

# Individuality, Conformity and Freedom in Mass Society: A Millian Perspective Revisited

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**Abstract:** J. S. Mill thinks of individuality as the most essential of human interests. Individuality is equivalent to freedom as self-determination – the principal condition of and main ingredient in self-development. Accordingly, non-interference or the absence of external coercion is, for him, a vital prerequisite of the good life: it is a fundamental presupposition of his liberalism that individuals should not be interfered with unless their activities can be shown to injure the interests of others. But Mill’s sociology and his theory of history led him to an awareness of the inadequacy of the ‘negative’ conception of freedom as non-interference for dealing with problems of liberty within the context of the newly emerging mass society. This paper sketches an interpretation of the link between individuality and a ‘positive’ conception of freedom as arising in the course of Mill’s critique of this type of society. To understand this link one needs to consider the contrast, to be found in Mill but not thought out in a very explicit way, between, on the one hand, social coercion and, on the other, oppressive social pressures of a non-coercive kind.

There is a common assumption that Mill was interested only in negative freedom; or that he identified freedom with non-interference, that is, with the absence of external coercion or constraint. This assumption results, I believe, from Mill’s habit of using the word ‘individuality’ to mean freedom in the sense of self-determination.

Negative freedom is, undoubtedly, part of Millian liberty. The words ‘freedom’ or ‘liberty’ in *On Liberty* frequently carry the commonsense meaning derived from the British empiricist tradition associated with Hobbes, Locke and

Bentham. In this use, often regarded as the primary sense of liberty, a person's desires are taken as the given data and what is in question is whether any constraints prevent him from giving effect to them. It is clear that in this context, and in a good many others as well, he thinks of liberty as jeopardized only by external constraints. He is concerned with "the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion."<sup>1</sup> Thus, a person is unfree, is not doing what he desires, when sanctions are being invoked against him, whether these take the form of laws backed by the state or assume the force of moral rules supported by social opinion – "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling," in Mill's words.<sup>2</sup>

However, Mill could not rest content with altogether relying on the negative concept of freedom. The originality of his Essay lies very much in the fact that, without making it quite explicit, he extended the earlier liberal concept of freedom. He wrote the Essay at a time when certain characteristics emerging in nineteenth century society seem to him to thrust the problem of liberty into a wholly new perspective. Earlier liberal theory, he believed, had become partly outmoded because of its failure to take these developments into account. Mill, in much of his social and political work (especially in his essay *On Liberty*), was preoccupied with what appeared to him to be the inexorable advance of social conformity in modern European communities. From his study of de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and from his own observations and reflections, he concluded that modern industrial democracies were rapidly becoming more egalitarian and generating

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<sup>1</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 72. Consider also pp. 73-4, 150.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

pressures hostile to the growth and development of individuality. He became fearful “lest the inevitable growth of social equality and of the government of public opinion, should impose on mankind an oppressive yoke of uniformity in opinion and practice.”<sup>3</sup>

His discernment of a powerful historical trend towards the growth of a mass society with its extreme egalitarianism and stress on social conformity leads Mill to attempt a restatement of the problem of liberty. The “changes progressively taking place in modern society” have led to a situation where “in the stage of progress into which the more civilized portions of the species have now entered, it [the question of social liberty] presents itself under new conditions, and requires a different and more fundamental treatment.”<sup>4</sup> He then goes on (in the Introduction to his Essay) to explain what these new conditions are and why they call for a new approach to the problem of liberty. After sketching the history of the “struggle between liberty and authority,” he points out that the ‘tyranny of the majority’ operating through the acts of democratic governments has come to be generally recognized both in theory and in practice as constituting the most dangerous threat to liberty. But what only a few reflective persons perceive is that the tyranny of the majority is not confined to the acts of governments and that in England especially, a much more serious danger is to be apprehended from the likings and dislikings of society, or the ‘yoke of opinion’. In an eloquent summary of his chief concern in the Essay, Mill writes:

Society can and does execute its own mandates; and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it

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<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography*, pp. 177-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 177; *On Liberty*, p. 65.

ought not to meddle, it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself. Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough; there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them. ... There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence; and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs, as protection against political despotism.<sup>5</sup>

Mill's enunciation, in the Introduction and in his Autobiography of his chief concern in writing the *Liberty*, is confirmed in the body of the essay itself, where we find him devoting Chapter 3 and also a good deal of the following chapter to the problem of individuality and social interference.

It seems correct to say that Mill was more concerned to avert the spread of social uniformity and the tyranny of an uneducated mass society than he was to prevent any political tyranny. He thought that social tyranny was the most pressing problem of freedom. What is more, he also believed that advanced societies were moving out of a period of transition into one of increasing social cohesion and uniformity. Thus, he thought that the teachings of the *Liberty* would be likely to be of even greater relevance in the future.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 178.

The question now facing Mill was whether the traditional, ‘negative’ concept of freedom remained adequate for dealing with the problem of freedom within the context of the new mass society. To some extent it could be adapted to deal with the novel situation, and part of Mill’s treatment of the problem of the tyranny of social opinion reveals just such an adaptation. In his response to the problem of the tyranny of the majority, Mill was in part concerned simply with the external coercion of the individual by society, i.e. with moral rules backed by the sanctions of public opinion. Some but not all of the social tyranny the Liberty was especially designed to combat arose from the oppressive social ethos of the Victorian middle class, whose Philistinism and intolerance were reinforced by the theories and projects of many social and religious reformers. In Mill’s view, a large proportion of the morality of any country emanates from the dominant class. In England this was the middle class, and its views of what is right and wrong tended to be adopted by most other members of society.

Moreover, a major reason why current popular morality was intolerant of purely personal conduct was that it was guided by an underlying view of the nature of morality. This view was essentially illiberal in that it rejected the necessity of giving reasons for moral judgments and found the basis of morality in the moral feelings of the majority.<sup>7</sup> Upheld by “nine-tenths of all moralists and speculative writers,” this view of morality holds that “things are right because they are right; because we feel them to be so.”<sup>8</sup> For people of this persuasion the “practical principle which guides them to their opinions on the regulation of human conduct,

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<sup>7</sup> *On Liberty*, pp. 69-70; 140-141.

<sup>8</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 141.

is the feeling in each person's mind that everybody should be required to act as he, and those with whom he sympathises, would like them to act.”<sup>9</sup>

This appeal to the feelings of the majority on moral matters brings into existence a ‘yoke of opinion’ that has extremely mischievous effects in at least two notable directions. First, in the domain of thought and discussion it induces in many of the most active and inquiring minds an extreme moral timidity. They have a strong inclination to keep their heretical thoughts to themselves and to conceal their true opinions when offering their views to the public. “Our merely social intolerance”, says Mill, “kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men to disguise them, or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion.”<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the tyranny of social opinion is invariably associated with a whole series of active attempts by the majority (or those who represent themselves as speaking on behalf of the majority) to extend the ambit of ‘moral police’. Strenuous efforts are made to enforce the majority moral viewpoint on those who do not share it, by means of legislation designed to protect people for their own good.<sup>11</sup>

A good deal of Mill's discussion of the problem of the social tyranny of the majority is, then, concerned with the need to expose and thereby possibly avert the external or perceived constraints upon personal behaviour, which flowed from the oppressive social ethos of Victorian England. But there is something else as well. R. Friedman has pointed out that Mill's use in the *Liberty* of expressions like ‘social tyranny’ and ‘social oppression’ is ambiguous. Such expressions may refer

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<sup>9</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> *On Liberty*, pp. 143-147.

either to external social coercion or to the unperceived pressures of the prevailing social morality.<sup>12</sup>

I propose now to elaborate on the contrast, to be found in Mill but not brought out in a very explicit way, between, on the one hand, social coercion and, on the other, oppressive social practices of a non-coercive kind. There are a number of contexts in which it is clear that what Mill is concerned with is social coercion, for instance when he says “society can and does execute its own mandates”, “society has expended much effort in the attempt to compel people to conform to its notions of personal and social excellence”, or when he speaks of “the coercion of public opinion.”<sup>13</sup> These dicta recognize social tyranny as a threat to liberty, but they conceive of social coercion on the analogy of physical and legal coercion. Mill is here still operating with the concept of negative freedom, while extending it to include the deliberate interference of public opinion as an additional and hitherto underestimated form of external coercion. Liberty is still essentially the absence of external obstacles to the expression of one’s desires. The point Mill is laying stress on, though, is that a person’s desires may be frustrated as much by the fear of social as of legal threats and deterrents.

But even if a person is free in the negative sense (i.e. is not deterred by threats or sanctions, whatever their source, from doing what he desires) may it not be that, in another sense of freedom he nevertheless remains unfree? For there is a sense of freedom with respect to which attention is focused not on the constraints a person

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<sup>12</sup> R. B. Friedman, “A New Exploration of Mill’s Essay ‘On Liberty,’” *Political Studies*, 1966. In claiming that Mill made no discernable effort to articulate and develop the concept of freedom as self-determination in *Liberty*, Friedman, though correct up to a point, has failed to appreciate that, since individuality and self-determination are equivalent, Mill’s chapter on individuality may be read as in part an attempt to articulate the notion of self-determination.

<sup>13</sup> *On Liberty*, pp. 68, 76, 72.

perceives as obstacles to the realization of his desires, but on the person himself and on the origin of his opinions and desires. It is this sense of freedom – freedom as self-determination – that Mill has in mind when he introduces the idea of ‘individuality’ in Chapter 3 of *On Liberty*. His discussion there indicates that, without being able to make the point explicit, he has become aware that one of his concepts of liberty – the absence of constraints on doing what one desires – gives a partial characterization of liberty. Had Mill meant by liberty simply freedom from interference, the claim that liberty is of intrinsic value could not be sustained. There is no intrinsic value in leaving alone and free from interference a blind man who is about to walk into the path of an oncoming train. We value such negative liberty for the goods it makes possible, or because it secures its possessors from various evils, and not for its own sake. Whilst he never made it fully explicit, the thrust of much of Mill’s thought carries with it the underlying presupposition that ‘negative’ or traditional liberalism requires to be reinforced with a view of what activities are valuable in themselves and worth pursuing for their own sake. Accordingly, in practical contexts, Mill is to be found arguing not simply for the absence of interference as such, or the removal of restraints upon an unspecified range of activity, but for the removal of obstacles to the growth and expression of those positive and specific modes of thinking, feeling and behaving which he associates with the development of personality.

A person may be unimpeded by social or legal constraints and yet, as Mill came to see, be dominated by a more subtle and much more effective form of social tyranny: custom, convention and mass opinion may be operating on him in such a way that he never stops to think where or how he acquired his beliefs or desires and it rarely occurs to him to question them. The majority of men and

women are largely passive in relation to their society; even if they are not coerced by legal or social sanctions, their opinions, tastes and ways of living are largely determined by the prevailing customs, pattern of beliefs and morality of that society. To put it otherwise, most people are largely lacking in individuality. They do not ask about a proposed course of action: “what do I prefer?” or “what would suit my character and disposition?” or “what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive?” They ask, instead: “is it suitable to someone in my position or (worse still) in a position superior to my own?” “I do not mean,” Mill explains, “that they choose what is customary in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination, except for what is customary.” Conformity is the first and only thought of the majority, until through not following their own nature they have none at all to follow “and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own.”<sup>14</sup>

By contrast with the ‘mass man’, the person with individuality, the self-determining man, is he whose opinions and desires represent his own personal bent or the path of life he has chosen for himself. As well as being unobstructed by external constraints, his desires are truly his own; his opinions, impulses and decisions depend on or flow from himself; he is more than just a reflector of the

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<sup>14</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 119. In pp. 116-17 he writes: “He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular powers, are improved only by being used. The faculties are called into no exercise by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing only because others believe it. If the grounds of an opinion are not conclusive to the person’s own reason, his reason cannot be strengthened, but it is likely to be weakened, by his adopting it; and if the inducements to an act are not such as are consentaneous to his own feelings and character (where affection, or the rights of others are not concerned) it is so much done towards rendering his feelings and character inert and torpid, instead of active and energetic.”

dominant customs or conventions of his society. The independent or autonomous person is he who thinks his own thoughts and makes his own decisions over a certain range of his activities. This does not mean that he is not in some measure beholden to traditions and customs. People must be trained in youth to benefit from the results of human experience and the mature adult finds some customs both good and suitable to his character and circumstances. But the free man always has customs and traditions under critical review; he does not conform to custom merely as custom, for he “who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice.”<sup>15</sup> The self-directing man is the person who scrutinizes the standards of society, who is fully aware that there are different and competing opinions and ways of life, and who strives to judge them critically and to act responsibly on the best of his judgments. According to Mill, “he who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 116. Consider also p. 68, 114, 118, 127, 133.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117. In her introduction to *On Liberty*, Elizabeth Rapaport observes: “Mill defines liberty ... as ‘pursuing our own good in our own way.’ Understood in this way, freedom is one of the most important ‘elements in well-being,’ or happiness. Mill believed that only someone who was capable of choosing an independent path and who had the social space in which to exercise that capacity could achieve happiness. Why? Because Mill conceived happiness as human self-development or self-realization. He contrasts the ‘ape-like’ existence of those who unquestionably adopt ready-made beliefs and values with the human existence of those who think for themselves and are prepared to depart from traditional lifestyles.” *On Liberty*, page xviii. In this connection, reference may be made to Samuel Fleischacker’s observation that “no one is happy without the opportunity to use judgment, or at least, no one is happy in a way that allows them freedom, allows them what Mill rightly identified, without properly explaining, as a *human happiness*.” See *A Third Concept of Liberty: Judgment and Freedom in Kant and Adam Smith*, 1999, p. 94.

Mill occasionally observed that lack of necessary conditions for effective self-determination, e.g. when impoverished, involved limitations on one's freedom.<sup>17</sup>

I reiterate that, for Mill, individuality is not mere non-conformity. He is not saying that choice is exercised only in condemning current standards or in continual rebellion against accepted modes of behaviour; it is the act of questioning that, in Mill's view, gives content to the notion of choice.

Sometimes Millian individuality is taken to mean mere unlikeness or difference. I regard this as a gross misinterpretation and propose to clear Mill of the charge of putting forward the unsophisticated view that would be implied by such a definition. One can see how when Mill stresses the need for non-conformity it might be thought he is assuming individuality to be nothing other than unusual or eccentric thought and behaviour. In these circumstances it is perhaps not too surprising that some of Mill's critics have supposed that uniqueness is, for him, the only criterion of individuality. Thus, R. F. Anschutz charges Mill with "the error of assuming that a man is only himself when he succeeds in being different from other men, as if individuality meant peculiarity or idiosyncrasy."<sup>18</sup> Such a view, Anschutz suggests, would require Mill to count the mere eccentric – the thoughtless, bearded and ragged Bohemian, let us say – as more of an individual

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<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., *Principles of Political Economy*, II, 1. However, Mill nowhere elucidated and developed the concept of liberty implied by this kind of observation. It was left to later liberals, such as D.G. Ritchie and L.T. Hobhouse (more cautiously), and to socialists, such as R.H. Tawney and H.J. Laski, to develop and employ the concept in support of state coercive measures aimed at improving conditions and thereby enlarging most people's effective range of choices. For example, an effective national health service, in ensuring the good of health to many who would lack it, being crippled, confined to bed or doomed to early deaths, provides a condition that allows for more effective exercise of freedom, more scope for individuality, and greater opportunities for effective self-development. The same is true with respect to employment, access to education, legal aid and the like.

<sup>18</sup> R. F. Anschutz, *The Philosophy of J. S. Mill*, Oxford, 1953, p. 27.

than most people, since he is so obviously more unusual. And Anschutz goes on to argue that we cannot for the moment believe that the man who spends most of his time struggling to assimilate the traditions of his calling and conforms, out of conviction, to most of the customs of his community, is any less of an individual than someone whose ruling passion is his desire to revolt against custom and tradition. Now, it is certainly true (as Anschutz is at pains to emphasize) that Mill does not speak of the desirability of eccentricity, though with two qualifications Anschutz fails to notice. First, eccentricity, “the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom”, should be encouraged only when the tyranny of mass opinion is exceptionally strong – as Mill believed it was in the England of his day; at other times, when the pressure towards social conformity is not so strong, there is no need to encourage exceptional individuals to behave differently from the mass. Secondly, Mill links the desirability of difference with the desirability of independence of character. He observes that “eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour and moral courage it contained.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Mill is here explicitly connecting uniqueness with mental vigour and strength of character, thus linking it to the notion of freedom as meaning self-determination. He is indicating that where there is mental and moral independence, there will generally be considerable variations in thought and behaviour and that where such variations are absent there is unlikely to be much independence or autonomy. Mill is in effect postulating a

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<sup>19</sup> *On Liberty*, p. 125.

statistically high, but not invariable, correlation between relative difference and the possibility of individuality.<sup>20</sup>

When Mill employs the concept of individuality what he has in mind, then, is a special type of character or mode of living. Or, one may say, what he has in mind is a certain ideal life to which in any society only a limited number of individuals closely approximate. On Mill's view, what we mean when we say of someone that he is an individual (or possesses individuality) is that he is a person who has in some measure developed his capacity for critical judgment and decision and so can properly be regarded as a distinct human being set apart from his fellow members of society. The mass of men and women are obviously individuals in a generic sense: they can be counted separately and they each possess certain special characteristics that enable us to pick them out from their fellows. But they do not qualify as individuals in Mill's sense or (as we might equally well put it) they have a comparatively low degree of individuality.

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<sup>20</sup> Mill argued convincingly even for the freedom to err, the liberty to be wrong. Since self-determination involves recognition of the need for choice between a variety of different opinions or ways of life it also involves the possibility of error. If the quest for absolute certainty is fruitless even in natural philosophy, how much more is it likely to be so in human affairs, and how much more necessary is it therefore that any and every doctrine be allowed the possibility of refutation. This very general theoretical belief concerning the nature of human knowledge is the basis of Mill's doctrine of toleration, which is a vital element in his liberalism. If in the ideological sphere it is especially true that uncertainty reigns, then unless toleration of all doctrines and practices (short of definite injury to others) is allowed, we cannot ever hope to arrive at true opinions, or discover which are the best ways of life. Mill's thesis is that men are fallible and imperfect at present (and will be as far as we can see into the future). We, therefore, cannot be sure that any doctrine is not a source of truth nor any way of living a source of goodness. Hence we must allow men and women free scope to explore diverse views and to try out various "experiments of living." (See *On Liberty*, p. 115) Unless we do this, many at present unforeseeable opinions and forms of human fulfillment will be left untried and we shall never know whether they are true or worthwhile.

Practical political philosophies, or ideologies, contain more or less explicit pictures or conceptions of man. Mill's doctrine of individuality is part of such a picture; it is his view of what men essentially are or are capable of becoming. What Mill regards as most fundamental in the nature of a man is his capacity for choice and (as a corollary) his relative uniqueness. For Mill the most important though not the only characteristic human excellence is man's individuality, or his capacity for self-determination. The notion of individuality does not exhaust Mill's concept of man – the perfectly developed man has other excellences as well; but individuality is the most essential for it is both the principal condition of and most vital ingredient in the fully developed personality.

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