

Mill, On Liberty, #2

Reid Blackman

11-16, 57-99, 104-5, 113-119

“The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it” (14-15).

Chapter 1

Liberty/Harm Principle: 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. **(11)**.

The “ultimate appeal on all ethical questions”: utility (usefulness) grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being (11).

- This end warrants external restraint.

Chapter 3: Of Individuality, As One of the Elements of Well-Being

We have already established that freedom of opinion/expression is imperative (in Chapter 2). What of freedom of action? That is, the freedom to live our lives in the way we wish?

How individuality is seen by society

It is not recognized as intrinsically valuable, and the majority wants everyone to be the same. Individuals are seen with jealousy, and as troublesome by those who think they know the best way.

Traditions and Customs are Not Sufficient Guides for Individuals to Living a Happy/Fulfilling Life

Traditions have something to be said for them; they are the result of experience and so there is presumptive evidence that they are good. But ...

- 1) The experience of the practitioners of a tradition may be too narrow, or may not have interpreted it rightly (60).
- 2) Even if correct for some it may not be suitable for everyone. “Customs are made for customary circumstances, and customary characters: and his circumstances or his character may be uncustomary” (60). Just as we should allow different opinions, we should allow different “experiments of living” **(58)**.
- 3) Even if correct and suitable, one should not conform to custom merely *as* custom, for that does not educate or develop him. “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” (60).

What question do you ask yourself when you ask how you ought to live? If you ask the wrong one – as most do – you are headed down a path of degradation and misery. **(63)**.

The Social Benefit of Individuality

1. Great individuals make one proud to be a member of the species.
2. With the government consisting of the mass, we can only have mediocrity. We need great individuals to show us the way.
 - Eccentricity should be encouraged because any example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. “That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time” (69).
3. “The only permanent source of improvement is liberty, since by it there are as many possible independent centres of thought as there are individuals” (72).
 - Only with an atmosphere of freedom does individuality and *genius* grow.
 - People think genius and originality fine, but in their hearts don’t see the point **(67)**.

Chapter 4: Of the Limits to the Authority of Society Over the Individual

Society is not founded on a contract. Still, one owes a return for the benefit one receives from society. Thus, one must not intrude upon the rights of others, and one must bear his share of the labors and sacrifices to keep the members of the community safe (77-8).

Objections to the Liberty Principle

1. One necessarily affects others; there is no isolated person, and so no isolated act.
2. We know certain things – gambling, drunkenness, idleness, etc. – are bad for people; these are well established (prudential) truths. Should we have both legal and social sanctions?

Responses:

- i. If such a person violates an obligation than the act is not self-regarding and he is the proper object of moral condemnation. But he is to be punished for breach of obligation, not for breach of his own happiness.
- ii. If the person hurts no one but himself, “the inconvenience is one which society can afford to bear, for the sake of the greater good of human freedom” (85).
- iii. His wrongdoing, as a result of being the object of censure, is an exemplar for being good.
- iv. If society does interfere, odds are it interferes wrongly; they consider what is good for them, not for the good of the suffering person.
- v. People will object to those things that are different but not actually harmful to the individual

Examples: a (religious) state is guided by their disgust with eating meat, polygamy; the same state of mind (though different in degree) served as the foundation for all religious persecutions ever perpetrated.

Chapter 5: Applications

The government may interfere:

- i. If an action violates the rights of others/is an act of breach of obligation/duty.
- ii. If an act directly (immediately?) causes violence; no inciting an excited mob.
- iii. In the cases of sanitary precautions, to protect workers from employers, etc. (99).

Reasons for curbing government interference with the community taken as a whole:

1. Individuals are more likely to care for the project more than the government, and know better.
2. The people cultivate their minds in doing things for themselves.
3. The more power the government has the more it can influence people; the community becomes increasingly dependent upon the government, the latter all the more easily becomes despotic.
4. There is the danger of the government capturing the brightest of the age, who now must work in the name of legality and custom, and cannot be innovators.