

On the catalyst of change: vital individualism against the conformity of public o...

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On the Catalyst of Change: Vital Individualism against the Conformity of Public Opinion John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty* published in 1859 is a powerful defense of human liberty and individualism against the perverse mechanizing nature of traditional customs as well as the tyranny of public opinion. In the essay, Mill proposes that individuals take the road less taken in a strategic manner which uses their reasoning to choose and deliberate the best decision to act upon. *On Liberty* to a degree was written as a reactionary response to the tyranny of public opinion posed by Victorian England's stringent social climate which stifled progress by promoting a tradition of social and morals that bound individuals to a circular range of undertakings. Ultimately, forming mimetic personal cultures within the masses that restrict intellectual, cultural, and social progression as well as diversity. Rather than letting public opinion dictate and predetermine one's path by caving into the social pressure to conform, Mill rightly, I believe, affirms that individuals in order to progress need to use and reassert their faculties to: "...see, [reason], and judgment to decide, and when he has decided, firmness, and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision. " The solution of freedom and vital individualism as the means for social progress to combat the crushing wave of conformity is arguably reasonable. Mill's perception of the individual in society through his solution of maximizing freedoms within the limits respecting other's rights (harm principle), such as the freedom of action to cultivate vital individuals, I believe, forms the essence of social progress. It's through the aid of exceptional minority minds that push and perpetuate intellectual and social boundaries that critical discourse and negotiations of higher diverse truths serve against the

constricting objections of customs which stagnate progress such as the web, in today's society. Mill's *On Liberty* serves as a reactionary critique to Victorian England's fixation with customs and public opinion since its social customs are antithetical and devoid of Mill's required means for the cultivation of social progress, namely the precept for freedom of expression and diverse means of self-actualization as an individual. The context of his work can be perceived in defense against the culture of indentured slavery to the tyranny of public opinion and conformity. Individuals to an extent can be grasped as slaves to majoritarian opinion in traditional Victorian England since they were more prone to absorbing the biases of other people thus further reinforcing the tyrannical intrusive nature of opinions taken as truth rather than as objects of contemplation and dispute needing further rectification. "Errors as corrigible," is a concept which did not truly resound in England's conformist civil society and the religiosity of the era. Though English society was highly rooted in traditional conservative practices hindered by the tyranny of opinion, the fact that an individual such as Mill rose up to critically express and defend his stance on the nature of social reality and organization to the progress of society self-affirms that individuals should hold assertion over their existence to participate and deliberate decisions that constitute their nature and lead them towards their personal happiness. It is only through engagement and deliberation of ideas rather than passive acceptance or tolerance to ideas and customs that leads to the refinement and sharpening of both parties' opinions on disputed subjects and if the concept gains popularity in society, further rectification through additional critical exchange of ideas. Firstly, Mill strongly believes

the cultivation of vital and principled individuality to be important in promoting the well-being of the nation-state in a reciprocal way which elevates the whole of society through the maximizing of liberties and as a result a diverse range of ideas. Within Mill's framework of the state, individuals are perceived as very important since they compose the sum of all parts in a society to a large extent. Thus, rather than conforming to a government which shapes the national character and attitudes of the time through coercive laws that perpetuate social mores and bind society to one-dimensional thinking, the power of the individual to rise above petty public opinion is seen as a heroic defense against conformity. Accordingly, Mill objects to the power of established authorities to coerce, censor and mold individuals by suppressing liberties and opinions. Consequently, Mill perceives this potential process of inculcation of a specific character and control by government authorities as truly "evil" since they invariably silence individual opinions and in doing so strip away potential human progress from the collective of the future population. By silencing minority opinion, the majority of the masses commit the grave act of silencing the nuanced range of the human condition and the potential moral collective enlightenment of discourse of society offered by the range of contributing opinions that lead different lives. Thus, it is up to the individual to exercise their right to free speech and defend the ideas which they personally believe in. It is through the rational process of defending one's ideas that one is able to concretize and rectify them, since to a moderate extent language constructs reality because debate and discussion brings about truths within opinions. Thus, further affirming the existence of higher truisms found within

the contention of opinions. The emergence of the "truth" is of utility to the, possible advent of, enlightened genius thought who raises consciousness in a moral and social revolution by questioning conventions that might stifle the overall happiness of society. By derivative, if silence is censorship, then for someone to not voice their inter-subjective version of the truth or the true nature of their inclinations is to censor and limit oneself from actualizing and becoming the being they were meant to be. Furthermore, the precondition of freedom of acting freely in the cultivation of personal individualistic characters as a requisite to a self-affirming means of social progression is a testament to the positive utility of individuals to the grander social scheme. It is in breaking free from the norm of public opinion and establishing themselves as individuals that genius people need the freedom to act and cultivate themselves since they don't fit into societal character molds of character comportment and have more to contribute to society. Individuals such as Socrates that contributed the Socratic method of deliberation and Mill himself serve to give due process to issues of importance that need to be delegated and deliberated upon in a just manner. Original and innovative thinking outside traditional conventions assists society in progressing forward and as such should celebrate pioneering minds rather than shun and punish them. Mill goes on to promote an extreme neurotic form of liberty by connecting the positive effects, "genius, mental vigor, and moral courage," of eccentric individuals to the well-being of nation-states. Thus freedom of action, protects the majorities' dissenting opinion against that of eccentric minority characters since Mill believes that cultivated character is a challenge to the dangers of conformist thinking. Mill worries about social

stagnation through lack of vital individuals, and even champions eccentricity as a positive means of flourishing both at the individual level and as a means of creative and artistic contributions to society. Without that eccentric inventor, there might not be a critical innovation to the society which could have benefited everyone and not just the prodigious individual. It is in freedom of education to learn and cultivate whatever the individual beholder later chooses and what his/her parents choose for him as an infant that humans can rear their youth and mold their destiny by becoming intersubjectively learned. Consequently, the freedom of eccentric, even manufactured geniuses, individuals to exist and cultivate their talents in a manner consistent to their individual nature will make for a happier society where individuals self-actualize in ways consistent to their natural energy. Mill, believes strongly in allowing for the liberty of individuals as a means to social progress creating a more diverse society that will raise its moral conscience by applying utilitarian justice in ways that are beneficial to the individual and the whole of society. However in order for the individual to harness and initiate their potential contribution to the rest of society, they must first be made left to their own devices in a manner that benefits the self and the whole of society. Thus it's evident and self-affirming by reading Mill that, genius minds who harness their " raw natural energy" through their freedom to act, develop original ideas that raise the level of original thought and might even affect the practices of the society positively. However, in order for genius individuals to even assert their existence and contributions to society amidst the wave of conformist public opinion, there must be an assurance for the freedom of action to explore nuanced actions within vital

individualists' curiosity to question and ask ideas less considered. Mill's description of China, epitomizes the negative effects of social uniformity due to lack of vital individualism, since he believes they have remained stationary by making people alike thus diminishing the potential for genius and innovation to arise. However, in circular motion it is all up to individuals, especially geniuses, to assert their views and work collectively around innovative noble ideas to counsel good government for the improvement of society. Additionally, *On Liberty* warns against the mechanization of individual personhood through conformist thinking, as an antagonistic to individuality since Mill believed constant campaigning for a certain character-type constructed lackluster nations that stagnate as a whole. Rather than receiving and perpetuating unwritten codes that create circular and fallible assumptions, such as in China, freedom of speech is seen as a means for individuals to reassert and defend their personal opinions. It is through debate and consensus of truth through toleration of other people's ideas that we can learn from each other and what it is that we truly hold of value and contribution. The way that conformist public oppression worked against the individual was by binding them in the despotism of custom and unwritten laws that dictated and delimited modes of life, thinking and expression. However, in open debate people are able to correct false ideas into one's approximating a semblance of truth since there is a forum for assessing minority beliefs while at the same time cultivating tolerance within the populace to listen to the beliefs of others. It's through argumentation by two opposing opinions that the truth is able to be filtered and compromised upon. Mill, by using 3 historical examples in Europe to elucidate the idea that

genius indeed flourishes when there is a lack of " mental despotism, " furthermore illustrates that during these historical periods such as the reformation, there was a flurry of cultural and artistic developments which instilled a " mental freedom. " Such individualistic mental freedom is in direct opposition to the mechanized thinking of social tyranny prevalent in Victorian England where codes of conduct created an environment which stifled creative expression and instead created a conformist fashion of social replicas with little variety for intellectual contributions to society. The means and ends of individuals in the grander social space they inhabit is that ultimately at the local level of political organization, since " noble" ideas containing higher truths are able to be mediated to grander social and political realms. Today's hyper-connected global communications network facilitated by the internet, I believe supports Mill's argument of vital individualism and the new way in human interaction and deliberation of ideas through the virtual public forum of the web and media innovation. The ability to instantaneously connect with other people and share information to one another through multiple portable mediums, deliberating, analyzing, and contending ideas to arrive at the truth through freedom of information and speech vicariously cultivates and informs individuals. The internet through its radically diverse associations and groups of sites, such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous, has been able to disclose and inform citizens of the way diplomacy and governments of the people behave privately about public concerns. Though forced disclosure to the people is impractical to representatives in government that face public scrutiny, the defense of freedom of information and speech is of supreme utility to the world itself

since transparency and approximation to reality ultimately provide the greatest amount of happiness at the private and public level. In forcing individuals of undemocratic societies, for example the Middle East during the Arab Uprisings, to question socio-political organizations and to defend their inter-subjective freedom through individual expression by participating against the repression of established authorities further ignites the struggle of social progress in a manner consistent to Mill. As a result of the new forum of political expression Mill's defense of freedom of action and speech would likely favor cyber-activism and the power of multi-media communication that allows individuals to exert their individualism in, sometimes, passive-aggressive forms of vital individualism through such tactics as cyber-sits, and even the leaking of government documents for the rectification of societies by enlightening public on "official history" of ideas and diplomacy. In utilizing Twitter and other social-networks, the Arab youth's vital individualism made it known to the world at large and spurred a democratizing effect of communication between different levels of society holding government and leadership accountable and subject to transparency. The utility of the Arab Risings therein lies in the power of individuals to exert their speech to reconstruct, rectify, and reclaim their freedoms to act against a political order which deters them from actualizing their happiness. Ultimately, I concur with the explanations given by Mill in defense of freedom and liberty to the individual. Mill's defense of negative liberty and the harm principle as a primal consent to government intervention when it harms another person's interests is crucial in comprehending his liberalism. Thus freedom of self-regarding autonomous

actions is protected when it is harmless to others. According to Mill, religion in many ways represents the antithesis of his utilitarian theory of the good since it "dwarfs" and patronizes individual thought and expression through, for example, the Calvinistic espousal of unyielding obedience to God and the unredeemable nature of humans. Religions are stemmed in traditions which Mill is trying to evolve away from in a way that allows for dialogic contributions from the individuals composing society in a manner that is horizontal rather than the top-down framework of control and coercion used by religions and governments heavily swayed by the biases of public opinion. In relation to social policy, coercion appears as a reciprocal responsibility of the individual to collaborate within the society they inhabit in a utilitarian manner of expression within the limits of not-interfering and harming other citizens' personal space. Thus the inner creative individualistic energy of the human spirit is something which Mill sees as crucial to human development and is perceived as a means of self-defense against the inhibitions of prevailing "public opinion." Overall, the fact that the problem of individuality against tyranny of opinion and traditional conservative thought is still seen as an issue for concern then and now in the globalized world is a testament to the power of Mill's enduring philosophical thought. It is highly reasonable to regard vital individualism as a means to mitigate the problem of censorship and traditional customs caused by public opinion since humans "are not sheep" to be led. The good life is succinctly phrased into one that is made to the mode of the individual himself through choices of their convictions. In possessing the freedom of action and speech, people can correct and rectify their errors, such innovation is vital to the individualism

he defends. As a modern case, WikiLeaks is a controversial individualistic version of what Mill refers to as an “organ of superintendence” to rectify and correct the behavior of governments and by derivative offer a more just and equitable forum for public opinion by raising the knowledge of people on what the “truth” actually resembles. It is through the active life, rather than passivity and conformity, that individuals are thus able to contribute to the progress and change of society while intersubjectively cultivating themselves. ----- [1]. J. S. Mill, *On Liberty and other writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) p. 59 (He who lets the...)

[2]. Ibid. p. 23 (He is capable of rectifying...) [3]. Ibid. p. 115 (the worth of a state ...)

[4]. Ibid. p. 20 (But the particular evil...) [5]. Ibid. p. 45 (“The loss of so...”)

[6]. Ibid. p. 25 (“The truth of an opinion...”)

[7]. Ibid. p. 67 (“Eccentricity has always abounded...”)

[8]. Ibid. p. 14 (“I regard utility as...”)

[9]. Ibid. p. 65 (“Originality is the one...”)

[10]. Ibid. p. 71-72 (“We have a warning...”)

[11]. Ibid. p. 66 (“No government by a...”)

[12]. Ibid. p. 70 (“The despotism of custom...”)

[13]. Ibid. p. 36 (“In each, an old mental...”)

[14]. Ibid. p. 69 (“It’s ideal of character...”)

[15]. Ibid. p. 111-112 (“In countries of more....”)

[16]. Ibid. p. 62 (“All the good of...”)

[17]. Ibid. p. 75 (“Though society is not...”)

[18]. Ibid. p. 67 (“There is no reason...”)