liberals, within the writings of Mill.

⁴⁰ It is not the only link. As a Sixth-Form student at Marlborough College in 1882, he wrote a complimentary essay titled “‘George Eliot’ as a Novelist” (*Marlburian*, XVII). As I discuss on p. 127 above, Green was also much affected by Eliot as a novelist.

⁴¹ L.T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1911), 60.

⁴² Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology*, 128. My italics.

⁴³ See ch. 5 above.

⁴⁴ Avital Simhony, ‘T. H. Green’s Complex Common Good: Between Liberalism and Communitarianism’, in Simhony and Weinstein, 74.

public society that can be served by the actions of fully-realised moral citizens. Philosophically, his ideal of the common good avoids the “dualism of egoism and altruism” by creating “a non-dichotomous moral framework which aims to occupy a moral terrain of human connectedness where one’s good and the good of others are intertwined”.⁴⁵ The exploration of the “moral terrain of human connectedness” is an equally incisive description of Eliot’s novelistic art and she employs money and economics as important tools in mapping and interpreting her discoveries.

In ‘The Natural History of German Life’, she compares the study of the social with the natural sciences, noting a progression from general, law-based methodologies to the complex and special conditions that constitute the actual practice of the social and natural world. Within social science, the laws of economics would form part of the former fields of study and observed economic behaviour the latter. Significantly, Eliot’s progressive analytical stages conclude with a dual observation: what she calls life’s “special conditions, or Natural History, on the one hand, and ... its abnormal conditions, or Pathology, on the other.” And because “a wise social policy must be based not simply on abstract social science, but on the Natural History of social bodies”, by implication it is necessary to identify and understand the abnormal, pathological conditions of social behaviour, including the economic.⁴⁶ In the novels, Eliot presents economic pathologies as those financially-related motivations and actions that attempt to bypass the society to which the particular economic agent is bound. Where these pathologies are cured, the widened social benefit is a secondary consequence of the enlightenment and self-realisation of the individual. It is a process that mirrors Green’s perception of all good individual action being compatible with and constitutive of the common good, for

Only through society is any one enabled to give that effect to the idea of himself as an object of his actions, to the idea of a better part of himself, without which the world would remain like that of space to a man who had not the senses either of sight or touch.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Simhony and Weinstein, 73.

⁴⁶ *Essays*, 290.

⁴⁷ Green, *Prolegomena*, 218 (sect. 190).

Financial pathology in the novels is very rarely identifiable by its transgression of civil or criminal laws.⁴⁸ The “abnormal conditions” of economic behaviour therefore relate to moral or social norms rather than legal definitions. Indeed, the strict legality of, for example Tito’s sale of Bardo’s library and Bulstrode’s deceptively-achieved inheritance serve to emphasise the scale of their moral breaches.⁴⁹ In ‘Brother Jacob’, even the outright theft of his mother’s sovereigns is rationalised and effectively decriminalised by David Faux’s accurate prediction that she is certain not to report him: “Besides, it is not robbery to take property belonging to your mother: she doesn’t prosecute you.”⁵⁰ In fact Faux has no moral objection to stealing: “[he] would certainly have liked to have some of his master’s money in his pocket, if he had been sure his master would have been the only man to suffer for it; but he was a cautious youth, and quite determined to run no risks on his own account” (51). He is, however, comfortable with the more legally ambivalent practice of blackmail (“charitably abstaining from mentioning some other people’s misdemeanours” [77]) which here, and elsewhere in the novels, Eliot exposes as morally and socially equivalent to property theft. All David’s economic choices are, in fact, based on a crude Utilitarianism of pure self-interest: “he calculated whether an action would harm himself, or whether it would only harm other people. In the former case he was very timid about satisfying his immediate desires, but in the latter he would risk the result with much courage” (58).

Where Eliot’s critique of this economically-driven social atomism becomes more interesting is in the second part of the story when David, now Edward Freely, establishes a legal confectionary business and, as a result of his skills and labour, prospers in a free, competitive market. It is a market at a particular stage of social and commercial evolution, which Eliot describes in explicitly Smithean terms. As a result of the “division of labour”, increasing disposable income and a greater value ascribed to leisure time, the housewives of Grimworth “had their hands set free from cookery to add to the wealth of society in some other way” (66). In fact there is no net addition to the wealth of society:

⁴⁸ The most prominent exception is Dunstan Cass’s theft of Silas Marner’s gold, an event, of course, on which the entire plot hinges.

⁴⁹ See *Middlemarch*, ch. 61 for Bulstrode’s meeting with Ladislaw: “‘you have a claim on me, Mr Ladislaw...not a legal claim’” (609); and *Romola*, ch. 32, for Tito’s sale of Bardo’s library, which Bernardo had legally secured against creditors, but not against a treacherous husband.

⁵⁰ George Eliot, ‘Brother Jacob’ in *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, 51. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

the liberated women turn to idle gossip and the reduced household wealth is simply transferred to Freely. Grimworth is a microcosm of an apparently modern and progressive commercial society in which economic individualism unalloyed by individual virtue or social purpose thrives, but with zero net gain to the overall wealth of the community. In Green's terms, the standard of the common good – which must benefit any individual or section of society neither to the exclusion nor detriment of others – is not met.⁵¹

The simple metric of whether a net economic gain has been achieved is, in fact, a meaningful, if ultimately inadequate indicator of the value of a particular financial action or behaviour. Gambling, in ignorance or defiance of calculable probabilities, undermines human rationality, but the moral objection, as voiced by Daniel Deronda hinges on the fact that the gain of one gambler necessitates the loss of another: “there is something revolting to me in raking a heap of money together...when others are feeling the loss of it.”⁵² Similarly, speculation in stocks and shares, as opposed to the long-term investments Eliot herself made, requires the balancing of a profit and loss equation, usually the result of the kind of information mis-match exploited by Sir Gavial Mantrap in *Theophrastus Such*.⁵³ However, this net gain shorthand isn't always sufficient. Silas Marner provides a skilled and valuable service for the Raveloe community, for which he is paid a fair market rate. There is an economic argument that his hoarding of gold coins and minimal personal expenditure on goods and services (under-consumption) is a constraint to growth and therefore not in the best public interest.⁵⁴ But a high rate of saving and low consumption can, in certain economic conditions, be beneficial and, in any case, any duty to spend must surely be subservient to the right to liberty of action, subject only to that action not causing harm to others. This was the central theme of Mill's *On Liberty*, which necessarily supported the individual's right to non-conventional or eccentric ways of

⁵¹ “[T]he only good in the pursuit of which there can be no competition of interests, the only good which is really common to all who may pursue it, is that which consists in the universal will to be good – in the settled disposition on each man's part to make the most and best of humanity in his own person and in the persons of others.” (*Prolegomena*, 288 [sect. 244]).

⁵² *Daniel Deronda*, 284.

⁵³ See p. 55 above.

⁵⁴ Mill's early economic writings included arguments against the underconsumptionist theories of Malthus and Sismondi; see Winch, *Wealth and Life*, 56-7.

behaviour.⁵⁵ Silas would appear to exercise this right while causing no harm to others, so should we regard his miserliness as pathological? Again, I believe Green's conception of individual self-realisation and the common good provides a useful framework for how Eliot approached the question.

When he first moves to Raveloe, Silas's reclusiveness is still distinct from his money hoarding. His focus on his work as "an end in itself" both maintains a direct, non-exclusively financial link to the community and, internally, provides him some comfort and consolation against the injustices he has suffered, "so to bridge over the loveless chasms of his life."⁵⁶ Notably, his work is compared to that of a spider; clearly lacking in some essential human completeness, but nonetheless vital and organic, in contrast to the mechanist imagery that describes his later obsession with the accumulation of gold. The money becomes an end in itself with "no purpose beyond it", so that "every added guinea, while it was itself a satisfaction, bred a new desire" (18). Unlike the things that money can buy, the medium itself is theoretically limitless in supply and its acquisition can therefore create insatiable wants. Gold, rather than more abstract representational money, has a talismanic quality that makes the individual coins humanised and familiar in Silas's eyes; "He began to think [the money] was conscious of him...and he would on no account have exchanged those coins, which had become his familiars, for other coins with unknown faces" (18). Money ultimately loses its use and exchange value and literally becomes non-economic. Its substitution for any kind of social contact marks an extreme of individualism that, in its isolation, is dehumanising. As his hoard grew, so Silas's life was "narrowing and hardening itself more and more into a mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had no relation to any other being" (19). The loss of his money exposes him to the individuals and institutions through whom he eventually re-engages with society, but, until Eppie appears, "[t]he fountains of human love...had not yet been unlocked, and his soul was still the shrunken rivulet" (84). His eventual spiritual and physical epiphany approximates closely to Green's concept of full self-realisation: "his soul, long stupefied in a cold narrow prison, was unfolding too, and trembling gradually into full consciousness" (124). The process is finally characterised by a

⁵⁵ In particular, ch. 3, 'Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being'.

⁵⁶ *Silas Marner*, 15. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

transformation of his social and economic habits to “the ties and charities that bound together the families of his neighbours” (124) and immersion into their communal institutions, including the Church.

If Eliot was broadly aligned with Green and new liberalism in an understanding of the common good that distinguishes a liberal tradition of individual freedoms from a purely *individualist* conception of society, it remains to consider whether there was similarly common ground with regard to state interference in economically-related rights and its policy implications. New liberalism came to prominence in the years after Eliot’s death and the ways in which its leading theorists and practitioners proposed the old liberal tradition should be revitalised for the modern age varied greatly, particularly in relation to the extent to which central government should support social welfare. Amidst this diversity, however, are recurrent themes that find their most common link in Green, most of whose work was produced during Eliot’s lifetime. He therefore provides an important bridge back to the liberalism of Mill, which informed Eliot’s own thought.

Despite the more collectivist directions in which some of his followers attempted to steer late-century liberalism, the main economic aspects of Green’s political theory, particularly with regard to wealth creation, are broadly compatible with the central theories of political economy. In his *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation*, Green opens his discussion of the problems of “an impoverished and reckless proletariat” (175) by declaring the optimistic foundation of capitalism. This maintains that “the increased wealth of one man does not naturally mean the diminished wealth of another”, but that rather “supposing trade and labour to be free, wealth must be constantly distributed throughout the process in the shape of wages to labourers and of profits to those who mediate the business of exchange.”⁵⁷ There is an unexpectedly conservative thread to Green’s writing here that again chimes with Eliot, for example in his reluctance to ascribe the extant great inequalities of wealth, and particularly in land ownership, to capitalism but tracing them rather to historic abuses stretching back to feudalism.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ T.H. Green, ‘Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation,’ in T.H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings*, ed. Paul Harris and John Morrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 174-5.

⁵⁸ The imperfect state of affairs, he contends, “is really due to the arbitrary and violent manner in which rights over land have been acquired and exercised, and to the failure of the state to fulfil those functions

Neither does he propose any form of redistribution by limiting private ownership of land or restricting its bequest. He does however recognise that land, because it is a limited commodity from which many natural resources originate and on which the housing stock and communications of the whole of society depend, is a special case of economic concern, distinct from wealth in general. These factors “necessitate a social control over the exercise of property in land.”⁵⁹ Green recognises that this social responsibility is, ideally, best exercised by the enlightened landowner, for “the possessor of an estate, who has contributed nothing by his own labour to its acquisition, may yet by his labour contribute largely to the social good, and a well-organised state will in various ways elicit such labours from possessors of inherited wealth.”⁶⁰

As I have discussed in the opening chapter of this work, Eliot uses land husbandry and concern for the well-being of tenants as an important moral indicator for her land-owning characters, often making use of a generational contrast in attitudes. Thus, the desire of Arthur Donnithorne and Godfrey Cass to reform the land management abuses of their fathers is indicative of an altruistic core to their characters which, through the course of the respective novels, gains an ascendancy over the egoism that underlies their earlier actions. Suzanne Graver makes a related but wider point when she describes the greater communal emphasis of Eliot’s earlier period settings, in which a “simple family life of common need and common industry prevailed”.⁶¹ In the resolution of both *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*, she traces how “the movement from alienation to integration is marked by Gemeinschaft images of a holiday world”.⁶² The interaction between landowner and tenant is flawed but still sufficiently strong to root both in the same patterns of custom, ritual celebration and seasonal rotation. As the settings of the novels move forward in time however, landed estates become the sites of social alienation, as Graver observes: “The Squires fall far short of the feudal ideal they should represent; still, the central role they play in the life of the community contrasts sharply with the peripheral function of

which under a system of unlimited private ownership are necessary to maintain the conditions of a full life” (Green, *Lectures*, 176).

⁵⁹ Green, *Lectures*, 178.

⁶⁰ Green, *Lectures*, 173.

⁶¹ Graver, 95. The description is of the village the Hayslope community in which Adam Bede’s “inheritance of affections” were nurtured. *Adam Bede*, 200.

⁶² Graver, 96, referring to traditional, communal ceremonies.

the great houses in the fiction set nearer to the present.”⁶³ In Hanleigh Grandcourt Eliot creates her most socially atomised egoist and his detachment from the responsibility of managing his estates to promote the common good seems to grow as his landholdings expand. However, neither here nor in the other novels in which land inheritance features, does Eliot suggest that the state should interfere either in the bequest or ownership of, nor in any extensive redistributive schemes linked to the value of land.⁶⁴ Her natural gradualism here again aligns her more closely with Green than, say Mill, whose distinction between the earned and unearned increments produced by land became the basis for proposed state appropriation of the latter by socialist theorists later in the century.⁶⁵

Beyond the specific conditions relating to the ownership of land, the nature of rights to any individually-owned property was at the heart of new liberal theory and debate. The interdependence of the individual and the wider community is again a unifying theme and serves to reinforce the morally-informed link between the leading theorists and George Eliot. John Morrow clearly differentiates the varying perspectives of new liberalism with regard to the limitation of individual property rights by the state but concludes that: “[u]nderlying these different perspectives...was a common commitment to the idea that property rights were of simultaneous and corresponding significance both to individuals and to the communities to which they belonged. The common good was furthered through the exercise of rights, but so too was the good of individual rightholders.”⁶⁶ Like Eliot, the new liberals, as part of their project to disassociate their political heritage from a self-serving individualism, sought to establish a mutually reinforcing link between property rights and social embeddedness.

Hobhouse, in *Liberalism*, idealises society as “a whole which lives and flourishes by the harmonious growth of its parts, each of which in developing on its own lines and in

⁶³ Graver, 97.

⁶⁴ As William Myers summarises Esther Lyon’s final renunciation of her legal inheritance: “The radicalism of *Felix Holt*...whatever its precise content, has to encompass George Eliot’s endorsement of a way of life which the novel’s heroine finally repudiates” (78).

⁶⁵ “To the proposal that ‘unearned increment’ in the value of the soil, as distinct from value produced by expenditure of labour and capital, should be appropriated by the state...the great objection is that the relation between earned and unearned increment is so complicated, that a system of appropriating the latter to the state could scarcely be established without lessening the stimulus to the individual to make the most of the land” (Green, *Lectures*, 178).

⁶⁶ John Morrow, ‘Private Property, Liberal Subjects, and the State,’ in Simhony and Weinstein, 112.

accordance with its own nature tends on the whole to further the development of the others.”⁶⁷ This is a statement of individuality as opposed to individualism that echoes strongly with Mill and which highlights the requirement of self-development in the attainment of true individuality – Green’s concept of self-realisation. Where this process connects back to property rights is that the very act of responsibly exercising those rights, they insisted, was both morally significant for the individual and served to cement his participation in the community. For Green, “Appropriation is an expression of will; of the individual’s effort to give reality to a conception of his own good; of his consciousness of a possible self-satisfaction as an object to be attained.”⁶⁸ Under such a definition, a political theory that either promoted state collectivism or merely denied the universalisation of the right to the social benefits of individual appropriation was essentially obstructive to the self-development of its citizens. Moreover, to the extent that ownership is linked to an individual’s *future* well-being, incorporating his (or her) desire to provide for others, it is expressive of a particularly human virtue and freedom that should not be limited by the state: “If we leave a man free to realise the conception of a possible well-being, it is impossible to limit the effect upon him of his desire to provide for his future well-being, as including that of the persons in whom he is interested.”⁶⁹

As I have tried to show in my earlier reading of *The Mill on the Floss*, conceptualising future well-being in exclusively material terms can result in an a form of excessive prudence which serves to elevate economic over non-economic values while relegating the legitimate claims of *present* well-being.⁷⁰ Where the bourgeois virtues are in proper balance, however, Eliot shows how property ownership is not only compatible with but constitutive of a virtuous character. Silas Marner, while fully freed from his obsession with gold and fully immersed in his community, is we feel better able to defend his natural right to be Eppie’s ‘father’ when he proudly tells Cass that “‘I’m in no fear o’ want...There’s few working-folks have got so much laid by as that. I don’t know what it

⁶⁷ Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, 136.

⁶⁸ Green, *Lectures*, 164.

⁶⁹ Green, *Lectures*, 172.

⁷⁰ See ch. 6 above. In behavioural economic terms, the Dodsons’ prudence actually inverts the theory of hyperbolic discounting, which states that individuals discount distant rewards in favour of lesser rewards in the near-term.

is to gentlefolks, but I look upon it as a deal – almost too much.”⁷¹ His assessment of what constitutes an appropriate level of monetary wealth is reminiscent of Adam Bede’s description of having “just enough and some to spare”. Adam’s heightened and persuasive concept of the value of labour throughout the novel is accompanied by a desire to elevate his own position and, thereby, support a family of his own by the accumulation of capital, initially out of wages, to finance his own business.⁷²

The new liberals’ position on property rights, in which, I contend, George Eliot was in essential agreement, effectively accepted that great inequalities of wealth were a necessary consequence of liberal rights. Beyond ensuring that these rights were protected – an essentially negative concept of the state – did the state have additional, positive responsibilities to promote the common good? New liberalism moved beyond Mill and his most direct descendants, including Sidgwick, in defending such intervention, although the extent to which its leading proponents believed this should be extended varied widely and eventually precipitated the split in the party out of which the Labour party came into being.⁷³ Green, despite his wide-ranging social concerns and enormous influence on later theorists and liberal politicians, advocated little direct policy intervention. Political change, he argued, should be the result of the voluntary action of socially engaged individuals and he therefore insisted that “it is the business of the state, not indeed directly to promote moral goodness...but to maintain the conditions without which a free exercise of the faculties is impossible.”⁷⁴

But what exactly should these “conditions” be and where, along a wide spectrum of interpretations, did George Eliot stand? I have argued earlier that, on the little evidence available, Eliot was most likely in broad agreement with Mill and Sidgwick, whose theories of taxation were the most comprehensive and influential in the third quarter of

⁷¹ *Silas Marner*, 162.

⁷² “Adam thought that he and Seth might carry on a little business for themselves...by buying a small stock of superior wood and making articles of household furniture...The money gained in this way, with the good wages he received as foreman, would soon enable them to get beforehand with the world, so sparingly as they would all live now” (*Adam Bede*, 198).

⁷³ For Sidgwick’s position see Collini, Winch and Burrow: “by including, as part of [*The Principles of Political Economy*] a detailed account of the very limited role for state action in economic matters which was derivable from the premises of classical political economy, Sidgwick was deliberately attempting to confer (or rather restore) the authority of science on a view of politics which remained, for all the qualifications, essentially Individualistic” (283).

⁷⁴ Green, *Lectures*, 202.

the century, that progressive income and inheritance taxes were - subject to strict limitations – legitimate means of the state providing services that would contribute to the common good.⁷⁵ For many new liberals, including Hobhouse and Hobson, this meant the provision of welfare payments, derived from the proceeds of socially-enabled wealth, to give every citizen the means fully to participate in society. This participation would, in turn, inspire a moral self-development that would progressively serve to lessen dependency. However, the rejection of individualism in favour of a communitarian theory of state did not necessarily mean the rejection of old-fashioned economic liberalism. Bernard Bosanquet was a follower of Green who stood against the increasingly welfarist tide, believing that public charity was morally damaging for both individual recipients and the state. Free trade and market capitalism, he argued, were capable of providing conditions of equal opportunity for individuals to acquire ethically significant property ownership without direct assistance from the state.⁷⁶

It is a viewpoint to which the fiercely financially independent Eliot was sympathetic. One of her earliest fictional representations of a charitable and socially-minded character is Mr Jerome, the “good old man” who befriends the eponymous heroine of ‘Janet’s Repentance’. His belief that the improvement in the condition of the poor is best served by voluntary, directed and localised charitable giving is supported by a long-term economic argument against smaller but ineffectual welfare payments that perpetuate dependency. He therefore explains the object of his charity as being

to keep industrious men an’ women off the parish. I’d rether give ten shillin’ an’ help a man to stan’ on his own legs, nor pay half-a-crown to buy him a parish crutch; it’s the ruination on him if he once goes to the parish. I’ve see’d many a time, if you help a man wi’ a present in a neeborly way, it sweetens his blood – he thinks it kind on you; but the parish shillins turn it sour – he niver thinks ‘em enough.⁷⁷

The Poor Law to which Mr Jerome refers remained a touchstone in the debates surrounding the nature and extent of state-funded relief throughout much of the century.

⁷⁵ See pp. 26-7 above.

⁷⁶ See Morrow and Gerald Gaus, ‘Bosanquet’s Communitarian Defense of Economic Individualism: A Lesson in the Complexities of Political Theory,’ in Simhony and Weinstein, 137-58.

⁷⁷ *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 293.

Recall Eliot's 1874 letter and its expression of an essentially 'old' liberal attitude towards poor relief, which "remains a huge system of vitiation, introducing the principle of communistic provision instead of provision through individual, personal responsibility and activity."⁷⁸ This quotation in isolation, however, risks giving a false impression that Eliot was both categorical in her views on how society should help the poor and somehow indifferent to their plight. There is, in fact, a tone of sadness and frustration in the letter, which was written to Jane Senior, a woman whose work and pioneering success in an increasingly government-supported area of social research and improvement, Eliot greatly admired.⁷⁹ In a letter to Blackwood later the same year, she describes Mrs Senior's work as "serious social labour."⁸⁰

It is also significant that Eliot's letter, while addressing the more general problems of poor relief, was written in direct response to Senior's Parliamentary Report on 'Education of Girls in Pauper Schools.'⁸¹ Eliot agrees "heartily" with Senior's educational conclusions, including "the superiority of that home education which calls out the emotions in connection with all the common needs of life, and creates that interest in means and results which is the chief part of cleverness." While Eliot's thoughts on education were never collected, as were, for example, Spencer's, they are a frequent and prominent feature of her letters and essays and are widely explored in the novels.⁸² Her conviction that a complete education, at all levels of society, should combine the moral, intellectual and practical led her to question and criticise established syllabuses from primary to tertiary levels. In December 1875, she wrote to Mark Pattison congratulating him on the contribution she believed a paper he had just published made to "that *most important* of all reforms – reform of the theory of Education."⁸³ Pattison was then the Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford and, together with another friend of Eliot and Lewes,

⁷⁸ *Letters*, 6, 46. See p. 30 above.

⁷⁹ See Hardy, 118-130 for a perceptive analysis of Eliot's relationship with Senior and its possible influence on the novels.

⁸⁰ *Letters*, 6, 87.

⁸¹ *Parliamentary Reports: 'Education,'* 25 (1874).

⁸² For an extensive review of Eliot's thoughts on the subject and its incorporation as an important theme in the novels, see Linda K. Robertson, *The Power of Knowledge: George Eliot and Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997). See also Cottom, *Social Figures*; and Gillian Beer, *George Eliot*, 174-180.

Spencer collected four periodical reviews, written between 1854 and 1859, into *Herbert Spencer on Education*, 1861.

⁸³ *Letters*, 6, 202.

Benjamin Jowett, was at the forefront of far-reaching reforms of courses and teaching methods at the University.⁸⁴ The narrowness of the earlier-century Oxford educational experience and its intellectually and morally-flawed products (including Arthur Donnithorne, Walter Stelling, Fred Vincy, Edward Casaubon and Thomas Lush) feature recurrently in the novels. Cambridge is less prominent in her work, although Daniel Deronda chooses to leave there “to pursue a more independent line of study abroad,” while Lydgate notably eschews the ancient English universities in favour of the scientifically advanced institutions of London, Edinburgh and Paris.⁸⁵

In her calls for a more equal educational provision for girls and a wider conviction that education was the key to the social development of the lower classes Eliot was very much in tune with progressive liberal thought over the period.⁸⁶ After 1860, the party’s long periods in government enabled it to extend the economically-related social reforms enacted earlier in the century, which progressively limited the working hours of children, into specifically educational legislation.⁸⁷ The most significant landmark was the Education Act of 1870, which, by enabling local School Boards to create bye-laws making school attendance compulsory, embodied a commitment to nationwide provision. A decade later, the Education Act of 1880 actually compelled the Boards to enact compulsory attendance bye-laws. Thus, by the year of Eliot’s death, “the formal legal position was clear and unequivocal. Every parish was expected to have an elementary school and all the children of the labouring poor between the ages of five and ten were expected to attend it on a full-time basis.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Eliot and Lewes stayed as guests of both men at the Colleges they headed, Lincoln and Balliol, during the 1870s. For Pattison’s educational importance, see H. S. Jones, *Intellect and Character in Victorian England: Mark Pattison and the Invention of the Don* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁸⁵ *Daniel Deronda*, 152 ; *Middlemarch*, 142.

⁸⁶ Eliot supported the establishment of Girton College, although probably not to the extent that her friends Barbara Bodichon and Emily Davies, the co-founders, might have ideally wished for. In January 1878, she wrote to Elma Stuart, “no doubt you are rejoicing too that London University has opened all its degrees to women” (*Letters*, 7, 6).

⁸⁷ The heavy defeat of the Liberal Government in the 1874 General Election was, in part, due to the alienation of many urban middle-class voters over educational reform. See Lawrence Goldman, ‘The Defection of the Middle Class: The Endowed Schools Act, the Liberal Party, and the 1874 Election’, in Peter Ghosh and Lawrence Goldman (eds.), *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain: Essays in Memory of Colin Matthew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 118-135.

⁸⁸ Gillian Sutherland, ‘Education’, in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), vol. 3, ‘Social Agencies and Institutions’, 144.

As government was increasingly drawn into educational provision not only at the elementary but at all levels, the debate on how this should be funded intensified. Old liberals drew on Adam Smith's argument, in *The Wealth of Nations*, that teaching should not stand outside of the market mechanism and that, for example, university teachers should be paid in relation to the number of students they were able to attract.⁸⁹ Spencer's 1850 *Social Statics*, which Eliot read, included a chapter entitled 'National Education' which insisted that his overarching principle of non-state interference should extend to educational provision. Mill's *On Liberty*, nine years later, agreed that the provision of a prescriptive and uniform syllabus by the state would be an unjustified interference in individual liberty, what he called a "despotism over the mind."⁹⁰ However, because he believed that for a child to receive no education was a "moral crime" against both the individual and society, the ability of the state to compel parents to educate their children was an acceptable limitation on their freedom of choice.⁹¹ Moreover, he argues, if the state enacts compulsion, it also has a duty to provide sufficient funding to enable the poor to comply with the requirement. Mill therefore justifies economic intervention by the state, funded by and on behalf of society in order to prevent a positive harm to society, thereby satisfying his central condition of personal liberty.

Eliot has much in common with the educational theories of both Mill and Spencer and the later new liberals, but on the economic aspects of the debate she is largely silent. In 'The Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt' (1868), probably her most direct statement of political philosophy, education is a central theme. The education, or "rescue of our children" is, Felix insists, "a part of our good, without which everything else we strive for will be worthless".⁹² However, Felix's appeal is not to government but to the working man directly and through the Trades Union mechanism of "extended co-operation". It is, therefore, a matter of social duty to persuade one's fellow-workers not to forsake their children's education and push them, prematurely, into waged labour. Emphatically, Felix argues, "[n]o political institution will alter the nature of Ignorance, or hinder it from

⁸⁹ *Wealth of Nations*, bk. 5, ch. 1, pt. 3, 'Of the Expence of publick Works and publick Institutions', 760. Smith's broader argument throughout 'Article II: Of the Expence of the Institutions for the Education of Youth' is, not surprisingly, subtle and far-reaching.

⁹⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 18, 302.

⁹¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, vol. 18, 302.

⁹² *Essays*, 428.

producing vice and misery.”⁹³ From this allocation of moral and social responsibility follows an economic requirement that the “common fund” drawn from Union subscriptions is used to finance the “common benefit” of compulsory education. Both *Felix Holt* and its hero’s subsequent ‘Address’ have been given in evidence by critics over many years in support of the case that Eliot was, at heart, politically conservative and became increasingly so as she aged. However, I believe both works represent attempts by the author to reconcile individuality with community and, as such, fall securely in the developing current of liberal thought. While Eliot’s resistance to the extension of government into widespread welfare provision may align her more closely to the old liberals of her *Westminster Review* days, Felix’s certainty “that a society, a nation is held together...by the dependence of men on each other and the sense they have of a common interest” emphatically secures a link with Green and the new liberalism he inspired.⁹⁴ Like the new liberals, Eliot, in her life and her work, sometimes struggled to make the further reconciliation between individual economic responsibility and the social adjustments that were required to ensure a level of meaningful, universal citizenship that went beyond the quantitative level of enfranchisement. The market and competition therefore remained ambiguous, even confused concepts for both.⁹⁵

A modern-day communitarian philosopher, Michael J. Sandel, tells us that “[t]o know whether a good should be subject to market exchange...we need to know what mode of valuation is fitting or appropriate to that good. This is different from knowing how much the thing is worth. It involves a qualitative, not just a quantitative judgment.”⁹⁶ The great success of her books *within* the market exchange brought Eliot influence with a widening readership and wealth; yet simultaneously it brought a fear that she was merely adding to the “heap of books”.⁹⁷ In one of her final meditations on the art and commerce of ‘Authorship’ in ‘Leaves from a Note-Book’, her commercial analogies can only go so far

⁹³ *Essays*, 426.

⁹⁴ *Essays*, 419.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Andrew Vincent, ‘The New Liberalism and Citizenship’, in Simhony and Weinstein: “the market continued to play an ambiguous role in new liberal thought. The new liberal perspective on social rights reveals the paradoxical need both for the redistribution to satisfy the requirements of social citizenship and consequently for productive markets to fund such rights” (220).

⁹⁶ Michael J. Sandel, ‘What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets’, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Brasenose College, Oxford; May 11-12, 1998), 101.

⁹⁷ *Journals*, 145. (January 13th, 1875).

before they break down amidst incommensurable considerations of capital, replication and value. The new liberal attempt to “*combine* an ‘ethically-orientated’ social rights perspective...with a liberal market ontology”, while never fully succeeding, crucially informed the course of British politics for the next hundred years.⁹⁸ So too, Eliot’s incorporation of the economic into her moral philosophical and sociological thought profoundly influenced her novelistic art and continue to help shape her readers’ perceptions of personal and cultural value.

⁹⁸ Vincent, 220.

Appendix

George Eliot's Stock Portfolio, 1880

	£	% Portfolio	Yield
Consols	963	3%	2.9%
USA Government	4,000	13%	4.9%
New South Wales	1,000	3%	6.9%
Victoria	1,000	3%	6.3%
Cape of Good Hope	<u>1,000</u>	<u>3%</u>	<u>2.0%</u>
<i>Total Government</i>	<i>7,963</i>	<i>26%</i>	<i>4.7%</i>
Melbourne and Hobsons Bay Railroad 5%	700	2%	4.9%
Bueonos Ayres 6% Perp. Debenture	500	2%	5.9%
Sambre et Meuse Railroad 5.5% pref	1,000	3%	5.6%
Pittsburg, Ft Wayne & Chicago Railroad 7%	500	2%	3.6%
South Eastern Railway 5% pref	800	3%	4.9%
Midland Railway 5% pref	780	3%	4.9%
Colonial Bank	1,400	5%	3.6%
East & West India Dock Co. ord	1,000	3%	5.0%
Scottish Australian	1,100	4%	7.2%
Gas Light & Coke ord	240	1%	8.4%
Phoenix (South Metropolitan Gas	300	1%	5.1%
Improved Industrial Dwellings ord	500	2%	6.0%
Grand Junction Canal	2,000	7%	4.0%
Surrey Commercial Dock	450	1%	8.0%
Midland Railway Debentures	1,650	5%	3.9%
Great Indian Peninsula 5% Guaranteed Stock	1,900	6%	5.2%
Madras Railroad 5% Guaranteed Stock	1,580	5%	4.9%
London and Northwestern Railway 4% Debentures	3,000	10%	2.0%
Regents Canal Ord	1,125	4%	4.7%
London Docks (St. Katherine's) Ord.	<u>1,700</u>	<u>6%</u>	<u>3.0%</u>
<i>Total Corporate</i>	<i>22,225</i>	<i>74%</i>	<i>4.4%</i>
TOTAL	30,188	100%	4.5%

Geographical Exposure

UK	48%
Empire	32%
US	17%
Europe	<u>3%</u>
	100%

Sector Breakdown (Excluding Government Bonds)

	<i>Eliot</i>	<i>Market Average 1880</i>
Railways	56%	64%
Canals & Docks	28%	3%
Banks	6%	15%
Mining	5%	2%
Gas	2%	2%
Other	<u>2%</u>	<u>15%</u>
	100%	100%

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