

Mill's Perfectionism

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ABSTRACT: J. S. Mill lays great emphasis on the importance of the notion of the individual as a progressive being. The idea that we need to conceive the self as an object of cultivation and perfection runs through Mill's writings on various topics, and has played a certain role in recent interpretations. In this paper I propose a specific interpretation of Mill's understanding of the self, along the lines of what Stanley Cavell identifies as a "perfectionist" concern for the self. Various texts by Mill, ranging from the *Logic* to *On Liberty*, show an understanding of the self in which both the theoretical and the practical domain are presented as being internally connected to the transformation of the self. Mill elaborates a criticism of a notion of truth articulated by doctrines having a life independent of the self, as well as a notion of choice which is not the expression of one's inner self. This internal relation of truth and choice to the self generates a special dialectic within the self, which Mill explores in *On Liberty*'s second and third chapters by means of several contrasts, such as passive vs. active knowledge, living vs. dead beliefs, or being oneself vs. liking and choosing in crowds.

KEYWORDS: Individuality, liberalism, perfectionism, truth, utilitarianism.

I

There is little doubt that the culture of the self and the idea of human perfectibility marks an important line of thinking in Mill. In his *Autobiography*, he writes that one consequence of his mental crisis in the winter of 1826–27 was that he "gave its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual" (*Autobiography*, in CW I, p. 147).¹ Mill's first reaction to these new ideas, which

¹ All references to Mill's works pertain to the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (hereinafter CW), general editor J. M. Robson, I–XXXIII (Toronto – London: University of Toronto Press – Routledge, 1963–1991).

he linked especially with Romanticism and Saint-Simonism, was one of enthusiasm and eclectic acceptance. In a letter to John Sterling dated October 20, 1831 he writes that his differences with Wordsworth and the philosophical Tories were differences of fact or detail, while his differences with the radicals and the utilitarians were differences of principle. Mill claims that utilitarians see only one side of the question, and “in order to convince them, you must put some entirely new idea into their heads, whereas Wordsworth has all the ideas there already, and you have only to discuss with him concerning the ‘how much’, the more or less of weight which is to be attached to a certain cause or effect [...]” (*Earlier Letters*, in CW XII, p. 81). In this same letter, he even writes that his position is the direct antithesis of liberalism, which neglects what is needed for human happiness (*Earlier Letters*, in CW XII, p. 84). While such positions were given some space in his writings from this period, such as *The Spirit of the Age* (1831), Mill quickly changed his ideas. In a letter to Carlyle from January 1834 he recognizes that he had been overwhelmed by his reaction to the narrowness of his utilitarian teachers, and had thus become “catholic and tolerant in an extreme degree, and thought one-sidedness almost the one great evil in human affairs [...]” (*Earlier Letters*, in CW XII, p. 205). Having overcome this extreme reaction, he was now in a position to assess the advantages of the utilitarian as well as the Romantic and the German-Coleridgian schools. By 1833 Mill’s writings already showed the emergence of this new perspective. The anonymous *Remarks on Bentham’s Philosophy* (1833) proposed to defend a reformed version of utilitarianism in which the depths of individual character were taken into consideration. These same topics are given a fuller, more mature treatment in the essay *Bentham*, published in 1838.

One might well read the entire corpus of the Mill’s writings from the 1830s as a phase in which he was working out the main axes of his thought in those areas where he later made his greatest contributions, such as logic, political economy, government and religion. Mill gives a clear statement of this new perspective in his *Autobiography*, where he writes the following:

The acquaintance I had formed with the ideas of the Coleridgians, of the German thinkers, and of Carlyle, all of them fiercely opposed to the mode of thought in which I had been brought up, had convinced me that along with much error they possessed much truth, which was veiled from minds otherwise capable of receiving it by the transcendental and mystical phraseology in which they were accustomed to shut it up and from which they neither cared, nor knew how, to disengage it; and I did not despair of separating the truth from the error and expressing it in terms which would be intelligible and not repulsive to those on my own side in philosophy. (*Autobiography*, in CW I, p. 253)

Mill writes that he had come to conceive of his goal as giving a new philosophical expression to ideas which were prominent in the Romantic school, yet conspicuously absent in the empiricist and utilitarian tradition. These ideas revolved around the importance of character and the education of the self. So we might wish to read Mill's entire corpus of writings in this light, as the re-elaboration of an empiricist and utilitarian perspective that would enable the articulation of a Romantic notion of the self.

Reading this sort of philosophical goal into Mill's project is a fairly recent feature of Mill scholarship. More traditional readings preferred to emphasize the incompatibility of the diverse philosophical trends that find expression in Mill's writings. In his classic work *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*,² Anschutz presented Mill as an author torn between the naturalist line, which was inductivist and associationist in its logic and utilitarian in its ethics, and an anti-naturalist strand, one whose logic was deductivist and essentialist and whose ethics was liberal. Newer readings – those from the 1970s such as Alan Ryan's,³ as well as more recent ones like John Skorupski's⁴ – have tried to offer a different picture, although they, too, stress certain moments of tension in Mill's work.

This revision of Mill's thought has also worked to deepen our understanding of the variety of intellectual themes in his work. For example, for many decades readers focused on Mill's use of the liberal and utilitarian perspective in ethics. Recently, however, new ideas have come to the fore, one of them being the importance of the dimension of the self and its perfectibility. This appears to be a distinctive point of view that is independent of both the utilitarian notion of value and the liberal conception of autonomy. The emphasis given to perfectionist themes has also resulted from an interest in placing Mill's work within European Romanticism,⁵ as well as a concern for the important role that Plato and classical Greek culture played for Mill⁶ – for both of these lines seem to underscore the importance of the self, of virtue and perfectibility.

² R. P. Anschutz, *The Philosophy of J. S. Mill* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953, 2nd ed. 1963).

³ A. Ryan, *J. S. Mill* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

⁴ J. Skorupski, *John Stuart Mill* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁵ N. Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); R. Devigne, *Reforming Liberalism: J. S. Mill's Use of Ancient, Religious, and Romantic Moralities* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2006). See also R. J. Halliday, *John Stuart Mill* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976).

⁶ T. H. Irwin, "Mill and the Classical World", in J. Skorupski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 423–463; N. Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002).

II

There are various questions that arise once we recognize the role played by the culture of the self in Mill's thought. I wish to mention two of these here. One concerns the specific interpretation of this notion of the self and its perfectibility; the other concerns the traditional problem of how this line of thinking combines with others, such as utilitarian or liberal thought, which are obviously prominent as well. I would like to address both questions, and will attempt to do so with reference to *On Liberty*.

Mill writes that the notion of liberty discussed in this book is "civil, or social liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual" (*On Liberty*, in CW XVIII, p. 217). The book is not primarily devoted to the political question of liberty, that is, to what forms of government are required in order to guarantee the right to liberty, but rather to a certain larger problem. As Mill wrote in a letter to Theodor Gomperz from 1858, the book's subject is "moral, social, and intellectual liberty, asserted against the despotism of society whether exercised by governments or by public opinion" (*Later Letters*, in CW XV, p. 581). As he shows in the first chapter, Mill assumes that there has been a gradual achievement of personal liberties, extending from the first immunities limiting the power of the sovereign to constitutional checks and, from there, to the (contractarian and utilitarian) concept of government's identification with the interests of people. Once the process of civilization has reached this point, it becomes clear that "the 'people' who exercise the power are not always the same people as those over whom it is exercised; and the 'self-government' spoken of is not the government of each over himself, but of each by all the rest" (*On Liberty*, in CW XVIII, p. 219).

At this point, the possibility emerges that the same majority of people which embodies government may endanger personal liberty. This is Alexis de Tocqueville's problem of the tyranny of the majority. Mill had devoted two lengthy discussions to Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* in 1835 and 1840. He remarked how the fears expressed by Tocqueville regarding democracy were "not of too great liberty, but of too ready submission; not of anarchy, but of servility; not of too rapid change, but of Chinese stationariness" (*De Tocqueville on Democracy*, in CW XVIII, p. 188). These same conclusions are restated in another essay written in 1836, *Civilization*. Having shown the great merits of a democratic society (which include, among other things, the growth of a spirit of cooperation and greater civil customs, along with an "increase of humanity, a decline of bigotry, as well as of arrogance of caste"), Mill identifies its great danger in "a relaxation of individual energy: or rather, the concentration of it within the narrow sphere of the individual's money-getting pursuits"

(*Civilization*, in CW XVIII, pp. 125, 129). These are all themes which Mill discovered at the time he was writing *The Spirit of the Age*, and which he treated from the 1830s onwards, with the aim of showing the merits of those processes of modern civilization connected with a market economy and democracy, as well as their dangers, which he perceives in a loss of individual qualities.

However, in his writings from the 1830s Mill dealt with such questions in a manner which he later found unsatisfying. He suggested in these writings that the regeneration of individual character against the degeneration of public opinion could be achieved by forming a class of cultivated people who would be able to impose their opinion on the many (*Civilization*, in CW XVIII, p. 134). He relied on a notion of individual perfectibility which permitted delegating to a few people the task of formulating ideals and convictions for all the rest – a notion which, on the social level, could assume an authoritarian form, as it had done among both Romantic conservative writers like Coleridge, who invoked the formation of a special clerisy, and the Saint-Simonian authors, who advocated the guiding role of a class of industrialists and scientists.

I would suggest that the problem which Mill treats in *On Liberty*, namely, the nature and limits of the power which society can legitimately exercise over the individual, should be read as a later and more mature response to the same sorts of questions that he had been tackling in his writings of the 1830s. Mill's answer to this problem returns to his idea of the importance of personal qualities and their perfectibility. The perfectionist themes which emerged during those earlier years are used in *On Liberty* as part of his response to this problem.

As is well known, Mill's answer to the problem is the principle of liberty, concerning which he states the following:

[T]he only part of the conduct of anyone for which he is amenable to society is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. (*On Liberty*, in CW XVIII, p. 224)

It should be noted, in the first place, that the principle of liberty stands very much apart from the sort of underestimation of personal liberty that pervades Mill's writings from the 1830s like *The Spirit of the Age*, and is more akin to the appeal to the individual's sovereignty over his personal interests found in Bentham and the utilitarian tradition. The further step taken in *On Liberty* is to show that the same conception of human nature that inspired Mill's writings from the 1830s is consistent with the utilitarian perspective and can serve to justify the principle of liberty. As Mill writes in *On Liberty*:

It is proper to state that I forego any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right as a thing independent of utility. I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being. (*On Liberty*, in *CW XVIII*, p. 224)

I propose to distinguish three levels operating in *On Liberty*, in which the Romantic themes of personal perfectibility, re-appropriated in a utilitarian framework, serve to defend the principle of liberty. We find in *On Liberty* a statement of the liberal doctrine of the individual's sovereignty in his own personal sphere, which comprises the individual's right to lead his personal life in freedom and in favorable circumstances. There is also a second level where Mill offers a justification of this principle, one which reveals his perfectionist point of view. On the third level, Mill shows how this perfectionist point of view may be read as a version of the utilitarian theory.

Mill's arguments in *On Liberty* may thus be summarized as follows. He holds that in order to achieve a society with a high standard of happiness – according to the utilitarian maxim of “the greatest happiness of the largest number” – conditions in which individuals may perfect themselves are to be promoted. A cultivated person will enjoy a kind of pleasure (wherein happiness consists) whose value is higher than that enjoyed by someone who has not cultivated his faculties. As suggested, the value of individual perfection derives from a theory of human nature which Mill had already developed in the 1830s. In the 1850s he returned to these themes, especially to the argument according to which individual perfection corresponds to a higher kind of happiness, and developed a utilitarian interpretation of the perfectionist doctrine. This is found, among other places, in the second chapter of *Utilitarianism*, where Mill shows how a hedonist utilitarianism can account for the sort of value appreciated only by individuals who have educated themselves in the entire range of human faculties. The novel argument found in *On Liberty* is as follows: in order to promote this sort of happiness, which is based on the notion of individuals as progressive beings, one needs to promote liberty, as defined by the principle of liberty.

Before turning to Mill's argument in *On Liberty*, I wish to consider briefly how he links his perfectionism to the utilitarian doctrine.⁷ In his *Utilitarianism*, the foundation of ethical theory is happiness, as traditionally held by utilitarianism; but here Mill introduces a new notion of happiness. Only a narrow conception, such as that criticized by Mill's writings from the 1830s, could view happiness as a simple entity independent of in-

⁷ I wish to thank the anonymous referee for suggesting that this topic be mentioned.

ner circumstances, that is, of individual character, as well as of the broader historical and cultural circumstances that influence individual personality. In his essay *Bentham*, Mill criticized his predecessor precisely on this point, arguing that individual character produces in each person a specific perspective:

Every circumstance which gives a character to the life of a human being, carries with it its peculiar biases; its peculiar facilities for perceiving some things, and for missing or forgetting others. But, from points of view different from his, different things are perceptible; and none are more likely to have seen what he does not see, than those who do not see what he sees. (*Bentham*, in *CW X*, pp. 90–91)

Accordingly, Mill argues that the intrinsic particularity of each point of view should be dealt with by enlarging the mind, and especially the imagination, through historical and poetical culture.

In *Utilitarianism* this idea is reworked into the notion of “competent judges”. As desires are satisfied or frustrated in ways that depend on individual character, the judgment of a certain activity – or, as Mill writes, of a whole “manner of existence”, of entire styles of living (*On Liberty*, in *CW X*, p. 211) – must be rooted in an individual point of view. Therefore, competent judges are those who are able to express this sort of qualified judgment by imaginatively assuming various and diverse inner circumstances. Judgment is not expressed from a neutral point of view; rather, it is internal to the perspective that calls it forth. Only someone who has experienced a certain activity – the reading of novels, for instance, as a central activity in one’s life – can judge the sort of enjoyment and happiness to be derived therefrom. In this same vein, Mill writes in *Bentham* that only someone who has personally experienced dramatic situations in life can truly weigh their significance (*Bentham*, in *CW X*, p. 92). There is no such thing as happiness or unhappiness independent of either the activity in which they occur or the manner of existence which they express. Therefore, Mill offers a radical criticism of a certain utilitarian model which requires only the capacity to calculate consequences. He appeals instead to the capacity to understand, to enter imaginatively into the inner circumstances of diverse lives so that one can determine what one feels and sees from that point of view. Comparing and calculating happiness and unhappiness are to be carried out from this perspective. It is clear that Mill’s model does not require the ability to sum up homogeneous quantities from some external point of view (if this really was Bentham’s idea), but rather the weighing of experience from a personal point of view.

Mill’s argument is empiricist, and assumes the following form. Someone who has experienced certain activities and manners of existence will

privilege certain pleasures, certain dimensions of value according to which one may perfect oneself. In this sense, Mill is an empiricist (although he would not have used the term himself), for he holds that moral reflection learns from experience. However, experience presupposes a cultivation of the self according to specific dimensions of value. Mill assumes that people who can deliver qualified judgment are those who have perfected themselves morally, intellectually, and in their aesthetic and sympathetic sentiments. He clearly defends this idea in discussing the “powerful natural sentiment” at the basis of utilitarian morality, that is, the “desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures” (*Utilitarianism*, in CW X, p. 231). This sentiment, Mill writes, is at the foundation of all moral sentiments; yet in most individuals it is “much inferior in strength to their selfish feelings, and is often wanting altogether”. However, Mill adds the following:

[T]o those who have it, it possesses all the characters of a natural feeling. It does not present itself to their minds as a superstition of education, or a law despotically imposed by power of society, but as an attribute which it would not be well for them to be without. (*Utilitarianism*, in CW X, p. 233)

Accordingly, one does not seek to defend the moral point of view against anyone, particularly not against the most insensitive and selfish of persons. On the contrary, one assumes the existence of individuals who have already attained to the moral life. It is to these people that the empiricist test is addressed. Mill claims that the desire to be in unity with their fellow creatures is deeply rooted in them; that is, it is associated with pleasant sentiments in a way which resists the dissolving force of reflection carried out from a point of view external to morality. On the one hand, therefore, we assume dimensions of value according to which individuals perfect themselves; on the other, however, these dimensions are worked out in individual experience, where they are confirmed or challenged. Experience is always qualified, and yet it has its own role. Experience produces different results with a change of circumstances, i.e. the sentimental associations by which one perceives new forms of good and evil, justice and injustice. This is the picture of moral progress elaborated by Mill at the end of *Utilitarianism*, where he writes the following words:

The entire history of social improvement has been a series of transitions by which one custom or institution after another, from being a supposed primary necessity of social existence, has passed into the rank of an universally stigmatized injustice and tyranny. So it has been with the distinctions of slaves and freemen, nobles and serfs, patricians and plebeians; and so it will be, and in part already is, with the aristocracies of colour, race, and sex. (*Utilitarianism*, in CW X, p. 259)

III

I will now turn to Mill's justification of the principle of liberty. Here we can see how the three levels are interconnected, and also examine how Mill develops his distinctive interpretation of perfectionism.

Mill treats liberty of expression in the second chapter of *On Liberty*, and liberty of conduct in the third. At the end of the second chapter, Mill makes this interesting statement: "We have now recognized the necessity to the mental well-being of mankind (on which all their other well-being depends) of freedom of opinion, and freedom of the expression of opinion [...]" (*On Liberty*, in CW XVIII, pp. 257–258). Of course this is no surprise, as Mill's goal is precisely to justify the principle of liberty in terms of his distinctive utilitarian theory. Rather, what is really noticeable in this chapter is that Mill justifies liberty of expression on the grounds that it favors truth. If one values truth, the truths of scientific, moral and religious doctrines, then complete freedom of expression of ideas and opinions is also needed. The key concept in this chapter is, therefore, not that of utility or individual perfection, but that of truth. Let us examine how this works.

One might think that Mill is simply pursuing a tactical strategy here, one which involves defending liberty based on a concept that his audience already accepts, that is, the existence of truths and, most especially, the truths of the Christian doctrine.⁸ While one should not entirely underestimate the tactical element in Mill's writing, it must be recognized that the notion of truth is central to Mill's project, quite independent of tactical considerations. Indeed, we know that Mill conceives of happiness as the development and improvement of higher qualities, among them truth. This clearly emerges from his discussion of the necessity of error for truth.

The second chapter is divided into three parts. In the first, Mill supposes that an opinion compelled to silence is, as far as we can tell, true; in the second, that this opinion is false; and in the third, that it is partly true and partly false. I am interested here in the second part. He claims that even if we have every reason to believe that an opinion is false, it is essential for truth's sake that it be expressed and defended. Error is fundamental to truth because it allows true opinions to be defended against false ones and thus renewed in our intellect and sentiments so that they do not become dead dogma to us.

Mill is not interested here in a notion of truth which is simply the property of some proposition, but rather in the modality whereby someone

⁸ G. Kateb, "A Reading of *On Liberty*", in J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, eds. D. Bromwich & G. Kateb (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 42.

holds a truth.⁹ The notion of truth is, therefore, related to the personal, inner experience of holding a truth in one's mind. Mill makes two points here. First, he argues that lack of knowledge of the grounds of a truth, and thus the inability to place it in the proper context of reasons that can defend and support it, transforms it into a mere superstition. His second point, however, is that a lack of discussion not only deprives truth of its proper grounds, but often empties it of meaning: "Instead of a vivid conception and a living belief, there remain only a few phrases retained by rote; or, if any part, the shell and husk only of the meaning is retained, the finer essence being lost" (*On Liberty*, in CW XVIII, p. 247). Mill discusses all sorts of truths here, scientific as well as moral, yet he refers especially to the latter. One central example of the problem he is diagnosing is Christian doctrine, whose vital force had, by Mill's time, been entirely lost, leaving behind formulas devoid of any meaning:

[T]he creed remains as it were outside the mind, incrusting and petrifying it against all other influences addressed to the higher parts of our nature; manifesting its power by not suffering any fresh and living conviction to get in, but itself doing nothing for the mind or heart except standing sentinel over them to keep them vacant. (*On Liberty*, in CW XVIII, p. 248)

Mill makes his point here using nearly the same words as in his writings from the 1830s like *On Genius* (1832) and *Civilization*, and a similar thesis is also found in the *Logic* (see Book 4, Chapter 4). This view, which connects the truth of a doctrine to personal improvement, is one which I regard as characteristic of Mill's notion of perfectionism.

Let us now return for a moment to *On Genius*. In this essay, Mill is interested in showing what genius is, locating it in the active mind's capacity to discover truths by itself. A person of genius is one who discovers truths on his own. "There may be no hidden truths left for him to find," writes Mill, adding, however, that in another sense many truths discovered earlier may be "hidden to *him* as those which are still unknown" (*On Genius*, in CW I, p. 332). If knowledge comes from within, from an active mind capable of entering into the spirit of a truth and making it his own, there can be no knowledge which is not the expression of a higher state of mind. All knowledge decays into a state of apparent truth, of mere formula, if it is not directed towards elevating the mind (*On Genius*, in CW I, p. 337). As in *On Liberty*, Mill's central example here is Christianity. Mill draws up a speculative history of epochs and, while finding a true capacity for knowledge in the great moments of the Greek mind, he registers a decay taking place afterwards: "The attempt to think for oneself fell into disuse."

⁹ C. L. Ten, *Mill on Liberty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 127.

It was in this spirit, says Mill, that the teachings of Christ were adopted, and “the effect was fatal”.

The words of him whose speech was in figures and parables were iron-bound and petrified into inanimate and inflexible *formulae*. Jesus was likened to a logician, framing a rule to meet all cases, and provide against all possible evasions, instead of a poet, orator, and *vates*, whose object was to purify and spiritualize the mind, so that, under the guidance of its purity, its own lights might suffice to find the law of which he only supplied the spirit, and suggested the general scope. (*On Genius*, in *CW I*, p. 337)

What interests me is Mill's understanding of these two states of the mind: the difference between “the man who knows from the man who takes upon trust – the man who can feel and understand truth, from the man who merely assents to it, the active from the passive mind” (*On Genius*, in *CW I*, p. 334). Mill distinguishes the apparent understanding of a truth from its real understanding; there is a difference between truths which remain traditional, truths “which we have *only* been taught and learnt, but have *not* been *known*”, and truths which one has really made one's own (*On Genius*, in *CW I*, p. 335).¹⁰

In *On Liberty* Mill returns to the argument set forth in *On Genius*, explaining in more detail what was already suggested there, namely, that the mind can be in a state of apparent knowledge, in which “a dull and torpid assent” is given to a truth, but there is no real entry of that truth into our imagination, feelings and understanding (*On Liberty*, in *CW XVIII*, p. 248). What happens, Mill says, is that we retain a few words, but the meaning is lost.

Mill examines the way in which words become connected to our life in its present unsatisfactory state, in contrast to the point of view of a higher state of mind. He wants us to see what a truth looks like when its meaning has been regained from the mere illusion of such meaning. He asks us to consider what it means to understand a truth, rather than to merely retain the shell and husk of its meaning. With regard to proverbs, he says that “most people first truly learn [their] meaning when experience, generally of a painful kind, has made it a reality to them”, adding that “the full meaning *cannot* be realized until personal experience has brought it home” (*On Liberty*, in *CW XVIII*, p. 250). There is a contrast here between the self that has learned from experience what words mean, and the mere shell of meaning that impresses itself upon a mind with no

¹⁰ For a reading of this issue connected with my argument, see R. H. Haraldsson, “This all but universal illusion...’. Remarks on the Question: Why Did Mill Write *On Liberty*?”, *Sats – Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 5, 2004, pp. 83–109.

experience. Proverbs can be striking in their ability to show us the sense in which their words are to be taken, a sense which destroys the previous illusion of their having meant anything at all, and which is connected to our experience and gives it expression.

In this way, Mill arrives at a tension between the fact that progress is measured, as he writes, by the “number and the gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested” (*On Liberty*, in CW XVIII, p. 250) and the realization that consolidation of an opinion contributes to a loss of its internal life, marking the first step towards passive acceptance. While Mill is interested in defending the idea of the progress of knowledge, he also emphasizes that there can be no progress which is not also manifested as the progress of the individual mind.¹¹ Thus all truths should be known as if they were being rescued from decay and corruption, as if for the first time, as the opening of new possibilities. (Mill had also expressed this view in the *Logic*, writing that “there is a perpetual oscillation in spiritual truths, and in spiritual doctrines of any significance, even when not truths. Their meaning is almost always in a process either of being lost or of being recovered” (*System of Logic*, in CW VIII, p. 682). Spiritual truths, which Mill defines a few lines earlier as “those subjects which are at the same time familiar and complicated, and especially [...] those which are so in as great a degree as moral and social subjects are”, are always in the process of being lost, since they fall prey to an everyday use that retains only those meanings connected to habitual experience and omits whatever associations lie outside the familiar. The capacity of words to awaken the mind requires, therefore, an understanding of neglected meanings, an understanding as if for the first time.)

IV

In the third chapter of *On Liberty*, Mill offers a similar interpretation of freedom of conduct. While in Chapter 2 Mill defends freedom of expression by virtue of its internal connection to the concept of truth, in this chapter he defends freedom of conduct, to the extent that it does not harm others, by virtue of its internal connection to the concept of individuality.

Freedom of conduct is justified as a necessary condition for the flourishing of individuality. The “free development of individuality,” writes Mill, “is one of the leading essentials of well-being”:

¹¹ C. L. Ten, *Mill on Liberty*, p. 128, distinguishes “knowing truth” from “having true opinions” in order to connect the value of truth in Mill’s thought to the progress of the individual mind. The tension here is also linked to the internal tension in Mill’s text between a positivist and a perfectionist understanding of truth.

Where not the person's own character but the traditions or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress. (*On Liberty*, in CW XVIII, p. 262)

Thus freedom of conduct is justified insofar as it promotes individuality, which is as much an essential ingredient of happiness as truth is. Once again Mill advances a perfectionist interpretation of the utilitarian doctrine. Happiness in its highest degree is an expression of the achievement of individuality, and freedom of conduct serves this end:

The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference are exercised only in making a choice. 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. (*On Liberty*, in CW XVIII, p. 262)

Since truth requires a personal transformation, and is lost in mere passive assent to received doctrines, Mill argues here that we are really ourselves only if we achieve individuality against the force of habit and custom. We must be able to become, as he says, "more individual than any other" and discover our own desires:

Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves, what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition? [...] They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? [...] It does not occur to them to have any inclination except for what is customary. [...] [T]hey like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done; peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct are shunned equally with crimes, until by dint of not following their own nature they have no nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starved; they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own. (*On Liberty*, in CW XVIII, p. 265)

Mill claims that people do not realize that they have lost their capacity for desire, pleasure, choice, and their own life. In Chapter 2, Mill wished to show that truths habitually held are not really truths in people's minds, but rather only the shell and husk of a lost essence. His goal, therefore, was to awaken people's sense of truth and their understanding, and to make them realize their capacity for truth. In Chapter 3, Mill wants to awaken the possibility that we have *desires*,¹² that we have pleasures of our own to pursue. Promoting people's happiness becomes, for Mill, a

¹² This is how Cavell puts it in *Cities of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 97.

matter of awakening society to its right to happiness, instead of following that which merely appears to be what people desire.

Thus we find in this chapter a movement analogous to the one noted in the second chapter, whereby Mill wishes to show that having desires is not to be taken for granted; rather, it requires a personal transformation. The possibility of having desires is the expression of an achieved individuality. There is thus a dialectic here between our desire and our own self. Our desire is the expression of a cultivated self that is always intrinsically more advanced, as it results from a constant struggle not to succumb to habitual choice. Knowing truth stands in a similar condition, for it is the expression of a higher self that is always further developed, having resulted from the struggle not to fall prey to the withering force of habit.

V

I shall now conclude with a few suggestions. I have spoken of a perfectionist line of thought in Mill, one which is made explicit in *On Liberty*, for example. However, the notion of perfectionism suggests many varied philosophical treatments. In one important strand of contemporary ethical and political theory, perfectionism refers to an ideal of excellence which is to be pursued at the expense of other values, if necessary; one such example is John Rawls's position in *A Theory of Justice* (§ 50).¹³ Although I cannot enter into this difficult topic here, it is possible to see how Mill proposes a notion of perfectionism that stands apart from such positions. Mill's notion of excellence of character is connected with the sort of dialectic that we have observed in Chapters 2 and 3 of *On Liberty*. One's ideal of perfection, wherefrom one judges the insufficiency of a present state, does not operate from the outside, as it were, but rather works inside the self, as the realization that one's sentiments, beliefs and life are, in fact, lifeless and empty. This sort of realization, this awakening, comes from within the self. Thus Mill presents perfection, to which he certainly assigns different contents (the education of the feelings, whether moral, aesthetic, sympathetic, or intellectual), as an ideal which must be awakened in individuals. An ideal of excellence imposed upon someone would be the negation of perfectionism as Mill understands it.

It might be said that this involves connecting the ideal of perfection to the transformation of the self; and Mill does, in effect, propose this. There can be no truth or choice if these are not linked to a transformation of the self. Knowing the truth requires such a transformation, namely,

¹³ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971). In this regard, see T. Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

developing an active mind that fights its own tendency towards passivity. Likewise, action requires individuality, that is, a transformation of the self from one that feels and chooses in crowds to one that makes an authentic choice from within.

This idea of linking perfection and the transformation of the self marks a distinctive model of perfectionism that has been clearly voiced in the writings of Stanley Cavell.¹⁴ It is not easy to identify all the different uses Cavell makes of this notion, nor the various authors he reads in this regard. Certainly he goes back to a certain tradition of American philosophy, most particularly that of Emerson, which was, one might say, interested in defending both democracy and the individual.¹⁵ Mill also seems to participate in this line of thought. He defends a liberal and democratic society, but conceives of such a society as one in which people driven by a constant urge to find and realize themselves would wish to live. Thus perfectionism works as a force defending and transforming both utilitarianism and liberalism. Utilitarianism is defended as a doctrine that locates value in a person's pleasures and desires, yet is transformed by the perfectionist perception that desire can be falsified, becoming merely what others think we should desire. Liberalism is likewise defended as a doctrine that asserts the freedom to form one's opinion on life and to live in accordance with it, but is transformed by a perfectionist attention to the ways in which liberalism may allow individuality to weather the influence of crowds.¹⁶

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¹⁴ S. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press, 1990); *Cities of Words*.

¹⁵ See S. Laugier, *Une autre pensée politique américaine: La démocratie radicale d'Emerson à Stanley Cavell* (Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2004).

¹⁶ I have also discussed the topics featured in this paper in "Bringing Truth Home: Mill, Wittgenstein, Cavell and Moral Perfectionism", in A. Norris (ed.), *The Claim to Community. Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 38-57; and in *Introduzione a Mill* (Roma – Bari: Laterza, 2006).

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