

Diversity of cultures:  
promotion of  
individuality and the  
search for truth



In his book *On Liberty* John Stuart Mill argues the importance of individual freedoms for the betterment of all of society and for the individual himself. This individuality creates a dynamic for society to adapt itself towards truth and is only restricted to the extent that it should not harm others. If then the multitude of individual beliefs, opinions, and actions are important for everyone it becomes clear that they must be protected and kept free, which means that they must be protected from the law and from the tyranny of social pressure often stemming from the majority. So if diversity of thought and action is important then surely cultural diversity is important as well, for if there were fewer cultures there would seem to be less diversity in general and thus less diversity in beliefs, opinions etc. This may indeed be the case but upon closer inspection there seems to be more than initially meets the eye and we find that there is actually a very interesting dynamic that builds between the preservation of cultural diversity and the promotion of individual thought. This is because cultures are founded on a set of underlying beliefs, so the individuality within these cultures may be stifled for the survival of the culture itself. If this is the case then cultural diversity can act as a mechanism which acts counter to individual diversity. If this is true we will have an ambiguous overall effect. There will be a reduction of diversity of individual thought via cultural repression and oppositely, there will be the creation of diversity through the greater number of unique cultural perspectives. First we need to understand why, exactly, Mill claims that individual diversity is so important. The (generalized) idea behind this is that even if an idea or belief is held by only one individual it may still be “correct”, and the others’ (majority) “incorrect”, “ Secondly, their

interpretation of experiences may be correct, but unsuitable to him. Customs  
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are made for customary circumstances and customary characters; and his circumstances or his character may be uncustomary.” (122). And even if the minority belief is “ incorrect” the arguments presented by the proponents of the minority belief would help the others (majority) to better understand the validity of their “ correct” beliefs and thus to better understand themselves. Another possibility that Mill discusses is that both positions contain some fraction of truth, “...an intelligent following of custom, or even occasionally an intelligent deviation from custom, is better than a blind and simply mechanical adhesion to it.” (124). In this case, discussion and argument amongst the two positions would yield a compromise position composed of the fraction of truths from each position to get closer to overall truth. So it becomes clear that individual/minority beliefs are essential for the progress towards truth, “ there are but few persons, in comparison with the whole of mankind, whose experiments, if adopted by other, would be likely to be any improvement on established practice. But these few are the salt of the earth; without them, human life would become a stagnant pool.” (129). And we will assume that the progress towards truth is for the better of society since Mill appears to assume this throughout his work. In order to ensure that individual/minority thoughts flourish, Mill proposes that there be no legal or societal action taken against the individual thoughts, to the extent that they do not harm others, “...eccentricity of conduct are shunned equally with crimes, until by dint of not following their own nature they have not nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starved” (126). Already we see that according to Mill, societal pressures towards a given belief would be viewed as repressive towards individuality and thus truth. Why does the existence of a culture necessarily mean that it represses its people towards

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some set of beliefs? The answer is quite simple. If cultures allowed for absolute individuality they would no longer be held together by the common thread that allowed them to identify themselves as a culture in the first place. Whatever identifying feature that the culture possessed would be greatly threatened by the divergence caused by individuality and the culture would die or become meaningless, “ and there would be no reason why civilization should not die out, as in the Byzantine Empire.” (129). For now it is plausible to claim that a culture must preserve its ways and beliefs in order to preserve itself and in such way represses individuality. Even if this is true though it seems apparent that having multiple, small, albeit repressive cultures would be better for diversity of thought than to have one huge culture repressing towards one set of beliefs. Perhaps having many small repressive cultures is the next best thing to complete individual thought in our effort towards truth. Thankfully we do not have to settle with this as a compromise. Mill provides us enough leeway so that we can imagine a situation that had the positives of cultural diversity without the drawbacks of cultural repression. Such a solution is cultural shuffling. That is to suggest that while an individual may be raised in a given culture and grow up given that culture’s slant, he is able to associate himself as an adult with any given culture he wants, and thus seek out others who are like-minded, and enjoy the same things that he does, “ It is possible that he might be guided in some good path, and kept out of harm’s way, without any of these things.” (123). So instead of cultures battling to eliminate independent thinking to preserve themselves they utilize that independent thinking to sustain themselves, and perhaps spawn others. Instead of inheriting culture, one chooses culture based on his preferences derived as an individual. This way

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nothing is repressed, instead, people independently come together to join a culture that perhaps they were not originally a part of. And having all of these unique cultures will inspire an infinite combination of discussions (by the free minded Genius/individual, “ Genius can only breath freely in a an atmosphere of freedom. Persons of genius are, ex vi termini, more individual than any other people” (129)) whose conclusions will help get closer to truth and will inspire new cultures. All that has been said is that one can reconcile Mill’s fundamental beliefs on individuality with the existence of cultural diversity. Why must we necessarily reconcile these two things? Why can’t it be that Mill would approve of any system which allowed for individuality? He could, but imagine the alternative to many cultures; in its most extreme form this would be the existence of only one culture. It has already been discussed why this seems like a bad idea but what if the culture had only one idea that held it together and that was the idea of individuality? What if the culture existed to allow individual freedom and this was its only concern? This seems to be the vaguest possibility, allowing for the most individual freedom one culture could possibly have. If this were possible it would seem Mill would be equally satisfied since individuality would flourish. This is a paradox though because such a culture cannot exist. If it did exist and allowed all individual thought, it would also need to allow for questioning itself. To question itself it would need to question its only identifying characteristic: the freedom of individuality. In doing so it would create new culture with the complete opposite defining characteristic: no freedom of individuality. The two cultures would discuss and inevitably a new culture would be born from some middle ground and the system would keep dividing itself until it would be back to a very diverse set of cultures. So it appears <https://assignbuster.com/diversity-of-cultures-promotion-of-individuality-and-the-search-for-truth/>

that the only way for Mill to have true individual freedom is for diverse cultures to exist. Without these cultures individuality could not flourish. Before, when we blamed cultures for repressing their members in order to maintain their identities we were being unfairly strict in describing cultural behavior, “ There has been a time when the element of spontaneity and individuality was in excess, and the social principle had a hard struggle with it.” (125). We were assuming that the cultures did not change dynamically and that members could not shift amongst them as they pleased. The truth is that while cultures might bias those born into them, they are almost always open to everyone. Those that have opinions that coincide with one culture are naturally welcomed into that culture. So in fact cultures do not repress individuality, they encourage the discovery of culture itself! And thus they promote individuality by creating a mechanism for the creation of new cultures through discussion. We know that Mill praises individuality for its ability to seek truth and advance one’s self and society at large, “ In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is, therefore, capable of being more valuable to others. There is a greater fullness of life about his own existence, and when there is more life in the units there is more in the mass which is composed of them.” (127). In order for this to be possible Mill implicitly requires cultural diversity. This is because cultural diversity is the only mechanism by which individuals can find where they most belong, discuss with others, and create new cultures, “ It will not be denied by anybody that originality is a valuable element in human affairs.” (129). The more cultures there are the more diverse beliefs there will be and the more beliefs that will be created. Remember, this is important for two main reasons, 1) a new <https://assignbuster.com/diversity-of-cultures-promotion-of-individuality-and-the-search-for-truth/>

belief, however unpopular might be “ correct” and 2) even an “ incorrect” belief helps achieve truth through discussion which allows the other individuals (in a culture) to understand why they are “ correct” and thus understand themselves. If they understand themselves they understand their individuality and thus contribute towards the discovery of truth. This is the mechanism which drives truth, cultural diversity and its spawning of other cultures and the discussion between those cultures. Without any cultures no discussion can take place and so truth cannot be pursued, thus society will not be bettered and the individual will not develop to understand himself, his value, his worth, his character, and his importance.