

Mill on Individuality Phil 13 Fall, 2007

Paragraphs (and sentences) in regular type are interpretations of what Mill is saying. Paragraphs (and sentences) in italics are my comments.-Dick Arneson

In chapter 3 of ON LIBERTY Mill argues that individuality is one of the essentials of human well-being. Mill holds we cannot achieve happiness without individuality.

So what is individuality? It's not easy to say. Mill enthusiastically praises individuality, and associates many goods with it, but he does not offer a definition of the word. The set of claims he wants to make by means of the notion is reasonably clear.

Mill contrasts individuality with mere conformity to custom. The habit of choosing to do something just because that's the way things are usually done around here does not promote individuality. But mechanically resisting custom would not do either.

Individuality and conformity to custom.

Sometimes it sounds as though Mill identifies individuality with becoming different from other people in one's preferences, values, way of life. But is Mill celebrating weirdness for its own sake? Of the English people of his day, Mill complains, "they like in crowds." Why is this bad? Having limited experience, I look to others, especially those I consider my peers, for cues as to what is worthwhile and choiceworthy. People take pleasure in being fashionable, in conforming to the customs of the fashion-conscious. The issue cannot be whether one chooses what is different from what others choose or the same as they choose. What Mill evidently wants is that people should choose reflectively, in the light of their own experience. One aspect of individuality is choosing one's own plan of life independently after reflection and deliberation. A plan of life is a strategy for how to live so as to achieve one's basic aims.

Individuality and development of mental faculties.

Mill associates individuality with developing one's talents and capacities, especially one's mental capacities. Choosing one's own plan of life is also linked to mental cultivation. Mill writes, "He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties." *This claimed link between choosing one's own plan of life and developing one's talents looks tenuous. First, even if one chooses a plan of life by slavishly following the local custom or the advice of one's relatives, whether this leads to mental cultivation or not depends above all on the content of the socially endorsed life plan one thoughtlessly chooses. Born in a family of scientists, conforming to family custom unreflectively might lead one to be a nuclear physicist or bio-medical researcher. Second, one could choose for oneself thoughtlessly, and the content of what one chooses might not include mental cultivation. The life I choose independently, striking off on my own path against custom, might be to be to become a couch potato or to lead a life that is Ferris Bueller's day off over and over again. (The reference is to an ancient movie.)*

One would also think that if there is an appropriate choice of a mode of life that suits my nature, I could fall into that choice either by way of careful deliberation or by good luck. Careful choice doesn't guarantee a good choice and careless choice doesn't guarantee inappropriate choice. But what Mill has in mind is pretty clear. He thinks that each of us has an individual nature, which may well differ to some extent from the natures of other persons. What sort of life will make one happy, lead to genuine fulfillment, depends on one's individual nature. Moreover, one's nature is not transparent--not to oneself, nor to other persons. Hence we need to engage in experiments in living to find out about our individual nature and we need to deliberate and reflect to draw out the lessons of these experiments in

living and make the right inferences from them about what is suitable for us. The set of local customs offered by one's culture is unlikely to fit one's nature perfectly.

Mill thinks that development of mental faculties is needed if we are to have the skills needed for critical reflection and sensible choice of a plan of life. But he also thinks that for all of us, developing our mental faculties will be an important part of our good.

Desires of one's own.

Careful deliberative choice of a plan of life does not suffice for individuality. One might choose a plan of life to achieve goals and desires that are taken as one finds them, and which might be the result of indoctrination or the influence of social processes that aren't ideal desire formation processes. Mill writes, "To a certain extent it is admitted that our understanding should be our own, but there is not the same willingness to admit that our desires and impulses should be our own, or that to possess impulses of our own, and of any strength, is anything but a peril and snare."

What is it for a desire to be one's own? Or not [really] one's own? Mill writes, "A person whose desires and impulses are his own-are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture-is said to have a character." I take it that by "character" Mill means "individual character," so he is here elaborating on his conception of individuality. For Mill, one's desires that fix one's basic life goals must satisfy an authenticity condition, if one has achieved individuality.

Authenticity: One's noninstrumental desires and aims and values are endorsed by one's own critical reflection and selected so as to be in harmony with the best of one's personality and are when need be the product of self-culture (deciding what kind of person one wants to be and making efforts to transform oneself into such a person). Putting together authenticity with the condition of individual choice of a life plan, we get the following: A person attains individuality to the extent that she lives her life according to a plan of life that is intelligently self-chosen to satisfy desires and aims that have been endorsed after critical deliberation and (when necessary) shaped by efforts at self-culture and that are in harmony with one's individual nature.

[This account of individuality may run together the idea of individuality, the development of one's individual nature, with notions of authentic and autonomous choice of values. The latter might be seen as a very useful means to achieving individuality rather than the thing itself. If so, is the fault in the account a flaw in my exposition or in Mill's text?]

Individuality and happiness.

For Mill, the utilitarian, human good is identified with happiness, and happiness with pleasure. In UTILITARIANISM, chapter 2, Mill argues that the superior pleasures are those that would be chosen by informed experts-those who have experienced all of the pleasures being compared and can appreciate what each has to offer. If Mill is to recommend individuality, he must argue that promoting it promotes happiness.

Mill's account of individuality qualifies his account of superior pleasures. The relevant expert preferences that determine the value of a particular pleasure for me are the preferences only of experts whose nature is similar to mine. People come in different types, and only experts of one's type have a bearing on what pleasures are choiceworthy for one. At the limit, if individuals are significantly unique, then there are as many types of persons as there are individual persons.

Developing one's individuality is a reliable means to gaining a life filled with superior pleasures. Moreover, the pleasures of developing one's individuality are themselves important constituents of happiness, the individual's good. For each person, individuality is necessary for happiness.

Midway through the chapter Mill's argument switches gears. Up to this point he has been arguing that developing one's individuality is desirable for each individual. He then addresses diehard conformists and traditionalists who cannot be persuaded that developing their individuality might be good for them. To this group, Mill argues that they should tolerate individuality and the social freedom individuality requires. They should tolerate the development of individuality by others even if they do not want it for themselves because some of those who develop individuality will be the salt of the earth who will generate undeniable progress in science, technology, and practical culture. Some who develop individuality will be geniuses, whose works will generate social progress that will increase what even the conformists and traditionalist will recognize as increases in the ability of society to provide happiness for its members. (Mill obviously does not feel comfortable with this argument. He would prefer to convince all that developing their own individuality is to their benefit.) *Question: Should those who reject individuality find Mill's instrumental argument for tolerating individuality compelling?*

Although Mill focuses on the highest flights of individuality, the genius of a Mozart or a Da Vinci, he is clear that his argument is meant to apply to almost any person. He writes, "If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode." *[Here Mill comes close to acknowledging that individuality might be a significant constituent of human good quite independently of whether or not it produces pleasure. At least, one might value individuality for the reasons Mill cites without supposing that if individuality is valuable, it must directly or indirectly promote or constitute happiness (pleasure and the absence of pain.)]*

Individuality, freedom, and the liberty principle.

Let's suppose individuality is a great constituent of happiness, a necessary means to happiness. Does this suffice to support Mill's chapter 1 claim (the liberty principle)? *On its face, no. Mill needs to argue more explicitly than he does not only that individuality is necessary to maximize human happiness but that sustaining wide individual liberty according to the liberty principle is necessary for promoting individuality and hence happiness.*

At the beginning of chapter 3 Mill observes that the same arguments that support freedom of speech also support wide freedom of action. We don't know for sure what is true, so we need to establish and sustain a regime of free speech to gain the best prospects of embracing true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. And in a similar way, we don't know for sure what modes of life are good for people of various types, so we need wide freedom of action to encourage experiments in living that will help us to develop over time better beliefs about what modes of life are choiceworthy.

Mill is not very explicit about the overall structure of the chapter 3 argument, but he must be reasoning along this line if his celebration of individuality is to be relevant to his defense of the liberty principle.

The obvious difficulty with the argument I am imputing to Mill is that while it is plausible to suppose that wide freedom of action is needed for society to promote individuality, it is far from obvious that absolute conformity to the liberty principle is the best social strategy for promoting individuality and happiness. There seems to be an unwarranted slide between "some" or "much" to "all" in Mill's line of argument.

Mill himself raises the difficulty that society might coercively restrict individual liberty in violation of the liberty principle only to steer people away from choice of the very worst modes of life or constituents of modes of life--those that experience has shown to be hardly anyone's best choice. *Suppose there are options that are tempting to people--if the options are available, many will choose them. But for all, or almost all who choose them, the options will tend to make their lives worse, not better. Now consider the social choice whether or not to enact a paternalistic law forbidding people to engage in these bad*

options, the law being paternalistic because it restricts individual liberty of an agent for the good of that very agent (or of others who voluntarily consent to bear any costs of that activity). Consider a drug policy that forbids some dangerous recreational drug. (The law might tolerate marijuana, alcohol, heroin, cocaine, and other drugs, but prohibit (say) supermethamphetamine, a drug that induces six hours of jittery ecstasy followed by six months of hellish pain) Such a law would violate the liberty principle, but would this be an unjustifiable restriction of individual liberty? Mill's chapter 3 arguments to the conclusion that individuality is a great human good do not suffice to establish that the liberty principle as espoused in chapter 1 of ON LIBERTY should never be violated. One might argue that some forms of paternalism in violation of the liberty principle would all things considered work to increase human individuality not diminish it In chapter 4 of ON LIBERTY Mill introduces considerations that purport to show that adherence to the liberty principle is always the happiness-maximizing social (and individual) policy choice.

Mill's arguments for the liberty principle emphasize that we are not good-at the level of individual decision and the level of social policy-at distinguishing the class of cases when restricting individual liberty in violation of the liberty principle would be happiness maximizing from the class of similar cases in which doing this would not be happiness maximizing. Given our limited ability to discriminate situations at the time of decision, we do best to stand fast by an absolute rule against restriction of liberty against the liberty principle.

The issue of fair distribution.

Mill's speculative arguments to the conclusion that strict and exceptionless adherence to the liberty principle promotes the maximization of human happiness better than any alternative that might be chosen might be correct or incorrect Just suppose Mill's speculations are correct Does this justify strict adherence to the liberty principle?

Not necessarily. (Nor would the failure of Mill's utilitarian arguments necessarily spell doom for the justification of the liberty principle. We might justify it on libertarian or other grounds.) Even if adherence to the liberty principle was happiness maximizing, we might be concerned morally not just with maximizing the total of human happiness (or good conceived some other way) but with how happiness (human good) is distributed across persons.

Consider that people evidently vary in their ability to become well informed, deliberate critically, and make good choices including good choices about what goals are worth pursuing. Individuals vary continuously across several dimensions of choicemaking ability, but for simplicity, suppose we can divide society into good choosers and bad choosers. The good choosers never make a mistake in choosing what is best for themselves (in situations when morality does not rule against choosing for one's own advantage). Good choosers will do best, one would suppose, under a set of rules that never restricts liberty paternalistically in violation of the liberty principle. A good chooser always picks the best option from any set of options she is presented with. So adding a problematic option to one's choice set will never lead a good chooser to choose badly. She chooses the problematic option only when that is best for her. (She might suffer loss of utility from having to consider a wider array of choices, but let that usually small complication pass) In contrast, bad choosers sometimes will choose options that are worse for themselves in preference to options that are better. A paternalistic law that excludes some tempting but bad options from her choice set can improve the life of a bad chooser.

Hence the choice of paternalism versus no-paternalism involves a conflict of interest between good choosers and bad choosers. The former will never do better with a regime of paternalism, the latter sometimes will. But on the whole and on the average, good choosers will tend to be among the members of society who are better off in terms of the happiness (good) they attain over the course of their lives, and bad choosers will tend other things being equal to be among the less fortunate in life

prospects. Hence even if Mill's conjecture were correct and strict adherence to the liberty principle were always happiness-maximizing, we might consistently hold paternalism sometimes to be the morally required policy because the consequences of no-paternalism for bad choosers have special weight. The choice of social policy might have this stylized character:

	Happiness under regime of paternalism	Happiness under regime of liberty principle
Each good chooser	60	70
Each bad chooser	18	10
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TOTAL:	78	80
<i>(Assume there are equal numbers of Good and Bad Choosers, so the total indicates the total happiness of society under the indicated public policy.)</i>		
Happiness level of worst off	18	10

In these circumstances we might morally favor the regime of paternalism over the regime of the liberty principle, despite the fact that the latter maximizes aggregate happiness.

One might suppose that the stylized choice just described could always be avoided under utilitarianism by enacting fine-grained social policies that provide liberty for good choosers and restriction of liberty for bad choosers, thereby maximizing the happiness of both groups. We might enact a suicide policy that separates good choosers from bad choosers by requiring those who wish to commit suicide to make their case to a suicide control board which issues licenses to commit suicide or obtain assisted suicide only to those whose choices for death are reasonable. Suicide and assisted suicide without a license would be prohibited. But such separating policies will not always be achievable—we lack the means reliably to separate good choosers from bad choosers. Moreover, separating policies would magnify the insult and stigma that tends to accompany paternalism for those who must suffer it, so separating policies might not always be a good idea even if they were feasible.

I have introduced this example just to illustrate that there are two controversial aspects to Mill's argument for the liberty principle. One is the argument that strict adherence to the liberty principle maximizes aggregate human happiness. The second controversial feature of Mill's argument is his commitment to utilitarianism--the idea that we should do whatever maximizes human happiness. To defend Mill's view both controversial aspects must be defended.

Against Mill's utilitarianism, I have suggested that we might be concerned not just for the aggregate total of human happiness but for its fair distribution across persons, which I associate with preference for the worse off. Someone else might reject utilitarianism in favor of individual rights to liberty. The libertarian might object to my argument in this way: If I am not harming anyone and am behaving prudently, why is it OK to restrict my freedom in order to provide assistance to bad choosers. Why must my freedom be limited for the sake of those who don't or won't take proper care of themselves (why limit my access to alcohol because some other people will predictably misuse alcohol to their own detriment?)