

J S Mill "On Liberty" Lectures
Lecture Notes for Session 3
William Arthurs, March 2007

Mill on Individuality and Genius

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Lecture title.

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Mill says that it is desirable in society to have diversity and variety of opinions and behaviour, consistent with his principle of liberty, ie. short of injury to others.

Human nature is like a tree that needs to grow and develop on all sides if it is to flourish. By this means, human beings can hope to become the best they can be. In proportion to the development of his individual nature, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and therefore more valuable to others. It is essential that different people be allowed to lead different lives. Even despotism or tyranny are not so bad if individuality exists under them. But if individuality is lost, that is genuine despotism.

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But today, Mill asserts, society has conquered individuality which was once present. People are "lost in the crowd". Public opinion rules the world. In what people do for pleasure and enjoyment, they mostly follow the popular tastes – when they choose, they choose among a narrow range of things that is already limited to those that are popular. Unusual tastes, unusual conduct, are regarded as strange by society, and treated almost as though they were crimes. Human nature is therefore starved and withers. This is not a desirable condition for mankind.

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The problem, Mill argues, is to show those who need to be convinced that "developed human beings" are of some use to the "undeveloped" – that the people who do not desire liberty will be rewarded for allowing others to pursue it. But most people are satisfied with the way things are now and do not understand why they are not good enough for everyone.

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Mill argues that they might possibly learn something from them. There is always a need of persons to discover new truths and start new practices. Nothing was ever done which someone was not the first person to attempt. All good things which exist are the fruits of originality. Persons of genius are always in a minority but they can flourish only in an atmosphere of freedom. They are by definition more individual than other people, less able to fit into any of the small number of moulds that society provides. In English "a square peg in a round hole."

Originality is the one thing which unoriginal minds cannot see the use of.

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Mill argues that, to open the eyes of the unoriginal, the first thing to do is to refuse to honour custom. To be eccentric, to break the tyranny of opinion. To "dare to be different." The amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained.

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Mill argues: Different nations have had different experience. Some societies which were once at the forefront of science, literature, art, and invention, fell behind, because of their bending the knee to custom. Eg. China. If they are to be improved, it must be by foreigners. A nation stops developing when it ceases to possess individuality. The nations of Europe have been kept from this fate until today, by their diversity of character and culture, striking out on new paths.

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The criticisms of L. Stephen

Mill is emphasizing one aspect of a complex problem. He looks at the decline of that individualism which is incompatible with social development and sees the decline of the "individuality" which is part of social welfare and benefit to society.

With the growth of the industrial market economy in England, the 18th and 19th centuries saw increased specialisation (the division of labour), along with increased cooperation and dependence between different units of society (eg. different businesses).

The division of labour narrows people's lives and interests, thereby threatening democracy which relies on the public taking an interest in the broader questions of politics – the process which gives diversity to society as a whole implies more uniformity in certain respects, in the units (people) which make society up.

What then is the individuality which is unconditionally good?

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The criticisms of L. Stephen (continued)

What leads to the flourishing of the tree of human potential? Is it, being allowed to develop freely, or does it benefit from restrictive shaping giving it a distinct purpose and guarded by renunciation?

Mere eccentricity seems bad insofar as it represents energy wasted, diverted to unimportant matters or impossible causes. Mill's emphasis on eccentricity in conduct seems to parallel his emphasis on contradiction in argument. To balance and correlate

the various activities, to direct energy to activities worthy of it, and to minimise needless antagonism, is as important as giving free play to a variety of activities.

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The criticisms of L. Stephen (continued 2)

Are energetic characters really rarer than of old?

Stephen argues that the importance of the individual in determining the course of history may have been greater in the past.

The action of great men, in all periods, is dependent on their social environment, but personal qualities may count for more in one period than in another. The energy and character of the old warlord who could conquer his weaker neighbours, is more obvious than, but not necessarily greater than, the energy of the democratic politician of today who has to build consensus, shift public opinion and construct political alliances, by more peaceful means.

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The end

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