

Human Fallibilism and Individual Self-Development in John Stuart Mill's Theory of Liberty

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ABSTRACT

J. S. Mill regards individuality as the most fundamental of human interests – the principal condition of and main ingredient in self-development. But in addition to the individualist-functionalist element in Mill's thought there is also a strong element of fallibilism derived from an empiricist view of the nature and possibilities of human knowledge. A corollary of Mill's fallibilism is his conception of human nature as essentially open and incomplete. His doctrine of individuality and self-development, on the other hand, implies that the individual is definable by certain necessary and permanent characteristics. Following a discussion of the empiricist and fallibilist strain in Mill's liberalism, the present paper offers an interpretation of Mill's view that reconciles these two seemingly discordant elements in his understanding of man.

KEYWORDS

Individuality, self-determination, self-development, fallibilism, liberalism

I. Introduction

J. S. Mill thinks of individuality as the most essential of human interests. Individuality is equivalent to freedom as meaning self-determination – the principal condition of and main ingredient in self-development. Accordingly, non-interference 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 in addition to the individualist-functionalist strain in Mill's thought there is also a strong strain of skepticism and this is a fundamental component of his liberalism. As well as presupposing a particular view of the nature of man, Mill's liberalism also rests on an empiricist view of the nature and possibilities of human knowledge. From this point of view, fallibilism is seen to be one basis of his belief in toleration. A corollary of Mill's

fallibilism is his conception of human nature as essentially open and incomplete. His doctrine of individuality and self-development, on the other hand, appears to imply that the individual is definable by certain necessary and permanent characteristics. Following a discussion of the empiricist and fallibilist strain in Mill's liberalism, this paper offers an interpretation of Mill's view that reconciles these two seemingly discordant elements in his understanding of man.

II. *Liberalism and Fallibilism*

Mill's philosophy has its roots in the tradition of British empiricism stemming from Francis Bacon and John Locke – he believed that all human knowledge is derived ultimately from sensory experiences, and his intellectual project may be described as an attempt to construct a system of empirical knowledge that could underpin not just science but also moral and social affairs.¹ Moreover, it is always possible in principle for new observations to upset old conclusions, or to overturn long-established theories. Human knowledge is always fallible and always incomplete; hence we can never claim certainty for any theory or doctrine, but we may hold most firmly to those hypotheses that have been given the most opportunity of being questioned. “The beliefs which we have most warrant for,” says Mill, “have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded.”² 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. As Mill points out, when we turn to “morals, religion, politics, social relations, and the business of life, three-fourths of the arguments for every disputed opinion consist in dispelling the appearances which favour some opinion different from it.”³

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

¹ The bulk of Mill's theory on the foundation of human knowledge is contained in his *System of Logic*, published in six volumes in 1843.

² *On Liberty*, 1859. Edited by Currin V. Shields. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1956. 26.

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

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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. So Mill writes:

“That mankind are not infallible; that their truths, for the most part, are only half-truths; that unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good, until mankind are much more capable than at present of recognizing all sides of the truth, are principles applicable to men’s modes of action, not less than their opinions. As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them.”⁴

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 discuss diverse views and to try out various “experiments of living.” 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.⁵

Mill’s doctrine of the fallibility of human knowledge also carries with it an assumption concerning the nature of man: it is assumed that human nature is essentially indeterminate and incomplete. Since man himself has the continuous capacity for free choice and experiment his nature is, in principle, left open for development in many different and unpredictable directions. Since openness is an essential part of Mill’s concept of the individual it further follows that opacity is also to be regarded as part of man’s nature. Our knowledge of everything,

⁴ Ibid., 68.

⁵ According to Mill, free expression of opinion must always lead to the greatest quantity of good in the long run. But such a view appears to rest on implausible empirical assumptions about the utility of truth and its inevitable triumph over falsehood. If we set aside any such empirical claims, Mill’s position leads unavoidably to the invocation of non-utilitarian moral considerations about the importance of individual expression.

including persons, is necessarily incomplete. There will always be something unfathomable or impenetrable about every individual. Or, putting the same point another way, one may take Mill to be saying that no individual is ever completely definable, so that the concept of man carries with it what might be called the notion of partial indefinability. This way of looking at men and women provides Mill with a powerful argument for toleration; if we know we can never fully understand other people we do well to suspend judgment, to adopt a ‘wait and see attitude’. Such a stance is implacably opposed to that of the fanatical moralist who, convinced that on the subject of human nature he has all the answers, is only too ready to impose his ‘solutions’ on other people.

From his various remarks on toleration it is clear Mill meant his renowned infallibility argument, deployed most effectively in his discussion on freedom of speech, to apply to actions as well as to opinions.⁶ As he grants when dealing with liberty of action, the state must act and act frequently e.g. to protect individual rights, and when it does so it necessarily has to act on the basis of knowledge which is far less than certain. With respect to freedom of speech, in particular, he at first takes the line that the suppression of any opinion whatsoever involves an assumption of infallibility. In seeking to qualify this position he concedes that opinions may sometimes incite people to commit harmful acts, which is the duty of the state to prevent. There may be a clear danger that the airing of an opinion will bring about some positive evil before there is time for the opinion to be put to the test in the forum of free and open discussion. Even though in such circumstances the state should be reasonably sure that there is a ‘clear and present danger’, once it has satisfied itself on this score it must intervene in order to protect those rights which it is one of its primary purposes to maintain.

Whilst the infallibility argument may have to be qualified in particular contexts, it nevertheless remains an essential element in Mill’s liberalism. It is such because it establishes an initial presumption in favour of toleration: if the state wishes to interfere with opinions and actions it must be reasonably confident (i) that the activities it wishes to prevent are harmful and (ii) that the measures it proposes are the best means of preventing them. Unless it can claim reasonable assurance for its detailed moral and political judgments, the state is not entitled to intervene. The infallibility argument is seen at its strongest when

⁶ The infallibility argument that intolerance involves an unwarranted claim to infallible knowledge, and hence may deprive people of access to true knowledge, is undoubtedly Mill’s most important argument for freedom of expression and action.

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employed against legislation aimed at enforcing morality. Mill deploys some particularly telling arguments designed to show how, in a number of different areas, the state cannot have enough rational assurance to be justified in protecting us for our own good. More might be said concerning the force of the infallibility argument in particular contexts. To follow up this question would, however, distract me from my task of trying to bring out the manner in which Mill's skeptical attitude functions as one of the basic elements of his liberalism. My purpose in the remainder of this paper is confined to exploration of the way in which the fallibilist strain in Mill's thinking is related to his doctrines of individuality and self-development.

The first point requiring emphasis is that fallibilism cannot, taken by itself, be a sufficient foundation for Mill's brand of liberalism. This is so because fallibilist liberalism is avowedly committed to the defence of one kind of freedom, viz. 'negative' freedom. To say this is not to deny that Mill was himself rather muddled on this particular question. There are times when he evidently imagines himself to be defending a purely negative doctrine of freedom. He is then led into the impossible attempt to draw a line between permissible and impermissible social controls by distinguishing between those actions which concern only the individual himself and those which concern others. On the other hand, the more 'positive' side of his liberalism adds up to an extended and elaborate admission that skepticism on the issues of truth and moral goodness does not by itself constitute a sufficient foundation for liberalism. 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.

Even though he remained somewhat muddled about the true connection between the 'negative' and 'positive' aspects of liberty, Mill was shrewd enough to sense that negative freedom is an insufficient basis for liberalism. The same cannot be said of certain contemporary liberals, whose skepticism provides them with a normative argument for toleration, but who are highly suspicious of talk about 'positive' liberty

and appear to regard ‘negative’ freedom as sufficient foundation for their liberalism. The writings of Berlin and Hayek exemplify the predicament of such liberals. While discussing in very general terms the meaning and justification of freedom, they may in principle stick to justification via negative freedom. Detailed consideration soon shows, however, that they do not really wish to, or in any case in practice cannot, defend non-interference simply as such, i.e. the absence of control over some range of human activity quite unspecified. On close scrutiny the moral substance of their writings reveals that what they are actually concerned with are various concrete ways of thinking and acting which they deem to be of the highest moral importance.⁷ They are really bent upon defending certain particular liberties which are clearly related to, or even identified with, the forms of activity that they see as making up the good life. Berlin, for instance, stresses the positive value of free inquiry and Hayek emphasizes the worth of individual initiative and innovation. It is hard to see how their stress on the positive worth of these activities is compatible with a definition of liberty which restricts its meaning to simply the absence of coercion or constraint.

Skeptical liberals, such as Hayek and Berlin, are quite right in insisting that the denial of certainty provides a powerful argument in favour of negative freedom. They go astray, though, when in discussing the meaning and value of freedom, they write as if they think skepticism alone can sustain their liberalism. Their own handling of specific problems involves a covert appeal to the positive worth of whatever it is that they want freedom for; their skepticism needs to be and is fortified by their invoking what they regard as important human interests or modes of living.

III. *Individuality and the Openness of Human Nature*

It remains for me to comment on what might easily be thought of as a discordance in Mill’s thinking about the foundations of liberalism, an apparent inconsistency between skepticism and his doctrine of individuality. On the one hand, the notions of self-development and individuality seem essentially to postulate for each man a distinctive

⁷ See e.g. I. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958, 55; and see I. Berlin, *J. S. Mill and the Ends of Life*, London: The Council of Christians and Jews, 1959, 18

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configuration of characteristics and powers giving him some measure of independence of his social milieu and environment generally. On the other hand, the notion of individuality (self-determination) involves, as I have said, notions of openness and indeterminacy, which forbid us to conceive of the individual in terms of any unchanging characteristics. Does this seeming contradiction mean that there is an incoherence right at the heart of Mill's liberalism? I believe not. Let us now see how the apparent dilemma may be resolved.

The problem is hinted at but left on one side by Berlin in the course of tracing some of the implications of Mill's adherence to fallibilism. From fallibilism it follows that men are altered by discovering new truths and trying out new experiences so that, Berlin argues:

“The notion common to Aristotelians and Christian scholastics and atheistical materialists alike, that there exists a basic knowable human nature, one and the same, at all times, in all places, in all men – a static, unchanging substance underneath the altering appearances, with permanent needs, dictated by a single, knowable goal, the same for all mankind, is mistaken...”⁸

Berlin is correct in suggesting that Mill's view of man amounts to a break with the picture of a determined and static human nature and the substitution for it of a conception of human nature as free to expand itself in innumerable and possibly conflicting directions. The picture of man inherited by Mill from his liberal predecessors did indeed tacitly assume that there is such a thing as a comparatively simple and unalterable human nature, completely formed and fully ascertainable. In place of the Benthamite image of man, with its crude and over-confident hedonism and its assumption that human nature is definable by a few unchanging characteristics, Mill proceeded to build up a more complex and open-ended picture. As has already been noted, from Mill's point of view uncertainty, openness and opaqueness are part of the concept of man; there will always be something uncertain and unfathomable about every individual.

A great deal of the zest and interest in human life does in fact arise out of our discovering and rediscovering that the conduct and experience of human beings is not congealed in some a-historical state, that it changes (sometimes dramatically but more often gradually) over time.

⁸ I. Berlin, *J. S. Mill and the Ends of Life*, op. cit., p. 17.

This part of Mill's account of human nature is incompatible with what Berlin describes as the classical model of man: the conception of human nature as something fully understandable, fixed and certain. But whilst Mill's empiricist-derived insistence that uncertainty of human nature is part of our concept of an individual remains incompatible with the classical account of man, it is not for that reason in conflict with his own view that man is, in part, definable by his possession of the distinctively human powers of mind, feeling and moral judgment. We can, while retaining the notion of the human species possessing certain essential powers, distinguish between those powers, and their particular form of expression within a given historical culture; in so doing room may be left within Mill's concept of human nature for the notion of contingency. It is not being suggested for a moment that this was Mill's own solution to the difficulty we have raised. There is, indeed, no evidence for his ever being aware of the need to try to reconcile the two apparently discordant elements in his picture of man. Still, the problem is one which his account of man's essential powers is required to meet so there is some point in following up my proposed way of overcoming it.

Stuart Hampshire, when speaking of such persisting ideas of human excellence, such as friendship and justice, draws an important distinction between these relatively unchanging abstract ideals and the criteria by which men in different periods and cultures have in practice characterized them. He writes:

“A common centre of meaning, and common conditions in the criteria, persist with the persisting idea of that which is distinctively human. But the more specific conditions in the criteria of application of such terms as justice and friendship change, as the conditions of social life in which they are applied change.”⁹

Mill's model of man may be looked at once again, this time in the light of Hampshire's remarks. Central in Mill's conception of the good man is his individuality, his capacity for choice, and it scarcely seems possible that this capacity should ever be thought of as irrelevant in a consideration of what are the distinctive human endowments. The same thing might be said of those emotional and aesthetic powers which, for Mill, go to make up the personality of the good man; these also are

⁹ S. Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1959, 1982, 247-8.

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among the relatively unchanging characteristics of man. If this is true, then it would look as if man may, in part, be defined by the possession of what are at least relatively unchanging characteristics. Yet while there are, in this sense, certain more or less permanent human powers which are part of the concept of man, the particular ways of thinking, feeling and acting, the various modes of character that are thought to give expression to or embody these aspects of human excellence do in fact change quite markedly over time. It is the existence of these latter, relatively impermanent and inessential forms of behaviour, in which the changing ideals of self-perfection are incorporated, that enables us to speak of the partial indefinability of human nature and so leave room in our concept of man for the idea of his openness and opaqueness.

The point may be brought out more sharply if we consider the value Mill accords to the ideal of self-determination. Whether or not we accept his evaluation of it as the most important of the essential human interests, we should probably agree that freedom, understood in this very general or abstract sense, has been for a quite considerable time an important constituent in the liberal conception of man. It is doubtful, however, whether men and women in a free society care very much for self-determination merely as such. What some do in practice seem to value are rather various forms of activity or ways of life which, as it were, instantiate the abstract freedom of self-determination. For freedom of self-determination may (even within one society and at one time) assume a variety of different forms or modes of expression. Consider, for instance, Mill's insistence on the value of participation in public life as a way of engaging and cultivating man's capacity for reasonable judgment and deliberate choice. Men and women who do manage to be active in social affairs might be said to be allowing their powers of self-direction a particular avenue of expression, or to be embodying them in a concrete way of life. For them, taking an active share in conducting the common affairs of the community is a form of self-determination, is a mode of living that enables their individuality to flower; they do not feel free (and are not free) unless they are exercising their 'political' freedom. On the other hand, there may be other members of the same community who, while feeling the need to think and act for themselves, set little store upon participation in community affairs as a vehicle for the display and cultivation of their freedom. They may, for instance, find more scope for their realization of their active powers in the part of their lives given over to business, to the following of some profession or to the carrying on of an artistic pursuit.

It is in acting within the context of their various social roles that individuals may be said to exercise and develop their powers of self-determination; and it is not the abstract power of self-determination but the exercise of their special powers of thought and self-will that they come to care for and to value. Mill was well aware that the ways of life of many men and even more women provide few opportunities for the display of this sort of freedom. What may be called the institutional structure of his liberalism is a fairly sustained effort to sketch, in institutional terms, the kind of society which would be required in order to provide the necessary setting for his ideal individual. No doubt, in making this attempt, he failed to consider carefully and systematically enough some of the difficult problems. No doubt he failed to take account of the complexity of the considerations to be dealt with in sketching the kind of political and social system within and by which the free life is to be realized and maintained. If I may pause to comment on one element in his outline of a liberal society, I should say he seems to have been altogether too optimistic in thinking that the majority of citizens in democratic nations would come to see participation in political and private associations as an important avenue for the expression and perfecting of their active powers. Yet even in making this observation it is necessary to sound a note of caution. The notion of workers' control, for instance, is still a live political issue, or at least is not everywhere dead. We cannot be sure that it has no future at all.

To sum up, we may say that an important implication of Mill's view of human nature is that the individual is not definable by any unchanging characteristics except his unspecified but designated in a general sort of way powers of reason, feeling and moral judgment. Insofar as they are capable of exercising these powers individuals can achieve some measure of self-perfection. What is more, because of the variety of human nature and because they live in a complex society and one in which social conditions are subject to constant change, individuals may take a variety of different roads to self-perfection. Indeed, Mill's individual depends, for his very being, upon the existence of this kind of society. It is only within a pluralistic and socially mobile society that individuals come gradually to be aware of their own identity and become capable of developing their powers or potentialities to their fullest extent.

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