Happiness and Individuality in Mill

JULIO SHARP-WASSERMAN, Pomona College

Abstract: In this paper, I identify two competing types of utilitarianism present in John Stuart Mill’s writings, hedonistic utilitarianism and objectivist utilitarianism. His hedonistic utilitarianism commands the maximization of happiness, and his objective utilitarianism the maximization of individuality. I compare the effectiveness of these to two forms of utilitarianism as justifications for individual liberty as defined in Mill’s Harm Principle. I conclude that his objective utilitarianism is superior in this regard because it alone can justify his crucially important voluntary slavery exception.

John Stuart Mill intends to make a utilitarian case for individual freedom. Mill’s anti-paternalism is a component of his argument for individual freedom, and is justified in large part by his arguments for individual freedom in general. But reviewing his anti-paternalism as well his paternalistic exception to the Harm Principle in the case of voluntary slavery, brings to light a tension between two competing types of utilitarianism in his political philosophy, hedonistic utilitarianism and objectivist utilitarianism, both of which can be used to justify the freedom granted by the Harm Principle. The objectivist utilitarian strand in his argument holds individuality to be
intrinsically valuable, while his hedonism presents the subjective experience of pleasure as the ultimate value to which all other values are instrumental. The objectivist utilitarianism hidden in Mill’s argument for liberty serves as a better tool for justifying his voluntary slave exception as well as a more powerful argument for liberal freedom.

Mill states that the ultimate source of all “moral obligation,” and by derivation, all norms of justice, is the Greatest Happiness Principle (185). This principle holds that happiness, defined as pleasure and the avoidance of pain, is “the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable.” Nothing can be desired or valued for any reason other than its being in itself pleasurable, or a means to satisfaction of further pleasures. Moral principles cannot have any ultimate justification other than the promotion of happiness, because happiness (i.e. pleasure) is the only thing that is intrinsically good.

Principles of justice, Mill says, belong to a subcategory of moral principles: principles of justice stipulate those moral obligations for which there is a corresponding right in some particular person. “Right” is defined as a claim by an individual that society is required to defend, a claim whose legitimacy is derived from the fact that its universalization as a moral imperative is productive of general utility (220-221). Mill’s Harm Principle, if we assume he is consistently applying the happiness-as-ultimate-value rule, must derive its sole and ultimate justification in such a way, because the Harm Principle is a principle of justice. The principle states that “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others (14)”, delineating both a moral obligation on the part of each individual member of society not to harm other individuals, and a corresponding right of each individual not to be harmed. This principle implies liberty, that is, the freedom to “pursue our own good in our own way” within the bounds of rights, rights understood as protections against interpersonal harm (17). As long as one’s actions do not harm others, they remain within the domain of liberty.

Mill’s anti-paternalism is a subset of his Harm Principle. Let paternalism be defined as “the assumption of sovereignty by society over the actions of an individual member, with the intended purpose of furthering the happiness of the subjected party.” The articulation of the Harm Principle previously mentioned is immediately followed by the statement that the individual’s “own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant” for the exercise of power by one individual over another, or by all of society against an individual (4). It is important to note though, that logically, the Harm Principle must prohibit not just the use of force when its end is the happiness of the coerced individual, but also in non-paternalistic cases where the end is the happiness of the coercer or of a third party.

Upon reaching this point, we should expect to find a fundamentally hedonistic utilitarian justification for the Harm Principle and its corollary, the anti-paternalism principle, both of these being principles of justice, both of which Mill believes necessarily have a utilitarian basis. And indeed much of his defense of liberty is a substantiation of his utilitarian claim that “mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest (18).” An elaboration of this statement that plays a prominent role in his book is the argument that liberty is the necessary condition for diversity in ways of life, which in turn is necessary for a trial-and-error process that improves individuals and societies over time.

The individual, as well as society, is fallible in its moral judgment, and thus requires for the discovery of what is valuable (that is, conducive to happiness) the opportunity to compare various ways of life with each other in order to learn what is valuable and worthless in each life experiment, and emulating or converting the former into customs. Because all things, including ways of life and customs, are valued instrumentally for their tendency to generate happiness, Mill means in the above argument that individual freedom allows for a learning process that helps us improve our ability to achieve happiness on an individual and social level. Following this line of argument, paternalism can
be shown to be wrong because the imposition of a mode of action upon a subject with the intention of improving his lot, prevents him from contributing his unique experiences (both failures and successes) to the wisdom of society regarding the achievement of utility. In other words, paternalism, as well as non-paternalistic violations of individual liberty, inhibit the progress of individuals and society toward greater happiness.

He also argues paternalism is wrong because a given individual tends to be better at securing his own happiness than any one else is at securing his happiness. This is true both because the individual has a greater motivation to secure his own happiness than anyone else, and because he is more knowledgeable about his individual situation and needs than anyone else; anyone else will inevitably rely on “general presumptions, which may be altogether wrong, and even if right, are as likely as not to be misapplied to individual cases” (98). The truth of the latter claim is most evident when we consider that the primary initiator of paternalistic intervention is the centralized state, which intervenes by necessity on the basis of highly standardized information and thus ignores particularity to some degree. Putting this point together with the previous utilitarian argument, we can see that what Mill is saying is that freedom tends to produce utility for the individual who enjoys it, and in those cases when the individual, on account of his fallibility, fails to use his freedom to maximize his own happiness, his mistakes are a social good, increasing the wisdom and thus the happiness of society. The second part of that argument is expressed eloquently in negative form by Herbert Spencer when he says that “the ultimate effect of shielding men from the effects of folly is to fill the world with fools” (Spencer 354).

Considering his fundamental Happiness Principle as well as the two-part utilitarian anti-paternalist argument just mentioned, we must conclude that his voluntary slavery exception to the Harm Principle is without foundation. He argues that an individual should not be permitted to voluntarily submit to a slave master:

His voluntary choice is evidence that what he so chooses is desirable, or at the least endurable, to him, and his good is on the whole best provided for by allowing him to take his own means of pursuing it. But by selling himself for a slave, he abdicates his liberty; he forgoes any future use of it beyond that single act. He therefore defeats, in his own case, the very purpose which is the justification of allowing him to dispose of himself. (133)

In other words, voluntary slavery is impermissible because the purpose of liberty is to permit the individual to pursue happiness; using one’s liberty to surrender one’s liberty, and thus the necessary means to happiness, defeats the essentially utilitarian purpose of liberty.

But in light of the claim previously made that liberty, even in failing to secure the happiness of the individual exercising liberty (which it is bound to occur on account of human fallibility), can contribute to the happiness of society, his justification for prohibiting voluntary slavery makes little sense. The voluntary slave sacrifices utility for himself, but in doing so contributes to the wisdom of society, impressing on or reminding his fellow men of the truth that sacrificing liberty is not a prudent means to achieving happiness. The voluntary slave produces utility for all members of society, and the widespread utility generated by his slavery probably far outweighs whatever utility he sacrificed in voluntarily signing away his future freedom.

In fact, an essential part of Mill’s utilitarianism, his belief that the value of happiness is neutral with respect to persons, strongly supports this utilitarian argument in favor of permitting the martyrdom of the voluntary slave for the benefit of society. Mill states:
The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. (174)

With this in mind, Mill justifies martyrdom in general with an argument very similar to the utilitarian justification for voluntary slave contracts just given: “all honor those who can abnegate to themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by such renunciation they contribute worthily to increase the amount of happiness in the world” (172).

Showing that Mill’s grounds for defending individual liberty justify slavery is almost a reductio ad absurdum, and seems at the least to decrease the potency of his defense of liberty. So far though, we have only examined the case against voluntary slavery stated in hedonistic utilitarian terms, that is, solely in terms of pleasure and pain. But there is some ambiguity in Mill regarding his approach to utilitarianism, that may allow us to read him as objectivist rather than hedonistic, and to apply this element in Mill to the task of justifying more adequately the voluntary slavery exception. Ideally, we would want to do this without belying his distinct preference for anti-paternalism.

In chapter three of On Liberty, he seems also to make the case for a non-hedonistic utilitarianism. What he calls “individuality” is presented as something intrinsically as well as instrumentally valuable, rather than merely valuable as a means to pleasure. That this idea is present in Mill is suggested by the title of this chapter, according to which individuality is an “element of” and not a means to well-being.

His individuality has two intimately related components. First, possessing individuality means cultivating a unique and well-defined character. A person possessing individuality thus understood, attains “the highest and most harmonious development of his powers into a complete and consistent whole [Mill quoting Humboldt]”-- he “makes his desires and impulses his own,” so that they are “the expression of his own nature” (77). Secondly, he defines individuality as the development of distinctly human faculties--“the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being…the human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference” (75). These faculties are only put to use and thus trained and developed, in acting freely, as opposed to acting reflexively according to the dictates of culture or in complying with the coercion of the state. When one does the latter, one is no more than a “sheep,” in the sense that one is non-autonomous and indistinguishable from other individuals in conformist obedience (87).

Putting these two ideas together, we can say that individuality is the cultivation of one’s distinctly human faculties toward the end of perfecting a unique and autonomous self. Mill defends individuality thus defined, partly in instrumental terms. Individuality manifests itself in the aggregate as a diversity of ways of life, which is a utilitarian benefit for reasons already explained. Going into more detail on this point, Mill identifies the spirit of liberty with progress because conditions of individual freedom, especially from cultural pressures to conform, permit the proliferation of eccentric geniuses who make transformative contributions to culture:

There is always need of persons not only to discover new truths, and point out when what were once truths are true no longer, but also to commence new practices, and set the example of more enlightened conduct, and better taste and sense in human life (82)

On the other hand, statements like this one seem to suggest that individuality is valuable independently of its utility: “it is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in
themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation.” The “nobility” and “beauty” of man seem to refer to the inherent value of his individuality. Mill bemoans the fact that popular opinion does not recognize “individual spontaneity” as having any “intrinsic worth” (73). The Harm Principle, which is to say liberty, may be justifiable not just by reference to the Greatest Happiness Principle, but also by reference to what we might call the Greatest Individuality Principle, which would command the maximization of individuality in society.

What if we apply the Individuality Principle to the dilemma of voluntary slavery? The slave surrenders his individuality in that he relinquishes his ability to judge and act for himself, and thus subjects his individual development to the will of his master. But if individuality is the value is taken into account in the utilitarian calculus, the same problem does not arise as with a hedonistic calculus, in which the disutility to the individual caused by his losing his freedom is outweighed by the utility produced for others who learn from his error. The determination by society regarding whether slavery brings happiness to the voluntary slave requires the observation of actual slavery by society. By contrast, that slavery violates individuality (understood as the combination of autonomy and uniqueness) can be known a priori, because slavery by its very nature involves the exercise of complete sovereignty by one individual over the actions of another, and thus the violation of autonomy, and by association, individuality. Hence, social learning from the voluntary slave’s folly provides no utilitarian benefit in terms of individuality.

An objectivist utilitarianism that seeks to maximize individuality in society provides a stronger defense of liberal freedom than hedonistic utilitarianism. This is so because the former avoids the reductio ad absurdum of permitting slavery in the name of freedom. Ultimately, however, both versions of utilitarianism provide compelling arguments for liberal freedom, in terms of two distinct and intuitively valuable ends, happiness and individuality.

Works Cited
