THE LIBERAL TRADITION, RELATIVISM, AND JOHN STUART MILL

Benjamin L. Smith

Anyone acquainted with modern political philosophy is aware of the important role John Stuart Mill played in the philosophical defense of liberal politics. The philosophical heir of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, John Stuart Mill was in many ways the intellectual standard bearer for both liberal politics and liberal political philosophy in the England of his day. Indeed, *On Liberty* became an instant success and had a discernable impact on political debate. Like other liberals who came before and after him, Mill actively supported a broad range of political practices and policies that assumed the normative priority of freedom. However, Mill’s real legacy consists in his philosophical attempt to construct a utilitarian justification for practical liberal politics embodied in the principle of liberty. To this end, Mill reformed the utilitarian tradition by offering a new and more complex understanding of happiness than Bentham had employed, which he combined with an original account of the role of individuality in the good life. This latter development presaged liberalism’s current emphasis on autonomy and, what Charles Taylor calls, the ethics of authenticity.\(^1\) As such, Mill is a major contributor to the liberal tradition — re-interpreting its received concepts in the view of emergent challenges — and a source for those currently working within the context of liberal political philosophy. On the other

hand, Mill has been criticized by some liberal thinkers, who contest the compatibility of utility and liberty.²

In what follows, I shall do four things. First, I shall clarify the meaning of the principles of utility and liberty; next, Mill’s argument for liberalism will be examined, and it will be shown that principle of liberty is consistent with the principle of utility; third, I shall demonstrate that Mill’s argument for liberalism collapses into relativism. Finally, the implications of Mill’s failure for the liberal tradition will be examined. To this end, I shall focus Mill’s texts that deal explicitly with the connections between liberty, utility, and individuality, viz., On Liberty and Utilitarianism. Following the lead of John Gray and Wendy Donner, the principles of liberty and utility will be interpreted according to the doctrines of the higher pleasures and individuality. It will become evident that the principles of utility and liberty are compatible; it also will become clear that this harmony is achieved at the price of self-defeating relativism. Given Mill’s historical role within the liberal tradition, I shall argue that his system’s collapse into relativism constitutes an ongoing challenge to those working within the context of liberal political philosophy.

Liberty, Utility, and Individuality

Mill identifies liberty with the individual’s freedom from undue social control, which enables the person to be self-directed — rather than communally directed — in self-regarding

actions.\(^3\) Thus conceived, liberty requires a clear principle by which we may consistently distinguish the private from the public.\(^4\)

That principle is that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. … He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise or even right. … In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.\(^5\)

In short, the community must refrain from curtailing someone’s “liberty of action,” except in the case of harm to others. The community must exercise this restraint even when it judges that interference would be wise, morally good, and productive of personal happiness. In this sense, liberty is normatively basic. Accordingly, the political community must remain neutral with respect to substantive commitments. If it were to do otherwise, if it were to favor one conception of happiness or goodness, it would run the risk of curtailing the liberty of those who do not share the favored perspective.

Mill explains that the principle of liberty conforms to utility, “in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being,” which is the “ultimate appeal on all ethical questions.” (On Liberty, 14) This is important, because it means that the priority of individual liberty depends on its conformity to the principle of utility: it must produce a balance of pleasure over pain.\(^6\) This seems simple enough, but a few clarifications are required. First, the principle of utility is not meant to operate as a normative principle in itself; it is not


\(^4\) Ibid., 8, 10-12.

\(^5\) Ibid., 13.

meant to establish on its own the right and wrong of each action. Rather this principle operates on the axiological level; it is a principle of value telling us that only pleasure is intrinsically valuable. As Mill puts it, “happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable.”7 Furthermore, Mill seems to intend that the principle of utility be understood in maximizing terms, for he says that an action is right in proportion to the degree it produces pleasure. Pleasure makes an action good, and the greater the pleasure of an action, the higher it ranks in goodness and desirability. But this is not as straightforward as it seems, for maximal pleasure is not strictly identifiable with the quantity and intensity of pleasure. Rather, Mill famously insists that the quality of pleasure must be considered as well.

In contrast to his utilitarian predecessors, Mill believed that some pleasures were better than others; pleasures differ by both quantity and quality.8 This sets Mill apart from both Bentham and some contemporary liberal theorist, who deny that we can make any value judgment about competing desires and ends. In fact, it is reasonable to describe Mill’s system as an early version of liberal perfectionism. As is well known, perfectionism is the theory that value can be derived from a set of human excellences or a description of human flourishing.9 Liberal perfectionists, like Martha Nussbaum and Joseph Raz, claim that liberal political practice is justified, because it promotes human well-being or the human good.10 Such thinkers remain “liberal” by adopting a fairly “thin” version of human well-being — one that consists primarily

7 Utilitarianism, 168. See also: Gray, 11. I think that Mill’s utilitarianism is best conceived as an instance of rule consequentialism.
8 Ibid., 138-142. See also: Alisdair MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 242. Although this is an important reform of utilitarianism, as we shall see, it does not go far enough.
9 Christman, 103-108.
10 Francesco Biondo, “Two Types of Liberal Perfectionism,” Ratio Juris 18.4 (December 2005): 519-535; Albert Dzur, “Liberal Perfectionism and Democratic Participation,” Polity 30.4 (Sum. 1998); David McCabe, “Joseph Raz and the Contextual Argument for Liberal Perfectionism,” Ethics 111 (April 2001): 493-522. One way to understand this is to reflect on the distinction between general capabilities and particular ends. Liberal perfectionists tend to think that the political community has a positive role in promoting the former, but should remain neutral regarding the latter.
in developing the conditions for making informed and empowered choices — and by making autonomy constitutive or even defining of the human good. This is perfectly in line with Mill’s own conception of maximal pleasure. 11 Although some pleasures are higher than others, there is not one set of “higher pleasures.” The higher pleasures are diverse in content, because the quality of a pleasure is not derived from its object, but the manner in which the pleasure is pursued and enjoyed. Those pleasures are higher that result from choices that express and establish the person’s individuality. 12

The same mode of life is a healthy excitement to one, keeping all his faculties of action and enjoyment in their best order, while to another it is a distracting burden which suspends or crushes all internal life. Such are the differences among human beings in their sources of pleasure, [and] their susceptibilities of pain … [that] unless there is a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable. (Liberty, 83)

There are diverse pleasures and corresponding diverse lifestyles; those are healthy that are in keeping with each person’s particular nature.

What does this mean for the connection between the principles of liberty and utility? According to Mill, the principle of liberty is justified, because of its utility, i.e., because in one way or another it maximizes pleasure. But the maximization of pleasure requires the enjoyment of “higher pleasures,” i.e., pleasures that express individuality. It follows that we can only maximize pleasure, by maximizing individuality. This is an important qualification of Mill’s commitment to utilitarianism. The greatest happiness is the standard for ethical action, but Mill has a specific sort of happiness in mind, viz., the kind of happiness that follows from individuality. Moreover, if this is true then the ultimate justification of the principle of liberty consists in the fact that it promotes individuality and it is hard to deny that it does so. By

---

11 Gray, 86-87.
12 Gray, 72-77.
protecting the person’s liberty in self-regarding actions, the principle of liberty certainly makes room for the maximal pleasure in keeping with individuality. If so, the principles of liberty and utility are certainly consistent. Once we understand that Mill modifies the principle of utility with the doctrine of individuality, nothing stands in the way of a utilitarian justification of the principle of liberty. Liberty must be guaranteed in order to maximize happiness in both quantity and quality, which in turn requires a commitment to individuality. For this reason, Gray and Donner argue that the doctrines of the higher pleasures and individuality harmonize utility and liberty.\(^{13}\) If this interpretation is correct — and I believe that it is — the coherence and strength of Mill’s political theory turns on his doctrine of individuality.

Mill’s most sustained treatment of individuality occurs in chapter 3 of On Liberty, wherein he describes individuality as the formation of a life based on one’s “inward forces.”\(^{14}\) “[I]t is the privilege and proper condition of a human being … to use and interpret experience in his own way. It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character.” \(Liberty, 70\) It is proper to human beings as such to interpret experience in their own way and create their values in accord with their own “character” and “circumstances.” According to Mill, it is important that we do so, because it is required by human flourishing. \(Liberty, 69\) “[I]ndividuality is the same thing with development, and … only the cultivation of individuality … produces, or can produce, well developed human beings.” \(Liberty, 77\) Mill even goes so far as to claim that the worth of a human being is based on the degree to which he has developed his individuality. \(Liberty, 72\)

The reason that Mill identifies human development with individuality is because each person possesses a unique nature and a correspondingly unique form of human flourishing.

\(^{13}\) Gray, 2-13. See also: Donner, 257.
\(^{14}\) Liberty, 70, 72-73. See also: Donner, 259.
Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing. (*Liberty*, 72)

It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth … that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation. (*Liberty*, 76)

What fulfills one person will thwart another. One model or paradigm of the good life cannot be imposed on individuals without frustrating their happiness, which would violate the principle of utility. Thus, the maximal happiness — understood according to the doctrine of individuality — requires that each person must be left free to pursue a lifestyle in keeping with the form of happiness corresponding to his own process of self-discovery and value creation. As John Gray observes:

… the teleological language which Mill uses … suggests the thesis that each man has a unique range of potentialities, expressible in a relatively small range of possible lives, and that the actualization of these potentialities is indispensable for any man’s greatest well-being.\(^\text{15}\)

A happy man will not, then, be simply a very distinct instance of a general type; rather one part of his happiness, a necessary part, in Mill’s view, will be that he has fulfilled the peculiar demands of his own nature. … he is insisting that the nature that awaits actualization has unique features.\(^\text{16}\)

“In … [Mill’s] account … no statement claiming universal validity can be made about the attributes of human nature, save that it is essentially indeterminate, and so open to improvement in indefinitely many divergent directions.” (Gray, 85)

Individuality means more than just the distinguishing features of each person. Over and above this it is both a process and an achievement. Individuality consists in those choices that express one’s “inward forces,” and uniqueness. This presupposes a sustained process of self-discovery and the creation of corresponding values. One can well imagine that this process could require endless experiments in living and revision of values. “Development” occurs when one

\(^{15}\) Gray, 80. See also: Donner, 260.
authentically lives in conformity with the process of self-discovery and value-creation, and maximal happiness is the result. In sum, individuality encompasses self-discovery, value creation, and self-expressive choice, and determines what counts as maximal happiness appropriate to each person. If one accepts, Mill’s doctrine of individuality, then a strong argument for liberalism can be constructed. Individuality is required for the maximal pleasure, and the principle of liberty is essential for the protection of individuality. It follows that maximal pleasure requires liberty. If a society was to do otherwise, it would end up violating the principle of utility.17

**Individuality and Relativism**

Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that the attempts of Enlightenment philosophers to construct an objective account of morality were doomed to failure because they eschewed a teleological account of the human good, in which goodness is identified with the actualization of human nature.18 This was the predominate structure of pre-modern ethical theories whether Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, or Thomistic. Whatever the particular deficiencies of these schools, they had the advantage of providing a defensible foundation for consistent ethical analysis. Once one was brought to recognize the structure of human nature, one could outline — at least in broad contours — its objective goods and relevant ethical principles.19

---

16 Ibid., 81. See also: Donner, 273-276.
17 Given this conception of human nature and autonomy, the importance of the principle of liberty should be obvious. Coercive public actions — even strong or pervasive forms of socialization — that inhibit the ability of the individual to pursue his own lifestyle would thwart the realization of his personal essence and thereby violate the principle of utility. In order to avoid this outcome, it is necessary for the public to refrain from restraining someone’s self-regarding exercise of autonomy.
19 For example, Aristotle’s conception of happiness begins with the affirmation of a universal human nature, objectively defined by man’s capacity for rational activity. “We take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be activity and actions of the soul that involve reason; hence the function of the excellent man is to do this well and finely.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a12-15)
This approach to ethics became unavailable to the liberal tradition due to the Enlightenment’s gradual rejection of formal and final causality. Nevertheless, many classical liberal thinkers, like Locke and Kant held to a universalist view of human nature along with its attendant metaphysical assumptions. So in the high liberal tradition we find a “thin,” but still universalist and metaphysical account of human nature. Indeed, classical liberalism was justified by appeals to a non-historical, objective human nature imbued with rationality and moral conscience.\textsuperscript{20} By the time we get to Mill, the Romantic rejection of universalism, along with the growth of scientific reductionism, made even a \textit{minimally} metaphysical account of human nature untenable. In essence, Mill replaces universal human nature with the self — or what we might call today “personal identity.” This is a radical move that fundamentally redirects the liberal tradition away from metaphysical conceptions of the human person and the good, and provides a new foundation for liberal politics — the flourishing of the individual self. Nevertheless the move away from classical liberalism and metaphysics comes at a high price.\textsuperscript{21} Unlike ethical theories that assume a universal notion of human nature and human perfection, Mill cannot offer a definitive account of human flourishing. Each person has his own distinctive nature and correspondingly an individualized form of happiness and flourishing. This makes it impossible for Mill’s system to avoid relativism.

If we accept Mill’s account of individuality, then for each person there will correspond a unique form of happiness. This follows from the fact that each person’s “self” defines what counts as a higher pleasure and therefore what counts as maximal happiness. So for person 1 (P1) there will be a specific form of happiness (H1); for person 2 (P2) there will be a distinct

\textsuperscript{20} Taylor, 41.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{After Virtue}, 52-53, 148. One might object that we can adjudicate rival ends or conceptions of the good by employing Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures. But, but since each self is different, what makes the nature of a philosopher or poet any better than the nature of a sot or simpleton? In Mill’s account there is no
corresponding form of happiness (H2), and so on. But, according to Mill, value is derived from happiness: whatever is conducive to maximal happiness is good; whatever detracts from maximal happiness is bad. But if value is derived from happiness, and happiness is relative to each individual self, then value itself is relative. It follows that the rationality and truth of any value statement will be relative to a given individual; what is truly good for one will not be so for another. Clearly, this sort of relativism makes consistent moral evaluation impossible, for it inevitably justifies contradictions. “Adultery is always wrong,” will be a true statement under some conceptions of happiness and not so under others; As MacIntyre puts it:

In the hands of Mill concepts like “pleasure” and “happiness” are stretched and extended in all directions until they are used simply to name whatever men aim at. By this extension they become useless for evaluative and moral purposes. … The injunction “Pursue happiness!” when happiness has been given the broad, undifferentiated sense which Bentham and Mill give to it is merely the injunction “Try to achieve what you desire.” But as to any question about rival objects of desire, or about alternative and competing desires, this injunction is silent and empty.

This sort of relativism is fatal for the justification of liberalism. For Mill, each person is a unique self with a corresponding unique form of happiness, which means there will be a unique set of principles for each. The central problem with Mill’s approach concerns the indeterminacy of happiness: since happiness is whatever happens to correspond to someone’s “inward forces,” the values and normative principles that follow will be relative to each person. To put it in simple terms, Mill’s ethical system is just as likely to justify one set of values and principles as another; in fact it could serve to justify illiberal principles just as well as liberal principles; it can serve to both justify and refute the value of the principle of liberty.

universal human nature against which competing models of life can be measured. So, as long as one’s happiness is expressive of his distinct self, it must be considered “higher.”

22 Donner, 257.
23 Short History, 236.
24 See: Christman, 108.
One might object that we can adjudicate between rival ends by employing Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, it is reasonable to question whether my characterization of Mill’s system as relativistic is consistent with my earlier description of Mill as a liberal perfectionist. As John Skorupski has pointed out, Mill’s version of liberalism includes a high-minded, almost aristocratic ethos, and it must be recognized that Mill believes the higher forms of happiness are only reached by those with highly developed faculties, experience, cultural cultivations, and competence.\textsuperscript{26} We should choose those ends preferred by the fully competent agent. Yet for all of this, Mill cannot escape the relativity that attaches to happiness once it is defined by individuality. Once happiness is defined by each autonomous self, it inevitably becomes relative. This fact can be most clearly discerned if we consider a distinction often invoked by contemporary liberal perfectionists, viz., the distinction between ends and capacities.\textsuperscript{27} Mill can tell us nothing about which ends we should pursue, because each human self is different, and only those ends are right that are consistent with each self. On the other hand, he does think that the best choices depend on the development and use of certain capacities: education, deliberation, developed mental faculties, etc. However, these capabilities simply make our choices more educated, deliberate, etc. Capabilities, considered in this way, simply inform the manner of choosing; they do not make it clear what ends should be chosen. Moreover, the logic of Mill’s doctrine of individuality undermines his endorsement of the competent agent standard, because the privileging of “competence” is simply something that satisfies or pleases one kind of self, viz., that of a late Victorian bourgeois progressive like Mill.

\textbf{J. S. Mill and the Liberal Tradition}

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Utilitarianism}, 138-141.
\textsuperscript{26} Skorupski, 23-29.
The relativism of Mill’s system is a result of his subjective account of happiness, which in turn, is a consequence of his doctrine of individuality. This is important for the liberal tradition, because the doctrine of individuality is almost identical to contemporary conceptions of autonomy, which in many ways shape current liberal discourse. If this is true, then the collapse of Mill’s system into relativism raises the question of whether the liberal tradition, in its current form, entails relativism.

In its simplest form, autonomy means living and shaping one’s own life or authentic self-directedness. Of course, different liberal theorist will construe authentic self-directedness in different ways. For example, liberal perfectionists emphasize the positive developmental role of informed self-directed choice. On the other hand, more conventional liberal theorist like John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, emphasize personal independence, substantive neutrality, fairness, and equality-guaranteeing procedures. Nevertheless, there are at least four common elements in contemporary versions of autonomy: (a) detachment from and critical reflection on received tradition; (b) information about alternative lifestyles and conceptions of the good; (c) the capacity and freedom to form and pursue one’s own values; and (d) critical self-discovery.

As such, autonomy goes well beyond free choice. Indeed it is a process that assumes a specific conception of the human person — unencumbered by prior commitments, free, critical, and unique. Each human self is constituted by a unique blend of inclinations and capacities that constitute personal identity. Discovering this identity requires a certain distance from external influences and careful self-reflection. On the basis of this process, the autonomous agent creates

---

27 Dzur, 667-691.
and authentically pursues values and projects that correspond to his unique identity. For liberals, this process is normatively basic, which is to say that it determines the value of human acts and other normative principles.

In sum, autonomy is the ability and process by which each person articulates and freely pursues a set of values based on self-identity. Understood in this sense, it is arguable that Mill’s doctrine of individuality is an early version of contemporary autonomy, especially versions that emphasize authenticity. This becomes clear, if we focus on the four conditions required for autonomy. Conditions (a) and (b) are satisfied by Mill’s insistence on free expression, open debate, and a generally critical stance of the person towards his society. Indeed this is likely the motive for Mill’s strenuous arguments against censorship in Chapter 2 of *On Liberty*. In his view, vital beliefs — as opposed to moribund traditions — emerge from open debate and free speech. A vital belief for Mill is one that is endorsed after a free and open debate, in which various alternative s have been considered. What makes such a belief “vital” is its informed endorsement. This process is required by individuality in order for the person to decide for himself what parts of tradition to accept. Individuality requires us to go further and endorse or form values that reflect our “inward forces,” i.e., our unique self, which includes both careful self-reflection and the free creation and pursuit of values, satisfying conditions of (c) and (d). In fact, Mill’s emphasis on value-creation and “inward forces” corresponds exactly to Charles Taylor’s account of the ethics of authenticity. It follows that we can at least say that Mill’s doctrine of individuality is an inchoate — but prototypical version — of contemporary accounts.

---

32 Donner, 276. Wendy Donner describes autonomy as “the capacity to reflect critically upon, choose and endorse … [the] projects and pursuits in harmony with our nature.” She goes on to make it clear that by “nature” she does not mean a universal essence.
33 Taylor, 28-31.
of autonomy. This makes it possible to draw some general implications about the current state of the liberal tradition from the relativism of Mill’s system.

As I have indicated, the relativism of Mill’s political philosophy ultimately results from his doctrine of individuality, which I have identified as an early version of autonomy. The doctrine of individuality ends in relativism, because prioritizes autonomy over the good, i.e., what counts as good is defined by the autonomy of each person. Gray sees this as a major difference between Mill and traditional perfectionist, who are likely to see autonomy as instrumental to a good life not constitutive. For traditional perfectionists like Aristotle and Aquinas, self-directedness is a necessary condition for an act to be fully virtuous, but self-directedness does not define the good. In their account, the value of an end or goal is intrinsic and does not depend upon autonomous endorsement. By contrast, Mill defines the good — maximal pleasure — by autonomy. For Mill, autonomy is what makes one pleasure higher than another and informs the content of each person’s happiness. In this sense, autonomy is prior to the value of any given end. Logically, this requires Mill to accept that the truth of any value statement shall be different, and perhaps even contradictory, between persons. For some persons it will be true that adultery is always wrong and for others it will be false. Here we have arrived at relativism again, but this time by focusing on what Mill holds in common with the contemporary liberals, viz., the prioritization of autonomy over good. Does it follow that the liberal tradition is inherently relativistic?

A particular philosophical tradition emerges because the previously dominant tradition is unable to meet the demands of new circumstances or overcome critical internal difficulties. The liberal tradition arose, because the scholastic tradition was unable to meet the problems posed by Enlightenment thought, politics, and the scientific revolution. Early liberal thinkers articulated a
form of political thought that responded to the needs of the time and employed new methods of
enquiry and rationality that conformed to the broader intellectual culture. As I have already
indicated, this movement based its political agenda of universal rights on a universalists — and
therefore metaphysical — account of the human person.35

By the 19th century, the liberal tradition faced the challenge of reformulating itself in a
non-metaphysical manner. J. S. Mill is one of the principle liberal theorists who accomplished
this task and, as such, is a transformational member the liberal tradition, and since liberals have
followed Mill in this respect, it is reasonable to anticipate that they will run into the same
problems. As I have already indicated, Mill radically alters the foundation of the liberal tradition
by replacing universal human nature with the self. Once he does so, autonomy is freed from the
metaphysical constraints of universal human nature and becomes the determining factor in what
counts as human flourishing. This is important because it means the abandonment of
metaphysics. To a great degree, the subsequent liberal tradition has followed Mill’s lead, basing
its discourse on the priority of autonomy rather than a metaphysical account of the human
person.36 This development constitutes a continuing challenge for those doing philosophy in the
context of the liberal tradition. In so far as liberal thinkers eschew metaphysics and base their
discourse on the priority of autonomy or an ethics of authenticity, they need to show how this
does not lead to the sort of relativism that proved fatal to Mill’s system.

34 Gray, 80-82.
36 Ibid., 37, 41.