



THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

John Stuart Mill *On Liberty* (1859)

**Lecture 3:**

**Mill on Individuality and Genius**

presented by William Arthurs  
Khazar University, March 2007

website for these lectures:  
[www.MillOnLiberty.org.uk](http://www.MillOnLiberty.org.uk)



# THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

Slide 2:

## **The need for variety in human action**

Mill argues that it is desirable for society to have diversity and variety in opinions and behaviour.

“Human nature is like a tree that needs to grow and develop on all sides if it is to flourish.”

True tyranny is when individuality is lost.



# THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

Slide 3:

## **The loss of individuality**

Today, Mill asserts, society has conquered the individuality for which England was famous in the past.

Everyone follows the popular tastes, and public opinion rules.

Unusual tastes, interests and conduct are treated almost as if they were crimes.

Human nature is starved.



# THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

Slide 4:

**How can the public be persuaded that liberty of action is a good thing?**

Mill argues that the public have to be convinced that “developed” human beings can be of some use to the “undeveloped”.

The problem is that most people are satisfied with the way things are now.



# THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

Slide 5:

## **The benefits of genius and originality**

Mill argues that the public might possibly learn something from “developed human beings”.

There is always a need for people to discover new ideas and ways of doing things.

Persons of genius can flourish only in an atmosphere of freedom. But they are more individual than other people, less able to fit into society. “A square peg in a round hole.”



# THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

Slide 6:

## **The need for eccentricity**

Mill argues that in order to open the eyes of the unoriginal, the first thing to do is to refuse to honour custom, and to break the tyranny of opinion.

“The amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained.”



# THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

Slide 7:

## **The experience of different cultures and nations**

Some societies (eg China) which were once at the forefront of science, invention and culture, fell behind because they came to respect custom too much.

The nations of Europe have not suffered this fate because they have a diversity of character and culture.



## THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

Slide 8:

**Leslie Stephen's criticisms of Mill (from *The English Utilitarians*, Book III - linked from [MillOnLiberty.org.uk](http://MillOnLiberty.org.uk))**

Mill emphasizes one aspect of a complex problem.

He looks at the decline of the individualism which is incompatible with social/ economic development (market economy, division of labour), but sees only the decline of the individuality which is part of social welfare and a benefit to society.



# THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

Slide 9:

## **Further criticisms of L. Stephen**

What helps the “tree” of human potential flourish? Does it benefit from restrictive shaping and concentration on a distinct purpose?

Mill praises eccentricity in a similar way to contradiction in argument. But eccentricity is bad if it represents energy diverted to unimportant or impossible causes.

It is just as important to balance various human activities and direct energy to activities worthy of it, as it is to have a variety of activities.



# THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

Slide 10:

## **Further criticisms of L. Stephen**

Are energetic characters really rarer now than in the past?

The importance of the individual in determining the course of history may have been greater in the past.

The energy of the warlord one thousand years ago is more obvious than, but not necessarily greater than, the energy of the modern politician.



THE TRANSATLANTIC INSTITUTE, LONDON

**THE END**

Thank you for your attention!