CHAPTER TWO

THE FEMALE BRAIN AND THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN: BIOLOGY, PHRENOLOGY AND SEXUAL EQUALITY

As argued in the previous chapter, the challenges posed to “positive philosophy” and “liberal naturalism” by the sexual equality issue originate in the respective ways Comte and Mill provided for the articulation of the biological and sociological levels of analysis. To put it briefly, Comte failed to live up to the methodological standard he set for sociology when he maintained that biology could settle the question of sexual equality, whereas Mill, despite his self-professed naturalism, refused to consider as sound arguments those based on biology.

What follows is a systematic reconstruction of the Comte-Mill correspondence that adduces textual and argumentative evidence in support of these claims. This chapter starts with an account of how the issue of sexual equality was first introduced by Mill in the correspondence, and how Comte responded by emphasizing the importance of biology for the appropriate handling of the discussion. Next is Comte’s actual exposition of his various biological arguments for the subjection of women. Eventually, it singles out the argument based on phrenology as the main biological support of Comte’s case for women’s subjection.

Setting the Grounds of the Debate

Mill’s attempt to introduce the issue of sexual equality in the correspondence was a cautious one, for it was only touched upon at the beginning of the summer of 1843, almost one year and a half after his exchange with Comte had begun. Despite some disagreements, the general impression one gets from the letters up to this date is that of a general convergence of opinions on most matters, speculative and practical.¹ However, one also discerns in Mill a growing desire for

¹ One disagreement – concerning phrenology – would prove particularly important with regard to the later discussion on sexual equality: see Chap. 2, pp. 84–92 and Chap. 3.
intellectual recognition. The letter of August 12, 1842, was a watershed, for it renounced the somewhat submissive tone Mill had adopted thus far. Mill wanted to be treated as a fellow thinker and not as a pupil. Time was ripe, he thought, for genuine discussion: “It has (...) always been my desire to engage in a true, frank and rather systematic comparison of our ideas, be they philosophic or sociological.”

Mill acknowledged that the imminent publication of the sixth volume of the *Cours* completed Comte’s first philosophical *grand oeuvre*, and thus testified to the systematic dimension of his reflections. But he also regarded his work as a systematic endeavour, which would soon materialize for the public in the *System of Logic*, the originality of which he was eager to defend. Accordingly, Mill suggested that Comte acquaint himself with Mill’s writings (which demanded an infringement of the latter’s “cerebral hygiene” that prevented him from reading anything else than poetry and a few scientific reports), so that they could direct their discussion “from the start towards points of real and basic difference,” whose very existence Mill claimed he could not yet determine. But that he was searching for them, the following pronouncement undoubtedly demonstrated:

I know that I have come ever closer to your ideas as I have come to know them better, but you realize as a geometer that a constant decrease is not always a decrease without limit.

As we also know, Mill used Comte’s confession as a pretext for raising the issue of divorce, and ventured that perhaps it would have been worth reconsidering the whole problem of the relations between the sexes anew. Deeply moved by Mill’s concern, Comte replied that he was sure his correspondent would eventually surrender to the views he first presented in the *Cours*:

As for our lack of agreement in the matter of divorce, I am convinced that, in spite of my personal case, which fortunately is exceptional though not as rare as it ought to be today, it will not take me long to persuade you to adopt my view, for it is of great import to society that marriage be indissoluble. This is the ultimate and indispensable attribute of monogamy as an institution, an essential condition of the definitive [human] economy.

---

2 John Stuart Mill to Auguste Comte, August 12, 1842; in Haac [ed.], pp. 91–2.
3 Ibid., p. 92.
4 Ibid.
5 See Chap. 1, pp. 9 et seq.