Despite the topic of sexual equality quickly becoming a crucial element of the discussion between Comte and Mill, many other questions were addressed in their letters, and it is likely that their willingness to correspond with one another was motivated by other reasons than the expected benefit of a discussion on women's condition. Accordingly, it will be useful to provide an account of the beginnings of the correspondence and of the circumstances that led them to address the issue of sexual equality, as well as a historical and doctrinal presentation of their views on the subject prior to the correspondence. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that the issue of sexual equality was a primary concern of both thinkers and that they both considered a scientific approach to the problem as a necessary ingredient of its resolution. It is also shown that they radically differed about the nature of this scientific approach and its practical consequences. The course of this discussion introduces the various problems associated with Comte's and Mill's respective ways of solving the issue of sexual equality.

The Beginnings of the Comte-Mill Correspondence

What were Mill's intentions when he took the initiative of sending his first letter to Comte on November 8, 1841? For want of textual evidence, one may conjecture that Mill, who was revising the draft of what would eventually appear in 1843 as the *System of Logic*, was eager to benefit from the comments and expertise of the author of the *Cours de philosophie positive*, one of the few recent books—along with Herschel's *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (1830) and Whewell's *History of the Inductive Sciences* (1837) and *Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* (1840)—that studied the logic and reasoning at work in the natural sciences.\(^1\) However, Mill was certainly attracted to Comte

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\(^1\) Mill first started reading Comte in 1828–9 after his French friend Gustave d'Eichthal communicated to him the *Système de politique positive* (a short tract published by
because of something that was present in both Herschel's and Whewell's writings but remained undeveloped. For, like Herschel and Whewell, Mill thought that the methods exemplified by the different sciences could be applied to the study of social phenomena. As R. Yeo has shown, the 'public discourse' of science in the 1830s underlined the accessibility, singularity, and transferability of scientific method “beyond the study of nature to the study of society.” Yet, Herschel’s pronouncements in the Discourse remained programmatic: it was hoped that the success of the methods of the natural sciences would help transform legislation and politics into “experimental sciences,” but no clue was given as how to bring about such a change. As for Whewell, although he insisted on the desirability of turning these subjects into scientific inquiries, he was also wary of not pushing the analogies between the physical and the moral sciences too far; in particular, he remained suspicious of the importation of concepts and methods of the former into the latter. 

Comte in 1822 as the Plan des travaux nécessaires pour la réorganisation de la société while he was still associated with St Simon and his school). As he told Comte in his first letter (John Stuart Mill to Auguste Comte, November 8, 1841, in Haac [ed.], p. 35), Mill came across the first two volumes of the Cours de philosophie positive, on the philosophy of mathematics and the philosophy of astronomy and physics (respectively published in 1830 and 1835), in 1837; by late 1838, he got hold of the third volume on the philosophy of chemistry and biology published in 1838, as a letter to Molesworth indicates (“Have you seen the third volume, the philosophy of chemistry & physiology? I have been almost as much struck with it as with the others & and have learnt as much from it, though there are more questionable things in the former two, but even on these he has shaken me,” John Stuart Mill to Sir William Molesworth, October 19, 1838; in John Stuart Mill, The Later Letters, CW XVII, p. 1988; see also John Stuart Mill to John Robertson, October 10, 1838; in John Stuart Mill, The Earlier Letters, CW XIII, pp. 388–9). Eventually, the third letter of Mill to Comte suggests that, by the end of 1841, he had read the volumes published in 1839 and 1841, for he expressed to the latter that he had been “impatiently awaiting the publication of the volume [the sixth, published in July 1842] which will complete your great work, and then of the special treatise on politics which is to follow and where I expect to find insights on many questions raised in your fourth and fifth volumes; so far they have only roused my intellectual interests without satisfying them fully” (John Stuart Mill to Auguste Comte, December 18, 1841, in Haac [ed.], p. 43–4). As J. M. Robson recalls, “Mill (…) was immensely impressed by the sixth [volume of the Cours], which led him, in January 1843, into a ‘remaniement complet’ of the concluding chapters of Book VI,” that is the chapters dealing with the methods of the moral sciences (John Stuart Mill, A System of Logic, CW VII, pp. lxviii–lxix; for the detail of Mill’s revisions of Book VI, see p. lxxv–lxxvi). 


3 J. Herschel, A Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy, p. 73. 

4 On Whewell’s ambivalence, see R. Yeo, Defining Science, pp. 193–201 & 231–41; for a recent and thorough analysis of the Mill-Whewell debate, see L. J. Snyder, Reforming philosophy. A Victorian Debate on Science and Society.