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## John Stuart Mill--Individuality or Utility?

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JOHN STUART MILL--INDIVIDUALITY OR UTILITY?

by

William Hoffman

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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## VITA

The author, William Hoffman, is the son of the late Howard Hoffman and Genevieve (Janis) Hoffman. He was born January 12, 1951, in Chicago, Illinois.

His secondary education was achieved at Weber High School in Chicago, Illinois, where he graduated in 1969.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In his autobiography, John Stuart Mill states that On Liberty was likely to survive longer than anything else he had written.<sup>1</sup> From the vantage point of the present, it would seem that Mill was correct in his estimation of the future of his essay. It is safe to say that On Liberty is Mill's most famous work. However, there does not seem to be a concensus among scholars about the ultimate basis for Mill's defense of freedom in On Liberty. There are those who contend that the ultimate basis for Mill's argument in On Liberty is his concern for self-development or individuality. Then, there are those who argue that what Mill presents in On Liberty is really a defense of individuality and freedom based on Mill's version of utilitarianism.

This difference of opinion has its basis in a paradox. This paradox is based on what appears to be Mill's commitment to two seemingly inconsistent principles. At times one is led to believe that the highest and controlling principle for Mill is found in utilitarianism. At other times, however,

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<sup>1</sup>John Stuart Mill, Autobiography of John Stuart Mill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), p. 177.

one feels that the ultimate end for Mill is self-development.

What I hope to do in this thesis is to examine this paradox and some possible solutions to it. Finally, I shall present some conclusions upon this issue.

## CHAPTER II

### MILL'S UTILITARIANISM

Mill explicitly professed his commitment to utilitarianism as his highest and controlling principle throughout his life. In his autobiography, which was written after On Liberty, Mill expresses his commitment to utilitarianism: "I never, indeed, waived in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in On Liberty itself, Mill expresses his allegiance to utilitarianism:

It is proper to state that I forgo 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.<sup>3</sup>

Mill presents the principles of his notions about social utility in Utilitarianism:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals "utility" or the "greatest happiness principle" holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure . . . namely, that pleasure and freedom

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>3</sup>John Stuart Mill, On Liberty (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947), p. 10.



from pain are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.<sup>4</sup>

Mill points out that the true utilitarian standard is not so much concerned for the individual's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number.<sup>5</sup>

Up to this point, Mill's views on utilitarianism are not unlike those of his father, James Mill, and Jeremy Bentham. However, as one reads on in Utilitarianism, one begins to realize how different John Stuart Mill's notions about the utility principle are from those of his father and Bentham. Bentham only recognized quantitative differences between pleasures based on such factors as intensity and duration. John Stuart Mill, however, speaks of qualitative differences between pleasures. To determine what makes one pleasure of a greater quality and value than another, Mill says: "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to

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<sup>4</sup>Idem, Utilitarianism, ed. by Oskar Piest (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1957), pp. 10-11.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 15-16.

prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure."<sup>6</sup> Mill then states that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give a decided preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties.<sup>7</sup> Mill seems to have a special regard for those capable of experiencing the "higher pleasures." "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."<sup>8</sup>

In the last chapter of Utilitarianism, Mill expresses the view which he lays out also in his Autobiography and his Essay On Bentham, that it is not inconsistent with the principles of utility to seek an end other than happiness. Mill makes clear, however, that all ends desired for themselves are ultimately desired only because of their connection to happiness. So ultimately it is still happiness which is desired as the highest end.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 48-49.

## CHAPTER III

### PARADOX OF ON LIBERTY--INDIVIDUALITY OR UTILITY?

With this background of Mill's version of utilitarianism, we can now examine the question of whether, in On Liberty, Mill abandons his commitment to utilitarianism and sets up the development of individuality as his highest and controlling principle. To begin with, I think it is important to note that Mill's concern for individuality and freedom is not to be found only in On Liberty. In his Principles of Political Economy, for example, Mill shows a concern for the free development of individuality. Mill in the Principles of Political Economy discusses the relative value of a free enterprise economic system. Much of the discussion seems strongly reminiscent of that expressed in On Liberty.

. . . We are too ignorant either of what individual agency in its best form, or Socialism in its best form, can accomplish, to be qualified to decide which of the two will be the ultimate form of human society.

If a conjecture may be hazarded, the decision will probably depend mainly on one consideration, viz. which of the two systems is consistent with the greatest amount of human liberty and spontaneity. After the means of subsistence are assured, the next in strength of the personal wants of human beings is liberty; and (unlike the physical wants, which as civilization advances become more moderate and more amenable to control) it increases instead of diminishing in intensity as the intelligence and

the moral faculties are more developed. The perfection both of social arrangements and of practical morality would be, to secure to all persons complete independence and freedom of action, subject to no restriction but that of not doing injury to others: and the education which taught or the social institutions which required them to exchange the control of their own actions for any amount of comfort or affluence, or to renounce liberty for the sake of equality, would deprive them of one of the most elevated characteristics of human nature.<sup>10</sup>

It is in On Liberty where Mill presents his most developed argument concerning the development of individuality. A strong motivation behind Mill's defense of the free development of individuality was his fear of the dangers connected with the recent use of democracy in the world. In a section of his autobiography dealing with On Liberty, Mill states that this essay expressed fears that the growth of social equality and of the government of public opinion might impose on mankind an oppressive yoke of uniformity in opinion and practice.<sup>11</sup>

Next to On Liberty, this sentiment of Mill's is probably most clearly presented in his essay on Tocqueville's Democracy In America. In this essay, Mill discusses the tendency of democracy towards bearing down on individuality,

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<sup>10</sup> John Stuart Mill, "Selections From Principles Of Political Economy," Limits Of Liberty, ed. Peter Radcliff (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1966), p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, Autobiography of John Stuart Mill, pp. 177-178.

and circumscribing the exercise of the human faculties within narrow limits.<sup>12</sup> Mill says that there must be steps taken to prevent this:

To sustain the higher pursuits of philosophy and art; to vindicate and protect the unfettered exercise of reason, and the moral freedom of the individual--these are purposes, to which, under a Democracy, the superior spirits, and the government so far as it is permitted, should devote their utmost energies.<sup>13</sup>

As indicated earlier, it is in On Liberty where Mill develops most fully his defense of individuality against the potential tyranny of mass democratic society. In the first chapter of On Liberty, Mill states the object of the essay:

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Idem, "M. De Tocqueville on Democracy In America," in The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill: Ethical, Political and Religious, ed. Marshall Cohen (New York: The Modern Library, 1961), p. 168

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 168, 169.

<sup>14</sup>Idem, On Liberty, p. 9.

Now, of course, the question arises about the basis for this principle. Why does Mill assert the liberty of the individual against societal coercion? If Mill's argument in On Liberty is to be considered consistent, I believe there are only two possible responses. One response is rather obvious. If Mill is a utilitarian, as he professes to be, then it can be argued that individual freedom and the self-development that can derive from such freedom is defended because it will in some way promote happiness. The other response is that in On Liberty Mill abandons his commitment to utilitarianism and instead sets up the development of individuality as his highest and controlling principle. Individuality is valued for itself.

There are several sources that one can go to which would seem to support the first response, that Mill's argument in On Liberty is based on utilitarian principles. Indeed, in On Liberty itself Mill seems to indicate that the basis of his argument in the essay is founded in the principles of utility:

It is proper to state that I forgo 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. Those interests, I contend, authorize the subjection of individual spontaneity to external control, only in respect to those actions of each, which concern the interest of other people.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 10, 11.

Ostensibly, Mill never abandoned his allegiance to utilitarianism. The fact that Mill affirmed his allegiance to utilitarianism in works written after On Liberty weighs against the argument of those who contend that in On Liberty Mill abandons his commitment to utilitarianism and sets up self-development as his highest and controlling principle. For example, as already indicated, in his autobiography, which was written after On Liberty, Mill affirmed his commitment to utilitarianism.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Utilitarianism, the book in which Mill explains his version of social utility, was written after On Liberty.

Not surprisingly, then, there are scholars like Alburey Castell who maintain that Mill's argument in On Liberty is based on utilitarianism. Castell states that liberty is defended on the grounds of its social utility.<sup>17</sup> Speaking of On Liberty, Castell says:

It contains a defense of the individual's right to think and act for himself. It says, by way of premise, that all human action should aim at creating, maintaining, and increasing the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. Actions are right when they do that; wrong when they do not. A good society is one in which the greatest possible number of persons enjoy the greatest possible amount of

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<sup>16</sup>Idem, Autobiography of John Stuart Mill, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup>Alburey Castell, Introduction to On Liberty by John Stuart Mill (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947), p. viii.

happiness. It says, secondly, that one of the most important ways for society to ensure that its members will be able to contribute their maximum to creating, preserving, and increasing the greatest happiness of the greatest number is to extend them the right to think and act for themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Castell's analysis seems quite reasonable if one assumes that in On Liberty Mill does not deviate from his commitment to happiness as the highest good. Indeed, one can point to numerous examples in On Liberty where Mill's argument is based on utility. His stance in chapter two in favor of freedom of opinion and freedom of expression seems to be based more upon the usefulness to society of permitting such freedom rather than on any intrinsic value to such freedom. Indeed, I do not think that it can be denied that On Liberty is filled with examples of the utilitarian value of the development of individuality.

However, there is a problem. There are instances in On Liberty where it would appear that happiness is not the highest good. At times, one gets the impression that for Mill the highest good is self-development. Individuality seems to be valued for itself without any connection to utility.

Mill seems more concerned about self-development than happiness when he looks with favor upon this quote of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. vii.



Wilhelm von Humboldt:

"The end of man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal or immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole;" that, therefore, the object "towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially those who design to influence their fellow men must ever keep their eyes, is the individuality of power and development"; that for this there are two requisites, "freedom, and variety of situations"; and that from the union of these arise "individual vigor and manifold diversity," which combine themselves in "originality."<sup>19</sup>

The fact that Mill looks with approval upon the statement by Wilhelm von Humboldt is quite significant. The chief end for man described in this quote is self-development, not social utility.

As indicated already, On Liberty is filled with passages which seem to indicate that the highest and controlling principle for Mill is individuality and not utilitarianism. Mill decries the lack of high regard for individuality in society:

But the evil is, that individual spontaneity is hardly recognized by the common modes of thinking, as having any intrinsic worth, or deserving any regard on its own account. The majority, being satisfied with the ways of mankind as they now are (for it is they who make them what they are), cannot comprehend why those ways should not be good enough for everybody; . . .<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, p. 57.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

This statement by Mill is rather important. He is critical of the fact that the mass of men are satisfied with a society in which there is an absence of individuality. The only logical conclusion from this statement is that Mill preferred individuality more than happiness. Richard Lichtman makes this observation about this statement by Mill:

Mill here makes the crucial admission that the mass of mankind is satisfied with the human condition as it now stands--that is, that their happiness is apparently compatible with the absence of freedom. The possibility of a conflict between happiness and freedom has actually materialized. In the third chapter, Mill is commending the doctrine of individual free development against the mediocre satisfaction of the masses.<sup>21</sup>

Chapter four of On Liberty provides another example in which Mill seems to value the free development of individuality over utilitarian concerns:

But with regard to the merely contingent, or, as it may be called, constructive injury which a person causes to society, by conduct which neither violates any specific duty to the public, nor occasions perceptible hurt to any assignable individual except himself; the inconvenience is one which society can afford to bear, for the sake of the greater good of human freedom.<sup>22</sup>

It appears that what Mill is saying in this passage is that the contentment of the mass of people in society is to be

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<sup>21</sup>Richard Lichtman, "The Surface and Substance of Mill's Defense of Freedom," Social Research 30 (1963): 486.

<sup>22</sup>John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, p. 82.

given less consideration than the freedom of the individual. This is not a statement one would expect from a utilitarian. Such a statement would be expected from one who sets up the development of individuality as his highest and controlling principle.

C. L. Ten, in an article entitled "Mill on Self-Regarding Actions," makes some similar observations. Ten makes reference to some of Mill's argument in chapter four of On Liberty. Ten points to the situation presented by Mill in which the overwhelming majority in a society feel strongly about the private conduct of a small group of people, and demand that the latter be fined or imprisoned for a short time. Ten maintains that there would be a good utilitarian reason for punishing that private conduct. However, it is this type of thing that Mill indicates in On Liberty that he wants ruled out. In Mill's example in the fourth chapter of the prohibition on the eating of pork and in other similar examples, Mill indicates concern about how hopeless the case for liberty would be if the majority's genuine feelings of horror and repugnance are recognized as having a claim to serious consideration.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>C. L. Ten, "Mill on Self-Regarding Actions" in On Liberty by John Stuart Mill, ed. David Spitz (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), p. 244.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PROBLEM OF SOLVING THE PARADOX

There is a problem then. Mill professes to be a utilitarian, yet certain passages in On Liberty seem to indicate that he has abandoned his commitment to happiness as the greatest good and sets up self-development in its place. Mill seems at times to value individuality for itself with no connection to happiness. There is a paradox. Numerous scholars have presented interpretations of On Liberty which would seemingly solve this dilemma. As indicated earlier, these scholars generally take one of two views. Some say that Mill's defense of individuality in On Liberty is based on its utilitarian value. Then, there are those who contend that Mill's argument in On Liberty shows ultimately that Mill's highest and controlling principle is self-development and not utility. Therefore, it is not inconsistent for Mill to argue in On Liberty as if he valued individuality for itself because for Mill the highest good actually is self-development and not the greatest happiness for the greatest number. For reasons that shall become apparent, I reject both views. It is my contention that there is no valid way to conclude that Mill is consistent in On Liberty. To accept this position, however, I think it is necessary to examine the argument of some scholars on this issue.

Robert Paul Wolff suggests a solution to the dilemma that one is faced with in On Liberty. Discussing Mill's argument as it develops in On Liberty, Wolff says:

On some occasions, he seems to say that the free development of individual tastes and inclinations is a valuable means to the end of happiness . . . . At other times, his language suggests that individual expression is itself a satisfying experience and hence one of the ends of life, not merely a means to some end. The truth, most probably, is that Mill personally valued individuality for itself, but felt it necessary to defend it to the world by a utilitarian argument.<sup>24</sup>

Wolff's proposition is very appealing. It provides an answer to the paradox that one faces in On Liberty. Indeed, there is one passage in chapter three which would seem to verify Wolff's proposition:

Having said that Individuality is the same thing with development, and that it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings, I might here close the argument: for what more or better can be said of any condition of human affairs, than that it brings human beings themselves nearer to the best thing they can be? or what worse can be said of any obstruction to good, than it prevents this? Doubtless, however, these considerations will not suffice to convince those who most need convincing; and it is necessary further to show, that these developed human beings are of some use to the undeveloped--to point out to those who do not desire liberty and would not avail themselves of it, that they may be in some intelligible manner rewarded for allowing other people to make use of it without hindrance.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Robert Paul Wolff, The Poverty of Liberalism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 26.

<sup>25</sup>John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, pp. 63, 64.

The implications of this statement seem to support Wolff's proposition. Mill seems to value individuality for itself. However, to convince others of its value, he feels he must show its utility.

Wolff's proposition provides an appealing solution to the paradox that one faces in On Liberty. Mill is really not inconsistent when he writes as if individuality is the highest good and an end in itself, while at the same time professing that he is a utilitarian because he feels the need to show the utilitarian value of individuality to the mass of men.

I, however, cannot accept this position. In a way, what Wolff has done is to turn the tables on the argument. Utility is now used as a means to support the end of individuality. I do not believe that it is valid to say that Mill ultimately valued utilitarianism merely as a means. This is in direct opposition to what Mill has explicitly said about utilitarianism. Indeed, in On Liberty itself and in books written after it, Mill has made quite clear his commitment to utility as the highest good and the end of life. Before I could accept the proposition presented by Wolff, I would have to have an explanation of why, if Mill really considered utility as a means to support individuality, would he make it quite clear in both Utilitarianism and in his autobiography that he considered utility as the chief end

in life. An explanation concerning this is particularly relevant considering that both books were written after On Liberty, the book upon which Wolff bases his proposition. I do not believe that it is really possible for Wolff to come up with an explanation. I think that Mill makes it particularly clear in his autobiography about his commitment to utilitarianism. Mill talks of the mental crisis which he had to face. Mill states that he resolved the crisis still committed to the principle that he was always committed to, which is, of course, utility.<sup>26</sup>

Robert Ladenson presents quite a different proposition than does Wolff. Ladenson argues that Mill does not deviate in his allegiance to utilitarianism in On Liberty. Ladenson's argument is worthy of study because, like Wolff's proposition, it presents an appealing answer to the contradictions that one is faced with in On Liberty. Speaking of Mill's contentions in On Liberty, Ladenson says:

. . . we have a sophisticated, yet unmistakably, utilitarian argument for the desirability of cultivating individuality, and derivatively for liberty of action. To assemble all the premises:

- (1) To cultivate individuality is to develop certain qualities, for example, observation, judgment, discrimination, firmness of will, and so on, that are the distinctive endowment of a human being.

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<sup>26</sup> Idem, Autobiography of John Stuart Mill, p. 100

- (2) Such qualities are instrumental in discerning or desiring what is best, and thus, in the proportion to which people have them they become more valuable to themselves and are therefore capable of being more valuable to others.
- (3) For a utilitarian (a) "what is best" is what is most productive of happiness, and (b) something is valuable to the extent that it is productive of happiness.
- (4) Accordingly, such qualities are abilities and capacities which, far more than any other aspect of human individuals, enable them to promote both their own happiness and the happiness of others.

Therefore,

- (5) Individuality ought to be cultivated.

In light of the foregoing, the defense of liberty of action in chapter three is likewise utilitarian in character, namely,

- (6) Liberty of action is necessary for the cultivation of individuality.
- (7) From a utilitarian standpoint, the cultivation of individuality is highly desirable.

Therefore,

- (8) There ought to be liberty of action.<sup>27</sup>

Ladenson's argument, like Wolff's, presents a solution to the paradox. Essentially what Ladenson is saying is that Mill supports individuality because it promotes the utilitarian goal of happiness. Individuality is simply a means to

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<sup>27</sup>Robert F. Ladenson, "Mill's Conception of Individuality," Social Theory and Practice 4 (1977): 175.



the end of happiness. This kind of reasoning leads one to the conclusion that there is no inconsistency in On Liberty. It is natural for Mill, a professed utilitarian, to defend self-development because it promotes happiness.

I, however, do not accept Ladenson's argument. Ladenson maintains that, for Mill, individuality serves as a means for the utilitarian end. This, however, is not consistent with some things that Mill says in On Liberty. As indicated earlier, there are some passages in which Mill seems to value individuality not as a means to some higher end, but an end in itself. Those passages make it appear that the highest and controlling principle for Mill is self-development and not utilitarianism. As I said before, there are passages which indicate that Mill gives preference to the free development of individuality over the satisfaction of the masses. Finally, there is that one passage in chapter three of On Liberty which I quoted in my discussion of Wolff's argument, which seems to indicate that Mill presents the utility of individuality as a means to get the mass of mankind to accept the end of self-development. I do not think it can be said that Ladenson's argument offers a viable solution to the paradox.

Maurice Cowling, in his book Mill and Liberalism, argues that, for Mill, the development of individuality

serves the end of utility. Cowling's argument in support of this conclusion is rather complicated. Cowling's interpretation of what Mill means by happiness is rather crucial to his argument. From this interpretation, Cowling builds his argument that individuality is essentially a means for the end of utility.

Cowling maintains that when Mill speaks of happiness, he is not referring to any happiness which the individual might happen to desire. Cowling contends that when Mill speaks of happiness, he means the happiness that rational reflection would approve. Happiness is referred to in an elevated sense.<sup>28</sup>

This notion of elevated happiness that Cowling discusses can be easily related to some of Mill's discussion in Utilitarianism. As noted earlier, Mill argues in Utilitarianism that it is compatible with the principle of utility to recognize a qualitative distinction among pleasures as well as a quantitative distinction. There are "higher pleasures." Those pleasures which employ the higher faculties and pleasures of the intellect are of higher value.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Maurice Cowling, Mill and Liberalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 31,32.

<sup>29</sup>John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, pp. 11,12.

Cowling in his book argues that Mill defends the free development of individuality in On Liberty because it serves as a means to achieving the elevated or higher pleasures:

The demand for liberty is not the assertion of a fundamentally binding end, but the designation of a means to the end--the end of allowing men to approach as close as possible to that highest of all pleasures which comes from mental cultivation of the closest approximation possible to knowledge of what is true.<sup>30</sup>

Cowling makes it quite clear in the fifth chapter of his book that the free development of individuality serves the utilitarian end of "higher happiness."

General utility for Mill means, as we know, maximization, not of any happiness, but of the higher happiness, the freedom of men to engage in rational pursuit of disinterestedness and truth. Maximization of the higher happiness comes when men are left free (from mediocre social pressure) to reflect on, and choose, the right action rather than the wrong one.<sup>31</sup>

I think it is necessary at this point to be quite clear about Cowling's understanding of Mill's utilitarian end. The end, of course, is the elevated pleasure derived from rational pursuit. It is important to note that this notion of rational pursuit is not without bounds. Something more

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<sup>30</sup>Cowling, p. 42.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 101, 102.

specific is intended here:

Mill, then, is offering persuasion, not to a vulgarly libertarian position, but to a unitary ethic, based on a unitary noetic, which assumes neither that methods of right reasoning are various and diverse, nor that there will be ultimate divergence about its injunctions. It assumes, on the contrary, that, given liberty to reflect and freedom from pressure of mediocrity, the higher minds will use their liberty (and the lower minds, perhaps, even theirs) to play their part in establishing a disinterestedly utilitarian ethic which will have been validated by agreed philosophical procedures . . . . Mill assumes that, given as wide a freedom as possible to exercise rational choice and taking this freedom as the means, the end will be achieved, not of diversity of opinion pure and simple, but diversity of opinion within the limits of a rationally homogenous, agreed, social consensus about the method of judging and the right end to be approached.<sup>32</sup>

Cowling connects Mill's utilitarian end with the development of a rational consensus in society. Liberty and individuality are not valued for themselves, but because they provide a situation in which a rational consensus for society can be developed by the elite.<sup>33</sup>

The best way of achieving a rational consensus, in other words, is to leave men as free as possible to be led into it by a rational education.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 43, 44.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 103-105.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

Cowling states that Mill defends the freedom to develop individuality, where no assignable damage is done to others by the use of that freedom, because then the only way to maximize utility is to leave men's minds absolutely open to the working of rational education. It is only through rational education that unforced assent to the right means of determining the right course of action will take root.<sup>35</sup>

According to Cowling, those of genius quality or the elite play a key role in the development of the rational consensus that he talks about. Considerations about the elite are of great importance to Mill's argument in On Liberty. Cowling implies, in fact, that Mill's defense of the free development of individuality is tied to the fate of the elite:

But Mill was attempting in On Liberty to protect the elite from domination by mediocrity. How he would have applied his principles in a system where the elite had triumphed, and to what extent it could have operated individualistically where a rational consensus had prevailed, is another question. On Liberty, in the form in which it was written, so far from being an attempt to free men from the impositions of all doctrine, is an attempt to free them from customary, habitual, conventional doctrine. Convention, custom and the mediocrity of opinion are the enemies in Mill's mythology: the freedom he gives is given in order to subject men's prejudices to reasoning authority. On Liberty does not offer safeguards for individuality; it is designed to propagate the individuality of the elevated by protecting them against the mediocrity of opinion

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

as a whole . . . the purpose in allowing men liberty, the justification of individuality, is not diversity in itself, but diversity informed by the rationally agreed education the clerisy alone can provide. Education is desirable and self-development an obligation, because both maximize the same part of happiness. Mill, in short, feared democracy and loved individuality, not so much because individuality would induce diversity, but because, by breaking up existing rigidities, it would make the world safe for "rational" education, "rational" thinking and the assured leadership of the "rational clerisy."<sup>36</sup>

Cowling's argument presents the possibility of another interesting solution to the paradox that one is faced with in On Liberty. Cowling associates Mill's "higher pleasures" with the pursuit of the rational consensus. Therefore it could be argued that Mill's defense of individuality in On Liberty is not inconsistent with Mill's commitment to utilitarianism. It is by the free development of individuality that man can develop rational pursuit. I, however, reject the solution which develops out of Cowling's argument.

Cowling's argument still restricts individuality to a means which serves the utilitarian end. As indicated already, this is inconsistent with parts of On Liberty in which it appears that Mill views self-development as an end in itself and his highest and controlling principle.

Cowling's argument could develop into a proposition such as the following: It is not inconsistent for Mill, a

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 104, 105.

professed utilitarian, to defend individuality as if it were a good in itself because the higher pleasures can be equated with the pursuit of rationality which implies self-development. I have serious problems with such a proposition. In Mill's revised definition of utilitarianism, happiness is still the end. Mill states that what he means by happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain. Pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends.<sup>37</sup> To be consistent, then, with Mill's argument in Utilitarianism, it would have to be maintained that Mill values self-development because of its connection to pleasure. Man may experience a "higher pleasure" or a more valuable pleasure from "the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties."<sup>38</sup> However, what is still desired as an end is pleasure, not the use of the higher faculties or self-development. The "higher pleasures" are sought after because they provide pleasure, not because they are "higher pleasures." Therefore, the proposition that I presented is fallacious. Mill's notions about utilitarianism are inconsistent with parts of On Liberty in which he indicates that self-development is the highest good and an end in itself. For Mill to

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<sup>37</sup> Mill, Utilitarianism, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

remain consistent with his definition of utilitarianism, the only thing that could be considered an end in itself is pleasure or happiness. However, as shown earlier, there are sections in On Liberty where Mill indicates that he would sacrifice the pleasure or happiness of the many to preserve the individuality of the few. This is certainly not consistent for even Mill's revised utilitarianism.

Cowling's discussion concerning the importance of the elite in On Liberty is a crucial part of his argument. Mill defends the free development of individuality because he desires to protect the elite from domination by mediocrity. A rational concensus can then be developed under the leadership of the elite. This result serves utility. Once again, individuality is reduced to a means. Cowling, in fact, voices uncertainty about Mill's concern for the free development of individuality in a society where the elite has triumphed.

From this reasoning it can be concluded that it is not inconsistent with utilitarianism for Mill to defend individuality as he did in On Liberty. In a society where individuality is protected, there is then provided a situation in which the elite are free to attempt to lead the way to a rational concensus which serves utility.



Once again, I must say that I reject this solution to the paradox that one faces in On Liberty. It cannot be denied, however, that Mill places great value upon those talented few of genius quality. He refers to these few as the salt of the earth. He states that without them, human life would become a stagnant pool. Genius, however, can only exist in an atmosphere of freedom.<sup>39</sup>

In one passage particularly, Mill emphasizes the importance to society of a talented elite:

No government by a democracy or a numerous aristocracy, either in its political acts or in the opinions, qualities, and tone of mind which it fosters, ever did or could rise above mediocrity, except in so far as the sovereign Many have let themselves be guided (which in their best times they always have done) by the counsels and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed One or Few. The initiation of all wise or noble things, comes and must come from individuals; generally at first from some one individual. The honor and glory of the average man is that he is capable of following that initiative; that he can respond internally to wise and noble things, and be led to them with his eyes open.<sup>40</sup>

It cannot be denied then that Mill places great value on a talented elite. However, it cannot be said that Mill defends self-development simply because it creates a situation in which the elite will be free to develop a rational

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<sup>39</sup> Idem, On Liberty, p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

consensus in society and therefore serve utility. Too many parts of On Liberty are inconsistent with this conclusion. Those passages in On Liberty in which it seems that Mill considers self-development an end in itself and the highest good would appear to invalidate Cowling's conclusion that Mill defends individuality to protect the elite from domination. There are instances where Mill defends individuality as a good in itself with no apparent connection to the talented elite.

There is one passage in On Liberty in which it is indicated that Mill values self-development as his highest end. However, to protect free self-development, Mill indicates that he feels the need to show to the mass of mankind the utility of individuality. This passage was quoted during my discussion of Wolff's argument. What is important is that immediately after this passage Mill presents his discussion about the value of a talented elite for society. This certainly would seem to show that Mill values individuality irregardless of its connection to the elite.

Some of Mill's argument in chapter two of On Liberty I think creates some serious doubts about Cowling's position that Mill values liberty and individuality not for themselves but because they provide a situation in which a rational consensus can be developed by the elite. Mill, in chapter two,

argues that liberty to dissent against the received opinion is the whole truth.<sup>41</sup> This seems to indicate that Mill would cherish individual liberty even if the elite were successful and did lead society to some type of rational consensus.

It would seem, then, that Cowling's argument does not present a solution to the paradox. I believe that I have shown the invalidity of the proposition that Mill's concern for individuality is based on its connection to the development of a rational consensus by the elite which serves the utilitarian end. What Cowling has presented does not convince me that Mill's utilitarianism is not inconsistent with some of his defense of self-development that he presents in On Liberty.

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 15-54.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

As I indicated early in my thesis, there are basically only two ways in which Mill can be considered consistent in his argument in On Liberty. One way is to argue that Mill supports individuality because it serves the utilitarian end which he professes to be committed to. The other way is to maintain that in On Liberty, Mill abandons utilitarianism and instead takes up self-development as an end in itself and the highest good. Neither side has proved its case; the paradox still exists.

Wolff, Ladenson, and Cowling present, I believe, the more plausible solutions to the paradox. However, as indicated, there are flaws in each argument. Therefore, there is only one conclusion that I think is valid. It is, that Mill in On liberty is inconsistent. Parts of On Liberty are inconsistent with Mill's professed utilitarianism. However, there is no indication that Mill abandoned his commitment to utility. In On Liberty itself and in books written after it, Mill explicitly reaffirms his commitment to utilitarianism. Mill appears to have allegiance to two inconsistent ends. He does not appear to be settled on what is his highest and controlling principle, self-development or utility.

Any conclusion that Mill is not inconsistent in On Liberty I am afraid is doomed to repudiation. I do not believe that there is basis in text for any other conclusion. I believe my handling of the sophisticated arguments of Wolff, Ladenson, and Cowling supports this.

I have found nothing written by Mill which solves the paradox. Mill makes statements in Utilitarianism, in his autobiography, and in his Essay on Bentham which indicate that it is not inconsistent for a utilitarian to pursue an end other than happiness for itself. In fact, Mill indicates that the only way to achieve happiness is not to seek it directly. However, Mill makes the point that in reality, nothing is desired except happiness. Mill states that whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself is desired as itself as a part of happiness. It is not desired for itself until it has become so. Those who desire an end for its own sake desire it either because the possession of it is a pleasure, or because the absence of it is a pain.<sup>42</sup> In other words, the only thing ultimately desirable as an end is happiness.

The paradox that one is faced with in On Liberty, I am afraid, is permanent. Mill is inconsistent. Any other response I think would be conjecture and not based on text.

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<sup>42</sup> Idem, Utilitarianism, p. 48.

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APPROVAL SHEET

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