

Overview & Reading Questions, John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*,

Chapter Three: On Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being

Keep in mind the title of the chapter: On Individuality. How is ‘individuality’ related to freedom or liberty? Notice that Mill specifies in the title that ‘individuality’, as he means it, is intended to refer to an element (i.e., a part of) human well-being. Is individuality a FORM of freedom? What does it signify? Freedom to do something? Freedom to BE something? Freedom FROM something? As for well being, does Mill refer here to COLLECTIVE well-being (i.e., overall social utility)? Or to INDIVIDUAL well being? Or both? Not clear from the title, but perhaps this will emerge as the chapter unfolds.

The first paragraph is a kind of summary and restatement of important points that have been established or asserted thus far: freedom, whether of speech (or thought) or action, is conditioned by the need to refrain from harming others. Humans are not infallible and are likely to hold only a portion of truth. Freedom resulting in widespread “experiments in living” are necessary to human happiness (collective?) and to individual and social progress. Mill writes at the end of this paragraph: “It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself. Where, not the person’s own character, but the tradition or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principle ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress.” So individuality here seems to mean a person’s conduct emanating from his or her own character, as opposed to his or her conduct emanating from the customs or traditions of others. Perhaps this signifies that individuality denotes freedom from the governance of custom or tradition—being able to think and act from principles or values that one has adopted reflectively and thoughtfully.

1. What is the chief evil with respect to appreciating the centrality of individual spontaneity to well being? What is the majority’s opinion towards individuality, according to Mill? What is the attitude of social and moral reformers (those who are questioning majority opinion) toward individuality?
2. According to von Humboldt, whose view Mill seems to endorse, what are the two elements of ‘originality’ (which Mill appears to treat as equivalent to individuality in his sense)?
3. In the third paragraph of the chapter, Mill considers a kind of rejoinder to his diagnosis of the problem. He suggests that the relative importance of the tradeoff between one’s own judgment and custom or tradition can only be a matter of degree since no one can conceive of living a life without taking into account the experience of previous generations. (Again, consider Mill’s remarks at the end of Chapter Two of *Utilitarianism*). Mill concedes that every thoughtful person MUST acknowledge the influence of custom and must even strive to take what is correct from custom. Nonetheless, he makes three cautionary points about the nature and circumstances of the influence of custom. What is the THIRD of his points? Does Mill’s point here seem correct? [Compare this point with his remarks in paragraphs 28 & 29 of chapter two of *On Liberty*.] Notice Mill’s reference to “desiring what is best”...while Mill may be in part be a subjectivist about what individual well being consists in, he seems to endorse the idea that there are right and wrong, or wise and unwise choices a person can make in his DESIRES.
4. Note the tree metaphor at the end of paragraph 4. The thing to be emphasized, which is not so obvious from thinking how a tree genuinely forms, is the phrase “the inward forces”. [This metaphor is not so useful, it seems to me, since trees develop more influenced to the better by *external* forces and the intentions of persons more so than by their inward forces. But presumably, no two oak trees or no two maple trees are identical, even if they are raised in identical external circumstances, so perhaps this helps his case a little.]
5. In the next paragraph (#5), Mill distinguishes between the intellectual part of our nature (the understanding) and our desires and impulses. What is the relationship between human nature and our desires and impulses? Paragraph #6 might be subtitled, “Then & Now”. What is the Now part of the story? Is his description at the end of paragraph 6 appropriate for our time as well?

In paragraphs 7 & 8, Mill considers Calvinism's attitude toward self-development and offers an alternative vision of God/God's vision of human nature. No question here, just pointing out something worth noting.

6. Paragraph nine begins to connect individuality with overall social utility and progress. What is Mill's definition of despotism?
7. In paragraph 10, Mill sets out the next item to be established. What is it that Mill is signaling that he will establish next?
8. In paragraphs 11 & 12, Mill speaks about the importance of genius. What does Mill identify as "the true sense" of the term genius? Not everyone is going to be a genius, but what is necessary for a society to produce any such instances of it?
9. In paragraph 13, Mill remarks that the activity of governing a mediocre population (the contrast with genius) had produced mediocre government. He also seems to suggest that democracy is liable to this mediocrity. What is the only way a democracy (or numerous aristocracy) ever rose/rises above mediocrity? Why does Mill endorse eccentricity near the end of the paragraph?

Paragraph 14 contains what is likely to be the strongest expression of Mill's subjectivism about human happiness. But while he seems to suggest that what a person (with a tolerable amount of common sense and experience) chooses as a way of life is best for that person BECAUSE he chooses it, it is clear from other parts of this paragraph (as well as from other places in the text) that Mill holds a partly objectivist view about human happiness for individuals in terms of capacities—certain capacities within our nature merit cultivation more so than others given the individual's end of living well.

10. Notice in paragraph 15 Mill makes one exception to the rule that his society is lacking in persons of "great energies guided by vigorous reason, and strong feelings strongly controlled by a conscientious will". What is that exception? [What do you suppose is the significance that this is the only area where great energy is present?]
11. Paragraph 16, another very long paragraph, explores the relationship between progress/improvement and the spirit of liberty understood as the freedom from custom's authority. He attempts to illustrate the relationship by appeal to comparing and contrasting England with China. I'm not sure the China of Mill's day is so transparent to us today, but you should be able to get a sense of what Mill thinks characterizes England. How is England being in favor of progress still not the same as being free in the sense of liberty above?
12. In paragraph 17, we have an interesting discussion of the importance of plurality or diversity (both terms are actually used by Mill, again citing von Humboldt). Freedom (in terms of being free from the authority of custom) requires plurality/diversity of life experiments to sustain progress or improvement (at the social level) which increases the probability of individual well being. But there are many source of homogenizing force in Mill's England. How do education, communication advancement, commerce and public opinion in politics each serve to homogenize the population, according to Mill (homogenize means to reduce diversity/plurality of ways of living)? Do you suppose the tendency in Mill's day has continued to ours? Does modern education have the effect Mill specifies? Do you think the effect of public opinion had the homogenizing effect Mill identified in his day? Do you think immigration in our day can serve the function Mill identifies for plurality and diversity?