

Refereed paper delivered at
Australian Political Studies Association Conference
6 – 9 July 2008
Hilton Hotel, Brisbane, Australia

**‘Freedom in a determined world’: John Stuart Mill’s philosophical engagement
with Robert Owen, and its effect on his politics**

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Abstract

This paper explores Mill’s and Owen’s incompatible conceptions of character and autonomy. Mill’s conceptions of autonomy and social liberty are indebted to his early opposition to the Owenites, who he debated several times in the 1820s as a member of the Utilitarian Society. Exploring Mill’s engagement with Owen’s idea of character can elucidate some alleged inconsistencies in his later essays. It can also enrich our understanding of Mill’s idea of autonomy, on which his defence of a sphere of ‘moral and intellectual liberty’ is based.

‘Freedom in a determined world’ is Alan Ryan’s encapsulation (1990, 103) of the product of John Stuart Mill’s attempt to reconcile autonomy and causation in a naturalistic framework. The prevailing critical response to this rather odd project is memorably expressed by W.S. Jevons and John Bowring, two of Mill’s contemporaries:

Mill’s mind was essentially illogical... in one way or another Mill’s intellect was wrecked.¹

[He] was most emphatically a philosopher, but then he read Wordsworth and that muddled him, and he has been in a strange confusion ever since.²

If the political complexities of Mill’s one not-so-simple principle are to be resolved, and if the traditional interpretation of Mill as an essentially confused and illogical thinker is to be allayed, it is necessary to explore his ideas of autonomy and character, both of which were formulated in direct opposition to the socialist and industrialist Robert Owen. Without agency – the ability to choose or to resist – it is difficult to provide a utilitarian justification for protection from social oppression, and the utilitarian imperative can become interventionist. It can advocate the forced promotion of aggregative utility, or of some other good, regardless of the irresistibly coerced, and therefore illegitimate, desires of a community.³ Such was the view, itself not completely free of the utilitarian influence, propounded by Owen.⁴

The alleged intractability of this problem, and the apparent incoherencies at the core of Mill’s individualist-utilitarianism, were asserted *ad nauseam* in the last century. Its proponents form a distinguished list: John Plamenatz (1959, 123) argues that Mill’s essays *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism*, and *Considerations on Representative Government* ‘exhibit all his defects as a thinker, his lack of clarity, his inconsistency, and his inability either to accept wholeheartedly or to reject the principles inherited from his father and from Bentham’; Maurice Cowling (1963, xii) considers the ‘moral totalitarianism’ of Mill’s radicalism at odds with the ‘libertarian’ doctrine propounded in *On Liberty*; Gertrude Himmelfarb (1974) alleges that there are two Mills, one an absolutist utilitarian, the other a libertarian individualist; and even Isaiah Berlin (2002a, 246) considers Mill’s politics ‘not... of the highest intellectual quality: most of his arguments can be turned against him; certainly none is conclusive, or such as would convince a determined or unsympathetic opponent.’

These interpretations have persisted, in some form, since the 1850s, but none of them considers the role of character in forming Mill’s political views. Considering that Mill owes his legacy primarily to his essay on liberty, and that he believes the

¹ As quoted in Semmel (1984,155-6). The interpretation of Mill as a fundamentally inconsistent thinker is challenged most successfully by Ryan (1990) and Skorupski (1989). In contrast to the views presented above, Skorupski (1989, 43) writes that ‘Mill’s philosophy wears well. It has a basic strength and soundness of design. Parts need replacing, yet it keeps on going, rather quaintly upright, but solid and steady, when more fashionable products disappear from the road.’

² As quoted in Snyder (2006, 12).

³ For a brief summary of this common objection to utilitarianism, and for an acknowledgement that it is inapplicable to Mill, see Berlin, (2002a, 237).

⁴ ‘The end of government is to make the governed and the governors happy. That government then is the best, which in practice produces the greatest happiness to the greatest number’ (Owen 1814, 129; c.f., 26-7).

conception of autonomy it defends is grounded in his utilitarianism, his conceptions of autonomy and character still demand clarification.⁵ Indeed, as John Skorupski observes (1989, 42), if either is incoherent ‘the fracture line would go right through his philosophy.’ This paper locates Mill’s notion of character in his early formulation of a compatibilist account of the extent of human autonomy in a physical space governed by causation. I first give a brief exegesis of Owen’s idea of autonomy, and then an account of Mill’s response, before criticising both. The paper offers some concluding reflections on the logical integrity of Mill’s politics, seen as an extension of his notion of character.

Character, Autonomy, and Politics

Mill’s and Owen’s political philosophies, and their conceptions of human character, stand diametrically opposed. Put crudely, Owen denies autonomy and Mill affirms it. Owen’s view is that, ‘character is not made *by*, but *for* the individual’.⁶ The ‘Great Truth’ of metaphysical investigation is that ‘[M]an is *not* a free agent, and does *not* create his own qualities, his will, or his conduct (Owen 1849, xxiii).’ Humankind ‘ever had been, was, and ever must be, the creature of the circumstances made to exist around him before his birth’ (Owen 1849, 9).⁷ The existing state of ‘error and misery’ is to be remedied not by revolution or war or enfranchisement, but by ‘reason’. This necessarily requires coercion, though Owen (1849, 49) prefers more passive language:

[T]o induce parties willingly to change their present position, and to have their old habits changed, the new circumstances must be made to be evidently superior to those in which they now are.’

The role of the state is therefore to

...establish rational plans for the education and general formation of the characters of their subjects. These plans must be devised to train from children from their earliest infancy in good habits of every description (which will of course prevent them from acquiring those of falsehood and deception). They must afterwards be rationally educated, and their labour be usefully directed (Owen 1814, 27).

This leads Owen (1849, xxxii) to propound a radical and paternalistic imperative, which, he thinks, will secure ‘the happiness of all nations and individuals’: character ought to be *given* ‘to the community at large’.

When this principle of rationality [that character is formed *for*, not *by*, the individual] shall be taught to all from birth, there will be no difficulty in giving a good and wise character to every one, and permanent, useful, and pleasant occupation to all.

⁵ For the view that a conception of autonomy is crucial to political philosophy see Philip Pettit (2001).

⁶ Owen (1849, 4; c.f., xxxi). The following maxim appears on the cover of the 1832 edition of the Owenite periodical *The Crisis*, below a portrait of Robert Owen: ‘It is of all truths the most important, that the character of man is formed FOR – not BY himself’. The front-piece is reproduced in Donnachie (2000, 148-9). See also Owen, (1849, xxxi, 4).

⁷ For an investigation into the extent to which Owen can be considered an *absolute* determinist, see Harrison, (1969, 81-2).

Mill's position (1843, 840) is the perfect opposite: '[w]e are exactly as capable of making our own character, *if we will*, as others are of making it for us.' The state Mill envisions (1859a, 223-4) has no role whatsoever in interfering with the character of its citizens:

...the sole end for which mankind are warranted, collectively or individually, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection... His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant... Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

The crucial difference is not that Owen thinks that character ought to be improved and Mill does not – Mill clearly does (Elliott, 223). The crux of the dispute is their disparate views on the forces acting upon its development. Owen (1814, 26-8) tasks government and society with forming character on behalf of the individual; Mill (1859a, 222-5) assigns this responsibility to the individual. As will be explained, Mill not only thinks that character is formed *by* the individual as a matter of empirical fact, he thinks that character ought not to be formed *for* the individual as a political imperative.

Owen, Character, and Utopian Socialism⁸

In 1800 Owen began 'the groundwork on which to try an experiment long wished for' (Owen 1814, 77). The experiment would be based on his most fundamental conviction: character is formed *for* the individual by antecedents over which he or she has no power. A Welsh entrepreneur, Owen bought the New Lanark cotton mills, located in the Scottish lowlands, from his father-in-law Robert Dale in 1799.⁹ Lanark was already a working community by this time, with a population of 1,334 in 1793, growing to over 3,000 by 1814. Aside from, but not independent of, financial considerations,¹⁰ Owen sought to construct a society free from all of the degradations and inequalities which rapid industrialisation had produced. There was much to be reformed in Lanark itself; Owen's first impressions were of a 'wretched society' where poverty, crime, 'vice and immorality prevailed to a monstrous extent'. In addition, Dale had used child labour, around 500 children 'procured [between the ages of six and eight] chiefly from workhouses and charities in Edinburgh' (Owen 1814, 42-4).¹¹

According to Owen (1814, 19), character can be 'given' to a community through correct teaching and organisation:

Any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant

⁸ Harrison (1971, 162) considers 'communitarianism' a more accurate description than 'utopian socialism'. Macintyre's *After Virtue* changed the meaning of this term ten years after Harrison's work was published, so, in the interests of clarity, this article will prefer 'utopian socialism'.

⁹ For the history of Owen's procurement of the site see, Donnachie, (2000, 73-81). For Owen's account, (1814, 41-58).

¹⁰ Harrison (1971, 161) bluntly describes Owen as 'a successful industrialist who made a fortune in cotton spinning'.

¹¹ Though Saville (1972, v) claims that 'the employment of pauper children revolted him', Owen (1814, 44-5) reports approvingly of the conditions in which the children lived, and of the education with which they were provided, and he describes Dale's use of child labour as 'a most complete charity' and one of 'necessity'. See also Owen (1849, 18-20).

to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by the application of proper means; which means are to a great extent at the command and under the control of those who have influence in the affairs of men.

Though Mill was well acquainted with the British and Continental intelligentsia, the wealthy Owen was in a position immediately to implement his 'New View of Society', based upon 'the principle of Good and Truth', in opposition to the existing hegemony of 'the principle of Evil and Falsehood (Owen 1849, 3).' Factory conditions were not regulated by law, so Owen's role was patriarchal. '[T]he time is *now* arrived', he proclaimed (1814, 21), 'when the public mind of this country and the general state of the world call imperatively for the introduction of this all-pervading principle [that character is formed by uncontrollable antecedents], not only in *theory*, but into *practice*.'

According to Owen, creating a perfectly harmonious community requires isolation, extremely long and hard work on the part of the inhabitants, and a 'strict regime' (Owen in Donnachie 2000, 80-1). Ian Donnachie (2000, 80-1) paints a bleak picture of life for the Lanark workers during the first years of Owen's tenure:

'[The settlement was] reached by a steep and winding road. The entry way was guarded by two symmetrical gatehouses and where the river or steep valley sides did not intervene between the mill lands and the outside world, adjoining gentlemen's estates were walled against trespass... After the long working hours there was nowhere for folk to go apart from their dwellings and therein apart from each other's company, resort might be made for solace to the bottle... Between the tenements and the factory ran the mill lade, like the river beyond, an ever present danger of drowning for young children. In the mills themselves, cotton choked the lungs, open machinery threatened life and limb, and, since so much of it was constructed of timber, and candles or lamps were needed morning and night, there was a constant risk of fire. Finally, pilfering was widespread in the early factory system...'¹²

At New Lanark Owen did not seek to remove the social oppression despised by Mill and Tocqueville, he sought to institutionalise it. Given the conditions in the town described by Donnachie (2000, 81), '[s]ocial and environmental controls... were therefore necessary not only for improved business efficiency, but also for the maintenance of good order.' Coercion was crucial in New Lanark. For example, Owen and his managers recorded the behaviour and productivity of each worker in 'books of character'. Owen compared this method of surveillance 'to the supposed recording angel marking the good and bad deeds of poor human nature (Owen in Donnachie 2000, 82).' According to Claeys (1989, 123), the content of these books was publicly displayed: coloured 'blocks of wood were suspended over the workplace of each employee and rotated according to performance, such that each knew how the others were graded.' Owen's intention, according to Donnachie, was to provide a form of self-regulation, where public opinion would be a 'silent monitor' of the individual.¹³ According to a report from a visitor to the site in 1833, in addition to

¹² For more details, see Harrison, (1969, 151-157).

¹³ Donnachie (2000, 81-2) also gives an account of the coloured-boards system. *Robert Owen*, 81-2.

these methods Owen's system was implemented and policed by 'a constant system of beatings' There were also 'random searches of workers', summary dismissals 'for being absent without permission', fines for drunkenness, a 10.30pm curfew, and periodical inspections of the lodgings by Owen's 'military police' (in Donnachie 2000, 80-2).

Life for the workers was not entirely nasty and brutish, however. According to the account of a different visitor in 1800, Owen assigned time after working hours where the inhabitants were given '1½ hours schooling'. This included not only reading and writing, but also singing and dancing lessons. There was also a 'degree of equality' among the workers, according to Donnachie. Finally, Owen set up a savings fund and a 'sick fund', which, by 1818, had funds of £3000, a considerable sum at the time (Donnachie 2000, 80-84).

Almost every aspect of life in New Lanark was monitored and controlled, and Owen's vision was meticulously enforced. With these methods, Owen set about reforming the closed-community. If character is made for and not by the individual, then centralised, omnipotent, and benevolent control of the polis appears to be plausible. One could inculcate the 'good character' in a similar practiced by Owen.¹⁴ Community and social cohesion would be the political means, and wealth, happiness, and virtue the ends. This idea is embodied in the following extract from an Owenite 'Social Hymn' of the 1840s, which also exemplifies the spirit of Millenarianism:

Community doth wealth increase,
Extends the years of life,
Begins on earth the reign of peace,
And ends the reign of strife

Community does all possess
That can to man be given;
Community is happiness,
Community is heaven.¹⁵

Mill on Character and Autonomy

Mill's political philosophy is almost as far removed from Owen's as is possible. It is important to note, however, that Mill's opposition to Owen is not a reaction against socialism, or against a feeling of common purpose or community as such.¹⁶ As Mill's posthumously published, and incomplete, *Chapters on Socialism*

¹⁴ There is no doubt that Owen considered the success of the Lanark community a vindication of his principles on character. See Owen, (1814, 29; Harrison 1969, 153). The connection between productivity and 'improvement' (in the Millian sense of the world) is beyond the scope of this article. I merely point out that if it can be shown that such a connection exists, if, in short, Owenism works, then this would present a serious challenge to Mill's idea of self-determination (as a means to happiness) as the highest political good.

¹⁵ As quoted in Harrison (1969, 137).

¹⁶ See Baum, (2007, 98, 100). Mill (1874a, 239, 199; Stillinger 1961, 142) refers to himself as an adherent of 'qualified Socialism' and classifies his (and Harriet Taylor's) political views as 'decidedly under the general designation of Socialists', a position which 'went far beyond Democracy'. Mill (1830, 47; 1879, 737-8) in fact remarked on the 'practicable' nature of Owen's socialism, as opposed to other, more revolutionary forms such as that preached by Gustave d'Eichtal. According to Mill

aptly demonstrates, Mill had a subtle and sympathetic understanding of British and French socialism, and of its most prominent nineteenth century exponents.¹⁷ In particular, he admired the ‘remarkably progressive attitudes towards relations between women and men’ expounded by the Saint Simonians, Owen, and Fourier, all of whom were committed, in Mill’s words, to ‘perfect equality’ between the sexes (in Morales, 1996, 35). Although the Radicals (represented by James and John Stuart Mill, Bentham, and John Arthur Roebuck, among others – see Thomas 1979) and the Owenites were often in philosophic conflict, they nevertheless were allies in the great project of reform which marks the Victorian period. Indeed, according to Capaldi (2004, 17) Bentham himself ‘achieved financial independence’ by investing in Owen’s New Lanark project after the failure of the Panopticon.

Necessity and Determinism

Rather than a problem with socialism, Mill’s objection was to the political implications of Owen’s idea of character and of his total denial of autonomy. His point is that determinism in philosophy manifests as despotism in politics. Mill identifies this ‘liberticide’ in the political philosophy of Auguste Comte as well as that of Owen: ‘The united forces of society never were, nor can be, directed to one single end, nor is there... any reason for desiring that they should.’¹⁸ The idea of autonomy is, for Mill, logically prior to these political issues, however; and it must be explored before they can be understood.

Mill’s concept of autonomy does not fit easily into his epistemological framework. In the *System of Logic*, he seeks to reconcile a free-choosing self with universal causation. Mill (1843, 323-370) develops what he calls the ‘Law of Universal Causation’¹⁹ (that effects are subject to laws of causal succession, discovered by observation), but he asserts simultaneously that human character is fundamentally malleable according to the volitions of the individual, who possesses at least some power over the forces acting on his or her character (Mill 1843, 840). ‘The problem’, according to Ryan (1974, 85), ‘is very simple’:

The *Logic* is a reformer’s book; to advocate reform presupposes that people have a certain amount of choice about what they do, enough at any rate to make it worth encouraging them to make certain choices and not others. Yet the foundation of the *Logic* is the pervasiveness of causation; if

(1839, 486), Owenism is measured and rational, while revolution is bloody and impulsive.’ Mill (1866, 387) also paid compliment to Owen, considering him comparable to other ‘great reformers’. Mill’s list is Luther, Fichte, Bentham, Voltaire, Rousseau, Fourier, Owen.

¹⁷ There is not a single mention of Marx in all of the thirty three volumes of Mill’s *Collected Works*. Though Marx certainly knew Mill’s work (evidence of ‘an insipid, brainless syncretism’), it appears that Mill, whose breadth of literary knowledge is legendary, was entirely ignorant of Marx. See Popper (1971, 87).

¹⁸ Mill (1829). On this occasion, Mill is referring to Comte, but the critique applies also to Owen. See also Mill (1865, 301-4) for a critique of the of Comte’s paternalism.

¹⁹ ‘The Law of Causation, the recognition of which is the main pillar of inductive science, is but the familiar truth, that invariability of succession is found by observation to obtain between every fact in nature and some other fact which has preceded it; independently of all considerations respecting the ultimate mode of production of phenomena, and of every other question regarding the nature of “Things in themselves (Mill, 1843, 326-327).”’

everything we do has its sufficient causes, then how could we ever do anything we do not do?

While social and physical antecedents are indeed formidably oppressive, the individual, Mill thinks (1843, 355, 840; Ryan, 1974, 24) in contrast to Owen, has a 'will' which can itself become an antecedent: 'Our will causes out bodily actions in the same sense, and no other, in which cold causes ice, or a spark causes an explosion of gunpowder.'

Mill considers his and Owen's philosophical difference amenable to empirical investigation. In short, Mill thinks Owen makes a demonstrably false claim about autonomy. Owen, according to Mill, exemplifies fatalism, the most extreme form of determinism. If uncontrollable antecedents determine every human action, there can be no choice or autonomy and, to use Mill's analogy (1859a, 264), the individual is free only to the extent a steam train is free. As Mill thinks spontaneity and individuality are crucial to happiness, this is indeed a serious problem.²⁰

Mill is therefore forced to accommodate choice of action into the causal structure; his phrase for this is 'Philosophical Necessity'. Mill gave great thought to Owen's idea that 'the character of all persons had been formed for them by agencies beyond their control, and was wholly out of their power that character is made for the individual.' In fact, he reports that this problem 'weighed like an incubus on my existence' during his depression (1874a, 175-6).²¹ At this crucial stage in his intellectual development, during which he was conceptualising the *System of Logic*, he realised that causation need not force fatalism (Mill 1843, 836-7; 1874a, 176). Mill emerged from his depression, realising that he was 'no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or a stone' (Mill 1874a, 145). He had discovered (1869c, 1554) that 'our conduct has on the average many times more effect on the fate of such of us as are not under the control of other people, than all other circumstances put together.' Owen, Mill realised (1874a, 176), had confused fatalism with Necessity, and the latter is *compatible* with autonomy:

I saw that the word necessity as a name for the doctrine of cause and effect applied to human action, carries with it a misleading association; and that this association is the main cause of the depressing and paralysing influence which I had experienced. I perceived that though character is formed by circumstances, our own desires can influence those circumstances; and that what is really inspiriting and ennobling in the doctrine of free will, is the conviction that our will has real power over the formation of our character; that our will, by influencing some of our circumstances, can modify our future habits or capacities of willing. This was perfectly consistent with the doctrine of circumstances or rather was that doctrine itself properly understood.

This epiphany became the substance of his chapter 'Of Liberty and Necessity' in the *Logic*, in which Mill (1843, 839) elucidates the 'true' meaning of Necessity, which allows for a sense of autonomy:

When we say that all human actions take place of necessity, we only mean that they will certainly happen if nothing prevents... The causes,

²⁰ This is the argument of *On Liberty*, especially Chapter III, 'Individuality as an Element of Well-being'.

²¹ He says, 'I felt as if I was the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances'.

therefore, on which action depends, are never uncontrollable; and any given effect is only necessary provided that the causes tending to produce it are not controlled. That whatever happens, could not have happened otherwise unless something had taken place which was capable of preventing it, no one surely needs hesitate to admit. But to call this by the name necessity is to use the term in a sense so different from its primitive and familiar meaning, from that which it bears in the common occasions of life, as to amount almost to a play upon words. The associations derived from the ordinary sense of the term will adhere to it in spite of all we can do: and though the doctrine of Necessity, as stated by most who hold it, is very remote from fatalism, it is probable that most necessitarians are fatalists, more or less, in their feelings.

Necessity 'properly understood', writes Mill, admits the causal structure of the universe, of which humans are merely one component, while leaving room for personal autonomy and choice. Necessity asserts only that '[effects] never come but through their causes' (Mill 1869c, 1554); it does not follow from the fact that effects always have causes that any given effect is *inevitable*. After a given cause, the effect 'will certainly happen if nothing prevents' (Mill 1843, 839). The problem, in part, is one of perspective; there is a distinction in certainty between explanation and prediction. Laura Snyder (2006, 111) usefully describes this position: 'experience can show us what does happen, but not what *must* happen.' This conceptual distinction is fundamental to Mill's politics, for without it there could be no justification for individuality or 'experiments in living'.

The idea of autonomy Mill affirms in the *Logic* and glorifies in *On Liberty* is essentially one of *resistance*: 'A person feels morally free who feels that his habits are not his masters but he theirs: who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist (Mill 1843, 841)'.²² Mill acknowledges the oppressive nature of seemingly uncontrollable antecedents (such as education, the beliefs of one's parents, and socio-economic circumstances), but he denies that their combined force is *irresistible*. According to Mill, Owen has misunderstood this doctrine. As Owen denies the ability of an individual to resist antecedents, Mill's thinks Owen's doctrine of character formation is tantamount to fatalism: it implies *irresistibility*, that the individual cannot act in any manner other than he or she does. Mill's notion of autonomy, on which his defence of social liberty relies, is found in this crucial conceptual distinction between Necessity (causation) and determinism (fatalism). This distinction has clear political implications: '[w]hat is at stake is no merely esoteric issue in the philosophy of language (Skorupski 1989, 41).'

The core problem for Mill is one of agency, the freedom 'to choose and not be chosen for', the ability to *resist* and to struggle.²³ This is what 'distinguishes men from the rest of nature' (Berlin 2002a, 250-1). The problem of determinism is, for Mill, the problem of Owenism. This is explicit in the following passage, where Mill (1843, 840) attacks fatalism as incoherent and formulates his idea of autonomy in direct opposition to Owen:

The fatalist believes, or half believes (for nobody is a consistent fatalist), not only that whatever is about to happen, will be the infallible result of the

²² For Mill's distinction between resistible and irresistible causes see Skorupski (1889, 43).

²³ This is Berlin's summary (2002a, 237, 222-3, 250-1). See also Mill (1843, 841).

causes which produce it, (which is the true necessitarian doctrine), but moreover that there is no use in struggling against it; that it will happen however we may strive to prevent it. Now, a necessitarian, believing that our actions follow from our characters, and that our characters follow from our organization, our education, and our circumstances, is apt to be, with more or less of consciousness on his part, a fatalist as to his own actions, and to believe that his nature is such, or that his education and circumstances have so moulded his character, that nothing can now prevent him from feeling and acting in a particular way, or at least that no effort of his own can hinder it. In the words of the sect which in our own day has most perseveringly inculcated and most perversely misunderstood this great doctrine, his character is formed *for* him, and not *by* him; therefore his wishing that it had been formed differently is of no use; he has no power to alter it. But this is a grand error. He has, to a certain extent, a power to alter his character. Its being, in the ultimate resort, formed for him, is not inconsistent with its being, in part, formed by him as one of the intermediate agents. His character is formed by his circumstances (including among these his particular organization); but his own desire to mould it in a particular way, is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least influential... We are exactly as capable of making our own character, *if we will*, as others are of making it for us.

This is Mill's compatibilist account of the extent of autonomy in a universe governed by the law of natural causation; it is his blend of naturalism and free-will. The conceptual difficulties are immediate: Mill is trying to construe humankind 'both as natural entities and as autonomous reasoners and doers' (Skorupski, 1889, 42). John Skorupski (Ibid.) characterises this as the doctrine of 'the formation of the self by the self'. Mill's attempt to mesh naturalism and free-will has been influential, though it has by no means succeeded. For example, his rejection of determinism in character formation forms one of Philip Pettit's three conditions for the 'freedom of an agent' in his *A Theory of Freedom* (2001, 6-7).²⁴ Conversely, in his *A Theory of Determinism* (1988), Ted Honderich finds insufficient Mill's 'unoriginal' attempts to refute determinism. I will return to the critical reception of Mill's views below.

Moral Freedom: Virtue, and the Realisation of Autonomy

From this compatibilist account, Mill (1843, 841) concludes that 'only a person of confirmed virtue is completely free'. What he means is that, only a person who successfully resists both the internal motivating desire for happiness and external impediments to action has exhausted the limited scope for autonomy in a 'determined world'. Put simply, to realise the full scope of autonomy the individual must 'act regardless of happiness' (1843, 952).

Mill's distinction between internal and external determinism is crucial to understanding his concepts of autonomy and character. *External* determinism requires an individual who has 'wished but not attained' (Mill 1843, 841). In this case, the individual has power neither over his or her antecedents nor his or her character. '[T]o render our consciousness of freedom complete', Mill says (1843, 841), 'we should

²⁴ Pettit's other two conditions are 'that the agent can be held responsible for what he or she did' and 'that the action freely chosen is one that the agent can own, thinking: this bears my signature, this is me.' Pettit's general theory of freedom is contrasted by Honderich (1988).

have succeeded in making our character all we have hitherto attempted to make it'. Where desires are unfulfilled, the individual is not 'free' because the full scope of autonomy has not been exhausted. The obstruction to desire-satisfaction is usually some form of socio-political coercion of the kind Mill seeks to prohibit in *On Liberty*.

An individual is internally determined if his or her desires are irresistible, if they translate inexorably into action. This inability to act in one way rather than in another is a form of coercion, a restriction in autonomy. Mill's theory of virtue identifies with freedom the autonomy to resist personal desires.

As the only thing desired for itself is happiness, Mill is forced to revise Bentham's utilitarian psychologism. The 'morally free' and virtuous individual, according to Mill, is one who is *not* 'under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure'. If these masters 'govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think', as Bentham asserted (2006, 65), autonomy is severely restricted and almost denied. Mill agrees that everything that is 'desired' is desired as a part of happiness; happiness and the avoidance of pain are the only sources of human desire, and they are the only things desired as ends in themselves.²⁵ But Mill thinks that while all desires relate to a pleasure, there is no corresponding logical necessity between action and desire: not every action is performed with the intention of satisfying a desire for pleasure (Mill 1843, 842; Donner 1991, 20-23). Therefore, Mill rejects psychological egoism: a motive is not always self-interested (Skorupski 1989, 293, 296-7). The willingness to act in disregard of one's own happiness and one's own desires, Mill (1843, 840-1) calls virtue.²⁶ He expresses this as a liberation from the happiness principle – an increase in autonomy.²⁷

The realisation of this ability to resist desires constitutes both virtue and 'moral freedom', which are synonymous. One who has acted in disregard of happiness has utilised the full scope of autonomy possible in a world governed by the law of natural causation.²⁸ This manifests as the 'indirect utilitarianism' of character formation advocated in *Utilitarianism* (1861, 213-4), the *Logic* (1843, 952), and the *Autobiography* (1874a, 147). In all of these works, Mill proclaims acting regardless of happiness as the best method for its attainment, hence affirming autonomy, the ability to resist desires:

Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit.

...on the whole more happiness will exist in the world, if feelings are cultivated which will make people, in certain cases, regardless of happiness. I fully admit that this is true: that the cultivation of an ideal nobleness of

²⁵ In *Utilitarianism* (1861, 238), Mill states this unequivocally: 'to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility.'

²⁶ I take Mill's phrases 'ideal nobleness of will' (1843, 952) and 'nobleness of character' (1861, 214) to be synonymous with, 'virtue'.

²⁷ See the passage entitled, 'A motive not always the anticipation of a pleasure or pain (Mill 1843, 842-3).' See also Mill (1861, 217-8): 'Unquestionably it is possible to do without happiness; it is done involuntarily by nineteen-twentieths of mankind'.

²⁸ Mill makes it clear that this is not to be confused with a doctrine of self-abnegation. Mill identified this as his departure from Stoicism (1861, 217-8; 1852, 176)

will and conduct should be to individual human beings an end, to which the specific pursuit either of their own happiness or of that of others... should, in any case of conflict, give way.

Let your self-consciousness, your scrutiny, your self-interrogation exhaust themselves on that [something other than self-interest or happiness], [and] you will inhale happiness with the air you breathe.

Politically, Mill's notions of autonomy and character, developed in explicit opposition to Owen, bring him to argue for 'moral and intellectual liberty' in the social sphere. The argument is familiar: the autonomy of the individual, the expression of which is crucial for happiness, can be realised only in an atmosphere of freedom of thought and action, limited only by the protection of the same freedoms for others.²⁹ So Mill's solution to the problem of social control over character is as far away from Owen's as is possible. Owen's utopian society seeks to harness antecedent power over the individual; Mill aims to eradicate it, or at least to diminish its influence.

Analysis

There are two immediate weaknesses in Mill's position.³⁰ Though truly to exhaust them would require much more space than is possible here, this article seeks briefly to explore them in the following order. Firstly, Mill's notion of autonomy, as a reply to Owen's, is empirically suspect; secondly, it may not be so valuable in the face of insurmountable social or economic impediments, and therefore the political maxims he produces may be inadequate.

Lack of an Empirical Justification for Autonomy

It appears that Mill never provides a satisfactory answer to the Owenite objection that the allegedly autonomous will of the individual to alter his or her circumstances may itself be an uncontrollable antecedent, present in some and absent in others. After propounding his belief in the ability to alter character, Mill (1843, 840) ponders the Owenite reply that 'since the will to alter our own character is given us, not by any effort of ours, but by circumstances which we cannot help; it comes to us either from external causes, or not at all.' Mill never satisfactorily answers this objection in empirical terms. He even admits that the Owenite position is 'most true' (Ibid.).

Mill does attempt to refute this position, however. As indicated above, his answer relies on his own experiences, and in particular on his epiphany that the philosophy with which he was indoctrinated was inadequate and emotionally bankrupt, and, most importantly, that he could modify it.³¹ But Mill's reply is more complex than this.

According to Mill, for fatalism to hold true, and thus for Owen's politics to be viable, the wish to alter one's character must be pre-determined, or, if it is not, social impediments must permanently prevent its realisation. In short, character must be formed wholly for and not at all by the individual. Mill simply rejects this on

²⁹ This is Mill's harm principle, as developed in *On Liberty*.

³⁰ A third is his theory of virtue which makes the seemingly paradoxical claim that autonomy must lead to virtue. There is insufficient scope to discuss this here.

³¹ In the first two editions of the *Logic* (1843, 1846), Mill inserted a footnote to his affirmation of autonomy which simply reads 'I speak from personal experience' (1843, 839). This note was removed from all subsequent editions.

empirical evidence. He admits that in a strictly causal sense Necessity ‘properly understood’ is true, but he considers Necessity discreet from determinism. Mill modifies his conception of autonomy so that it is *compatible* with his revised definition of necessity, which does not force fatalism. This, as Ted Honderich notes, has been the strategy of a long tradition of ‘compatibilists’, including Hobbes and Hume. Honderich’s position (which is also Owen’s and Isaiah Berlin’s) is that modifying our notion of autonomy so that it is compatible with natural causation is no solution at all. It simply pushes back one step the freedom of the original desire to alter character and dilutes the concept of autonomy.

Mill cannot be absolved on appeal to ambivalence or ignorance, for he was acutely aware of this problem. He makes the very same criticism of the ‘first cause’ argument for the existence of a deity, which was to have such an influence on the young Bertrand Russell. Positing an uncaused causer does not solve the problem of the first cause. It merely raises the further question of what, or who, caused the ‘first’ cause. It also requires sufficient (empirical) evidence be presented which proves there even exists such an entity. Mill thinks this involves a manipulation of language and an inconsistent application of the idea that every effect has an antecedent cause; causation is either true or false, but not both. There is no textual evidence which suggests Mill considered this deficiency crippling to his own position on autonomy.

Mill does provide evidence for his position that the desire to alter character, however coerced by antecedents it may be, is realisable, and therefore, in some sense, autonomous. ‘The depressing effect of the fatalist doctrine can only be felt where there *is* a wish to do what that doctrine represents as impossible (Mill 1843, 841).’ Only a person who wishes to alter his character can ‘feel discouraged or paralysed by thinking himself unable to do it (Ibid.).’ Mill thinks the feeling of autonomy lost or retarded causes pain, such as he himself suffered in the 1820s. ‘[I]f we examine closely’, Mill thinks (Ibid.), ‘we shall find that [the reverse of] this feeling, of our being able to modify our own character *if we wish*, is itself the feeling of moral freedom which we are conscious of.’ However coerced or un-free the initial desire to alter character might be, the fact that it is susceptible to frustration makes it a source of autonomy. The ability to choose to act on, or to resist, such a desire – not the ability *generate* it – Mill calls autonomy, or ‘moral freedom’.

There is some strength to this empirical justification. His own education was one of indoctrination and was itself a study in the formation of character *for* the individual. Bentham and James Mill set about ‘making’ a perfectly rational and virtuous being – a ‘manufactured man’, as Mill calls himself. The way Owen speaks of children as ‘passive... compounds’ must have reminded Mill of his educators’ philosophy and of the incapacitating depression its application produced:

Children are, without exception, passive and wonderfully contrived compounds; which, by an accurate previous and subsequent attention, *founded on a correct knowledge of the subject*, may be formed collectively to have any human character. And although these compounds, like all the other works of nature, possess endless varieties, yet they partake of that plastic quality, which, by perseverance under judicious management, may be ultimately moulded into the very image of rational wishes and desires (Owen 1814, 34).³²

Such are the impressions these principles these impressions will make on

³² Emphasis in original.

the mind of every child so taught; and instead of generating anger or displeasure, they will produce commiseration and pity for those individuals who possess habits or sentiments which appear to him to be destructive of their own comfort, pleasure, or happiness; and will produce on his part a desire to remove those causes of distress, that his own feelings of commiseration and pity may also be removed. The pleasure which he cannot avoid experiencing by this mode of conduct will likewise stimulate him to the most active endeavours to withdraw those circumstances which surround any part of mankind with causes of misery, and to replace them with others which have a tendency to increase happiness (Owen 1814, 35-6).

Mill's position is that he *is* a 'child so taught' and that this simply does not work. The very cause of his depression was that this type of education had failed. Not only could he feel no emotion, his education had removed any sympathy he felt towards the plight of his 'fellow creatures', which was exactly what Owen, James Mill, and Bentham sought to inculcate (Mill 1874a, 137-155). Despite the fastidious hot-housing and censorship (Mill was a 'child who from infancy has been rationally instructed'), he was able to modify his character. Of his own volition, he read Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shakespeare – works banned by his father and Bentham, who considered them sentimental and irrational.³³ It is doubtful that this proof is sufficient to refute determinism. However, Mill does attempt to provide an empirical justification both for his notion of autonomy and his conviction that character is malleable.

The Burden of Proof

The problem revolves fundamentally around the burden of proof and with whom it rests. It does not follow, for example, that Owenite determinism holds true if Mill cannot refute it, or if his compatibilism is unpersuasive. Similarly, Mill has done no lasting damage to the logical integrity of fatalism. At this essential level, the issue ceases to be wholly a political problem and passes into the realms of metaphysics, or even cognitive science. This is no defence of Mill; he consistently deplored the 'backward state of the moral sciences' (1843, 833-4) and his naturalism would not allow any non-empirical study of the first principles of anything related to humankind. Considering Mill propounds such a radical empiricism (in which even mathematics is considered an inductive science), it is reasonable to search for an *empirical* justification of his idea of autonomy.

Should we not find it, however, it does not follow that it does not exist, or that Mill is simply wrong.³⁴ When searching for an empirical justification for Owen's fatalism – for if empiricism is to be the measure of Mill's arguments, it must be of Owen's also – it too is conspicuously absent.³⁵ The best justification for fatalism is

³³ 'Words, he thought, were perverted from their proper office when they were employed in uttering anything but precise logical truth. ... [For Bentham, a]ll poetry is misrepresentation. Poetry, he thought, consisted essentially in exaggeration for effect: in proclaiming some view of a thing very emphatically, and suppressing all the limitations and qualifications (Mill 1838, 113-4)'.

³⁴ It could also be that these problems are inherent to all meta-ethical or metaphysical enquiry, at least in an empirical framework.

³⁵ The empirical evidence provided by Owen is, of course, the implementation of his plan at New Lanark. See Owen (1814, 29). However many problems with Mill's compatibilism, there are at least as many with the political implications of Owen's

one of analytical logic, of ratiocination rather than empirical investigation. In fact, Owen (1814, 33) himself admits that ‘the peculiar original organization of each individual’ is a force affecting character. However flimsy the essential nature of Mill’s concept of autonomy (and it is no empirically weaker than the determinism of Epictetus or the historicism of Marx), it ought to be noted that his solution does not involve any metaphysical leap of faith, apart from an initial conviction in empiricism.

The Notion of Responsibility Requires a Solution

More pressing is that some solution to the problem of autonomy is necessary for any *political* thinker, and especially for a reformer like Mill (Ryan 1974, 85). Without any idea of autonomy, or with its total denial, we are left with the Stoicism of Epictetus the slave, or a form of historical inevitability. The result is no scope to amend, to change, to resist, or to reject. The acceptance of one’s lot is Epictetus’s idea of virtue; the transition from one historical phase to its inexorable successor is Marx’s idea of progress.

This kind of fatalism strikes at the heart of Mill’s political ethos. If there is no possibility of liberation for the slave, or of resisting historical forces, autonomy is necessarily restricted, and even denied, as the scope of possible action is itself restricted (and autonomy is measured by its expression). More importantly, by denying that there is such a thing as an ability to resist, there can be no responsibility, accountability, nor even a modest idea of morality (for every act would be determined). The only moral imperatives in a determined world are acquiescence to inevitability (Epictetus), or facilitating its arrival (Marx).

It is clear that whatever the true metaphysical extent of autonomy, the political problems of civil society cannot be avoided; socio-political life is now inescapable. The isolationism of the Epicurean withdrawal from civil society, for example, is no more of an option than the complete removal of political and social liberty proposed by Owen. Some solution that subscribes neither to fatalism nor to absolute free-will is required. As Mill says (1859a, 276), ‘every one who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit, and the fact of living in society renders it indispensable that each should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct towards the rest.’ Whether or not Mill’s defence of social liberty is adequate is another question, to which I now turn.

A Second Problem: Is Mill’s Diluted Concept of Autonomy Worthless?

Of what worth is Mill’s ideal of a desire-resisting individual in a global society marked by vast socio-economic inequality? To answer this question requires a closer examination of Mill’s idea of ‘desire’ and its connection to action and autonomy.

To use a modified version of Berlin’s framework, desire satisfaction can be

determinism, such as the abandonment of the concepts of responsibility and accountability. More troubling for Owen’s idea that character can be ‘given’ is that he assumes there is such a thing as an individual without a character, just as there is no society without a history – a blank slate (though see Owen 1814, 33). Owen’s idea is not one of re-education, but one of ‘giving’ character. The Platonic analogy of ‘washing’ the dye from wool is inapplicable here for, according to Owen, there is no pre-existing dye to be removed. This is exactly the manner in which Bentham and James Mill thought of the young John Stuart Mill; The title of the first chapter of Michael Packe’s biography is revealing: ‘Tabula Rasa’ (1954, 3-111). Mill at least came to acknowledge that there is always an antecedent affecting character. Mill (1833, 387) too spoke of the ‘vagaries’ of Spencerianism and Owenism’.

obstructed in two ways: physically and superficially.³⁶ Only superficial obstruction is a restriction of autonomy.

A desire is physically obstructed if its realisation would violate what is possible for a human to do. Therefore, a physical obstruction cannot be considered a lack of autonomy – its realisation is impossible. For example, the unfulfilled wish to be taller cannot be measured in degrees of autonomy because the constitution of the human body permanently (that is to say, physically) obstructs it.³⁷ If the concept is to have any significance, that which is beyond the physical capabilities of the human body cannot admit of a measure of ‘freedom’. It cannot be considered an absence of autonomy to wish to alter something unalterable.

A desire is superficially obstructed if the obstacle to its fulfilment may be removed by human action. Consequently, a superficial obstruction is often, but not always, the result of human action, while a physical obstruction rarely is.³⁸ Though only a physical obstacle is truly immovable, it ought to be acknowledged that there are superficial obstacles that, if not actually immovable, for all purposes appear to be so. This informs several of the criticisms of the Millian sense of autonomy. One classic example is the Marxist critique of wage labour: ‘all the conditions of existence of modern society have become... something over which individual proletarians have no control (Marx in Bottomore 1983, 146)’.

The more obvious example of a superficial obstruction with the appearance of immovability is poverty. It is the position of those within one of the two intellectual traditions to which Mill could claim paternity that the wealthy nations possess the *ability* to alleviate poverty, if not to eradicate it altogether (Singer 1999a, 218-246; 1999b). But for the individual living in a condition of poverty, even the most basic desires, such as the want for food, are, without outside interference, permanently (but not, strictly speaking, physically) obstructed. Obviously, the desire to eat does not correspond to an ability to eat, nor can it be resisted. This poses an obvious problem for Mill’s idea of autonomy. If it is possible for a superficial obstacle to be impervious to the efforts of the individual (if it can be removed only with assistance), why not concede to Owen that character might be formed for the individual in the same way?

One immediate response might be that the Millian concept of autonomy is *worthless* in a condition of poverty. However, if this is considered logically to constitute lack of autonomy (not social liberty, or the realisation of desire, but the ability to choose), the concept has no political meaning or relevance. This is an extreme example, and it was not what Mill was thinking of when he conceptualised virtue, character, autonomy, and liberty.

³⁶ Berlin (2002b, 167-170; 2002c, 32) makes a similar division which informs the following discussion. Berlin defines ‘negative liberty’ as an ‘absence of obstructions on roads down which can decide to walk.’ This captures nicely the three central elements in the Millian understanding of desire obstruction: coercion or intervention; choice; and ability. In particular, Berlin’s ‘*can* decide’ is crucial, for it conveys the importance both of physical possibility and of autonomy; indeed it affirms the latter in spite of the negation of the former.

³⁷ This is Berlin’s example. Elsewhere, he argues that, ‘[i]f I say that I am unable to jump more than ten feet in the air, or cannot read because I am blind, or cannot understand the darker pages of Hegel, it would be eccentric to say that I am to that degree enslaved or coerced (Berlin 2002b, 169). The failure to understand Hegel is not, strictly speaking, a physical obstruction, like the other two examples, however.

³⁸ Berlin’s blindness example justifies the qualifiers ‘almost’ and ‘rarely’.

However, the example of a superficial obstruction with the appearance of a physical obstruction is not confined to conditions of poverty. According to Foucault and Marcuse, for examples, it can be as readily apparent in an affluent society. Though their objections to liberal ideas of autonomy are divergent – indeed it is doubtful that they can even be grouped together at all – the point is similar: obstacles to the realisation of desires in modern society are too great, whether or not we are aware that they are obstructed. In line with this sentiment, Foucault (2002, 416) talks of ‘the destiny of man being spun before our very eyes.’ The force of ‘destiny’ (which, by definition, implies a loss of agency), is so overwhelming that ‘man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea (Foucault 2002, 422).’³⁹ In a different context, Marcuse (1969, 87) observes that ‘freedom is still to be created even for the freest societies.’⁴⁰ The question remains: of what value is Mill’s conception of autonomy in the face of a seemingly insurmountable superficial obstruction? This challenge demands an answer in Millian terms, if Mill’s idea of autonomy is to be considered adequate.

One response is that worthlessness does not constitute absence. The existence of autonomy and the political worth of autonomy are discreet matters. This is where the difference between Mill and Owen becomes one of logic first and of politics second. Mill himself assigns an immense amount of power to antecedent forces. He even admits that the character is ‘made’ ‘largely by circumstances’ (Morales 1996, 49). For Mill, the crucial thing is that, while formidable in its oppression, the power of these antecedents is not omnipotent.

The qualifier ‘largely’ provides the core logical distinction between Mill’s and Owen’s conceptions of character; Mill affords the individual with some power, rather than no power. At an Owenite meeting in 1826, Owen was asked ‘whether he was of the opinion that man was wholly the creature of circumstances and consequently has no controlling power over any circumstances whatever; or whether he conceived that man formed one link in the chain of circumstances, and consequently possessed a controlling power to a limited extent (Harrison 1969, 82)’. According to an observer, Owen replied that ‘until it was fully ascertained that the character of each individual was formed for him, he believed man may be said to have been entirely under the control of circumstances’ (Ibid.).⁴¹ With respect to empirical justifications, this

³⁹ Furthermore, in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Bottomore 1983, 188), there is no entry for autonomy and the entry for ‘freedom’ refers the reader to the entry for ‘determinism’.

⁴⁰ The context is Marcuse’s critique of liberal conceptions of tolerance, which he holds to be paradoxical and discriminatory. The discussion revolves around the extent of ‘true’ autonomy in liberal societies. For example, he refers also to the blocking of ‘effective dissent’ and the ‘instrument of domination’ of the unequal distribution of political and economic power (1969, 95).

⁴¹ Though even Owen goes on to dilute his position somewhat. He asserts the doctrine that knowledge increases liberty: ‘the knowledge he has acquired – that he is under the control of circumstances – forms itself a new circumstance, which will give him the power to control a large range of circumstances relative to himself’. Berlin (2002d, 261) argues that this conflation of knowledge and liberty disfigures the history of western political thought ‘in an unbroken line from Chrysippus and Cicero to Aquinas, Spinoza, Locke and Leibniz, Hume, Mill, Schopenhauer, Russell, Schlick, Ayer, [and] Nowell-Smith’. It is interesting that he included neither Owen nor Mill in this list.

position is far more absolutist than Mill's; it is more difficult to prove that *nothing* is chosen or resisted freely, than it is to prove that some things are freely chosen and others not, even if a choice is made with an illusion of freedom where it is in reality absent or at least causally explainable. To Mill, this distinction is of great political significance.

Alternatives

A stronger response to this objection is that if Mill's concept of autonomy is found wanting, or if the compatibilist middle ground is to be abandoned and the individual is considered *wholly* 'the creature of... circumstances', pure free-will and determinism are all that remain.⁴² If the purpose of this kind of metaphysical investigation is to inform political discourse, these alternatives are not viable.

Whatever the metaphysical standing of autonomy, it is certainly possible to restrict its expression. In any particular society, one can have less autonomy, autonomy being measured solely by its expression. If autonomy can be decreased, it can, up to a point, be increased. Mill is surely correct that when we feel we have no choice in any particular matter it is often a serious frustration and sometimes a great source of anxiety and pain (as he felt in the 1820s). Resisting any general psychological claims, it is often the case that the absence of autonomy, represented by a superficially obstructed desire or an inability to resist a desire, is a pain to us. Furthermore, Mill is right to distinguish between the *feeling* of lost autonomy and the *reality* of lost autonomy. If lack of autonomy is a pain, we must be aware that our decisions are somehow coerced, for the idea of pain requires that we feel it. Thus Mill is correct to say that the *feeling* of being coerced, as well as actual coercion, is a sense of pain.⁴³ In the scale between total denial of autonomy and its absolute affirmation, Mill (1843, 841) makes what is in essence a very simple claim: the feeling that one is coerced and has no power to resist some antecedent is a great source of pain.

Mill's Politics

It is logically compatible with his utilitarianism, therefore, for Mill to place the protection of autonomy, however conceived, high on the list of primary objectives for the state. If human action is able to affect the level of coercion in a society (if obstacles are superficial and not physical) then the level of coercion can be diminished as well as increased. However non-autonomous we are, however restricted the ability to choose and to amend may be, it can always be restricted further.

If we were to compile a short-list of values – Mill would not use the language of 'rights' – which we would neither trade nor forego for a supposedly superior benefit, consent would surely be one of them. One might assent to a restriction of social, political, or economic freedoms to prevent some greater abuse or harm to others – after all, liberties must be forfeited on the path out of the State of Nature. One might, for example, assent to some form of wealth equalisation or redistribution in order to alleviate poverty. These would constitute a restriction of freedom of action (liberty), but not of autonomy. What would be difficult to abdicate is *consent*, one's ability to express whatever little autonomy one has. Mill thinks the surrender of the ability to choose so pernicious to individual and social well-being he considers it illogical. As he says in *On Liberty*, 'one is not free not to be free'. This is simply not a choice one

⁴² Owen (1849, 49). At times, Owen inserts the qualifier 'to a very great extent', indicating that even he does not deny some level of individual power over circumstances.

⁴³ The reverse would require an idea of self-realisation, the total abolition of restrictions on action, or absolute free-will.

can make, Mill says, because the abdication of consent is permanent.

I am not arguing that the state which promotes the most autonomy or secures the most freedom of desire satisfaction is also the most just. My point is that, after the satisfaction of the most basic of bodily desires (such as hunger, thirst, and shelter), it is logically coherent with his utilitarianism for Mill to consider autonomy, and its corollary, consent, crucial to the reduction of harm and to the preservation and furtherance of equality, and thus within the province of state authority. Mill makes this point in a faintly melodramatic manner in *The Subjection of Women* (1869b, 336): ‘After the primary necessities of food and raiment, freedom is the first and strongest want of human nature.’

As for the contemporary viability of Mill’s politics, it is a mistake to think that the utilitarian standard, as conceived by Mill, cannot produce a distributive imperative which might remove, or contribute to the removal of, a pernicious superficial obstruction. (Rosen 2003, 7-9). There is nothing in this principle to *prevent* a redistribution of wealth, or even an equalisation of wealth, if it is done with the goal of reducing harm. In his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848, 887), for example, Mill recommended a severe restriction on inheritance: ‘no one person should be permitted to acquire, by inheritance, more than the amount of a moderate independence.’

This is not the place to discuss Mill’s views on political economy, but it is relevant to the above discussion to note that, despite E.H. Carr’s interpretation (1958, 45, 50), Mill was not a free-marketeer. Nor does Mill argue that the pursuit of self-interest will benefit society; his conceptions of character and autonomy force him to argue the opposite (Mill 1843, 951-2, 945; 1874a, 146-8; 1861, 213-4).⁴⁴ Even in *On Liberty* (1859a, 293) Mill argues that

[T]rade is a social act. Whoever undertakes to sell any description of goods to the public, does what affects the interests of other persons, and of society in general; and thus his conduct, *in principle*, comes within the jurisdiction of society.⁴⁵

It would not be difficult to restrict economic freedom in Millian terms. What is impossible in Millian terms is to legislate the moral, intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic tastes, opinions, and desires *for* the individual – to form individual character in the manner practiced by Owen. The good life is for the individual to construct and to pursue, not for society or government to assign and to coerce.⁴⁶ Alleviating

⁴⁴ Mill, *Logic*. 951-2, 945; *Autobiography*, 146-148; *Utilitarianism*, 213-14.

⁴⁵ Emphasis added. Mill (1859a, 293) thinks that ‘the cheapness and the good qualities of commodities are most effectually provided for by leaving the producers and sellers perfectly free, under the sole check of equal freedom to the buyers for supplying themselves elsewhere.’ The point is that government and society can restrict the freedom of trade on grounds of harm to others; Mill thinks at the time he writes *On Liberty* that free trade ensures lower prices and better quality goods. He says nothing about the effect of free trade on equality or on well-being. Had he lived into the twentieth century and observed the effects of free-trade in the developing world he may have revised his position.

⁴⁶ As is often pointed out, he certainly hoped the individual would pursue one kind of life and not another; Mill had his own conception of the good life. See Donner (1991). Mill thinks the ‘good life’ requires choice. It is not something that can be endowed,

suffering caused by economic inequality is not imposing a standard of the good – it is alleviating harm and is defensible wholly in Mill’s utilitarian terms. In agreement with the principle of *On Liberty*, utilitarians argue explicitly that restricting economic freedom is a prevention of harm to others. A more equal distribution of wealth and of opportunity can both be justified by an appeal to the same principle of utility on which Mill bases his defence of social liberty. This is the enterprise undertaken by Peter Singer (1999b; 1999a, chapter 8), for example.⁴⁷

Conclusion

In this sense, Mill is wary of the oppressive nature of popular opinion, which is given expression through democratic governance. He fears the ‘tyranny of the majority’ because of the power it exerts over autonomy – the ability and utilisation of choice – and its expression. Herein lies the value of Mill’s conception of autonomy, as contrasted with Owen’s: social, moral, intellectual, political, and religious coercion ought to be restricted where and if possible, subjected to an initial directive to reduce harm, of which there is never a scarcity. Mill thought the best way to combat these social forces was to create a private sphere for the individual in which the state (and by extension society) interference is prohibited. This does not solve all political problems. Indeed, the language of utilitarianism (‘desire satisfaction’, ‘obstruction’) contributes to the use of its derivative adjective as a term of abuse, implying an impassive, overly simple laboratory-style approach which ignores the messy reality of the human condition.⁴⁸ It does ensure, however, that coercion is restricted and autonomy is allowed the only meaningful expression Mill can give it while simultaneously embracing causation. If this is admitted, the critical focus shifts away from Mill’s conception of autonomy and towards questions of political means and ends: safer ground for a utilitarian.

but must be earned. He makes the same point about representative government and self-determination (Mill 1859b, 122).

⁴⁷ A case for greater welfare can, of course, be made with other means. Philippe Van Parijs’s ‘basic income for all’ idea (2000) is an obvious alternative.

⁴⁸ Utilitarians can only blame themselves for this interpretation. Consider the following metaphor used by J.J.C. Smart (2005, 3), for example, in which the idealisation of the laboratory is clearly evident: ‘The meta-ethical philosopher may far too readily forget that ordinary ethical thinking is frequently muddled, or else mixed up with questionable metaphysical assumptions. In the clear light of philosophical analysis some ethical systems may well come to seem less attractive.’

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