

The Tension of the Perennial, Traditional and Historical in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*

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Reflection on teaching courses in the Western tradition over many years leads the author to identify some unavoidable fundamental questions, among them: What does one mean by “tradition”? Are there perennial insights which persist through time? If there are, how are they affected by changing historical conditions? Are ideas necessarily relative to time and place? Is there progressive understanding or wisdom or is there simply change? What sorts of lessons is one to gain from studying the past? John Stuart Mill’s “On Liberty” is examined with respect to such questions to discern the response of one of the acknowledged masters of modern progressive thought. In turn, some concluding questions are posed to Mill’s response, seeking to extend dialogue on these matters.

Throughout my career at Colorado College, I have taught courses in Western Civilization. The college does not have a single core course with common readings that all students take, but it does require that all new students take a course surveying the history of the West from some important angle. The Political Science Department satisfies this requirement with the entry course into our major, “Introduction to the Western Political Tradition.” Over the years, I have taken an active role in promoting the importance of the Western tradition. I was a co-founder of such courses as “Renaissance Culture” and the current course on the “Western Political Tradition,” and I have also taught the venerable, trans-disciplinary course in our curriculum, “Freedom and Authority,” which has been taught at Colorado College since the early 1950s. Thus for the past thirty years, I have committed myself to introducing my students to the monuments of the Western tradition such

as great books, historic documents, masterpieces of painting, sculpture and architecture, great musical compositions, and classic scientific experiments.

Over the course of that time, I have been moved to inquire not only how to teach courses like these, but why. We need to become more thoughtful about the task of teaching western culture and its role within the humanities. In this essay, I will illustrate my thinking by considering John Stuart Mill's classic text *On Liberty*, a book frequently assigned in the "Western Political Tradition" course. *On Liberty* could be, and often is, assigned in courses on topics such as ethics and politics, social and political philosophy, liberty and authority, modern democracy, and so on. But here it allows me to demonstrate how I challenge my students to reflect on "tradition," "the perennial," and the "historical"—terms that we might otherwise use without even knowing what they mean.

1. Tradition

We enjoy an inheritance of dialogue and reflection on politics handed down to us in a considerable number of books, both ancient and modern, that have come to be seen as especially full of insights of permanent value to us. They are books which, even if occasioned by the particular crises of their authors' times and places, seek to understand politics philosophically, to see in the present discontents what is revealed about the human condition as such. These authors understand themselves to be writing for their contemporaries in part but perhaps even more for the ages. It is thus both useful and necessary to acquaint ourselves with a representative sample of those works, from the time of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to the American Founding and beyond, as a means to make ourselves conversant with the complex range of thinking of the Western tradition.

A tradition is neither static nor defined by a single thought or idea; a tradition is a complex exploration in search of self-understanding; it comprises interminable actions both of preservation and innovation. A tradition is an unsystematic whole in which there is both argument and agreement. One enters into it actively by becoming conversant

with its range and complexity, with its internal tensions addressed and addressed again through time. One might think of a tradition as a dialogue extended through time. It began long before us and will very likely continue long after us. It is always unfinished, and there is always more to be said than has been said, while what has been said before remains pertinent as a guide to what is important to discuss.

We do not, in short, begin from scratch but from wherever in this extended dialogue we find ourselves. We may like where we are or we may long for a different time and place. There will be both affirmation and criticism, agreement and disagreement, and, perhaps, agreement to disagree. That we are embedded in traditions is unavoidable. How we choose to think about and make use of them is our responsibility, and that too is unavoidable. We are, one could say, unavoidably constrained, unavoidably free, and unavoidably responsible.

In this context, reading does not mean simply going through material efficiently. Rather, it means trying to understand how the world looks in the views of those whose thoughts and arguments we encounter, how they may challenge and disagree with our assumptions, how they may reaffirm or strengthen them. Important books are important because they are the means by which we gain access to the full range of thinking that composes our tradition. Careful reading rescues us from, and forces us out of, the temporal parochialism that would confine our thinking to the here and now. In reflection and dialogue, the thoughts of our predecessors become present to us, and recognizable puzzles and predicaments of the human situation cast our immediate concerns into a larger, historical perspective. We can thereby make clearer to ourselves what is novel in our time and place, and what is not, assessing our hopes and aspirations in light of the vast array of hopes and aspirations history records.

Thus we seek to think carefully about the enduring questions of politics through careful reading and discussion. We seek to clarify the vocabulary of political discourse. We seek to understand how, for example, the American political tradition emerges out of, and adapts, the larger Western political tradition of which it is a part. We recognize that, in discussing these matters, we will have both agreements and

disagreements of opinion, that some issues necessarily are heartfelt and personal. But we share the common endeavor to understand better than we understood before, to become liberally educated by accepting the longer road of inquiry whereon the inquiry may be as important as the conclusions we hope to reach. So far as we are individuals characterized by freedom and reason, then, we must each make out of our inquiries something for ourselves with the help and support of our common association in inquiry and dialogue. This is a joint inquiry into fundamental questions about our lives together.

2. The perennial and the historical

Considering the perennial and the historical, I offer my students these questions: In teaching the Western tradition, is one bringing to sight truths valid in all times and places? Is one considering a progressive development in which greater approximations to truth are made over time so that we know more of what is true now than we could have known before? Have we departed from past insights such that we have declined rather than advanced? Does each era (remembering always the difficulty of demarcating eras without arbitrariness) present us with what is true in its context, true for it, but not true beyond it, and thus indicative neither of advance nor of decline, but only of transformation? Is there only an interminable succession of understandings that human beings have generated in responding to the contingent circumstances in which they have found themselves? If we grant that we must be implicated in, and constrained by, what has gone before us, and that our self-understanding may be greater so far as we are aware of what we have been and where we have come from, does it follow that such comprehensiveness will endow us with meaning or protect us? Will it be, as Hegel asserted, that the only lesson we learn from history is that we never learn from history? What is the relation of historical understanding to the quest for wisdom?

On Liberty

Let us consider Mill's famous essay (Mill 1975) for the light it may shed on questions like these.¹ Few will need reminding of the basic

arguments of *On Liberty*; Mill published the book in 1859, and it quickly emerged as a classic expression of modern liberal thought and individualism. Mill explores what it means for us to be associated as free individuals capable both of self-development and of self-governance, who require little governmental control, who are orderly without the need of much coercion, and who are associated in the exchange of ideas through absolute freedom of thought and expression, in the hope of establishing a permanently improving, spontaneously progressing society wherein the disposition to stability and preservation serves not as a brake on progress but as the staging area for continual efforts at improvement without disruption. Mill was a liberal not only because he defended the principle that human beings are free beings, but also because in the necessary balancing of the forces of order with the forces of progress, Mill thought the balance should be struck for the sake of progress, understanding that order is instrumental to progress. “Order” was for him the preservation of those past accomplishments which are genuine contributions to the advancement of the human condition, keeping the way open for further contributions to “Progress.” This way of balancing Order and Progress he thought to be the primary safeguard against decadence and decline. He elaborates this more fully in *Considerations on Representative Government* (Mill [1867] 1993) which complements and extends the arguments of *On Liberty*.

We have in *On Liberty* the vision of a society of collaborative, mature individuals, governed directly or indirectly by a scientific attitude in a procedure of continual dialogue and constructive criticism. In it, Mill emphasizes civil or social liberty, and the tension between Liberty and Authority. Mill is seeking to establish the “nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised over the individual” (1975, 3). According to him, the question is

so far from being new, that, in a certain sense, it has divided mankind, almost from the remotest ages; but in the stage of progress into which the more civilized portions of the species have now entered, it presents itself under new conditions, and requires a different and more fundamental treatment. (3)

Reflections on the questions of the nature and limits of governmental

interference arise classically, Mill says, in Greece, Rome and England. England is the inheritor of an ancient inquiry and aspiration; as such it is, according to Mill, perhaps the most competent purveyor of its current meaning to the world.

Mill has put before us a perennial question concerning human liberty. Yet he thinks that nineteenth century England has progressed to a new stage of civilization in which there is a need to think more deeply about the relation of Liberty and Authority, possibly to arrive at a decisive insight into that relationship which will at last complete previous speculations. Mill, like virtually all of his contemporaries, recognized that circumstances had dramatically altered in the wake of the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution and the American and French Revolutions. Like Tocqueville, he saw that we had entered into a democratizing age, irrevocably separating the spirit of our age from the spirit of every preceding age. Like Tocqueville again, he saw that there was both possibility and peril in this historic transformation. Therefore, while the question of Liberty and Authority persisted, its implication requires fresh reexamination.

The old issue of the tyranny of rulers was more or less resolved by the establishment of political liberties or immunities and then by the establishment of constitutional arrangements to constrain the exercise of political power. In the wake of this resolution, a new project appeared inspired by the desire to establish a common interest between rulers and ruled such that the tension between Liberty and Authority might be transcended. But in America where something like that project had come to be, observation showed that the will of the people is practically speaking the will of the majority. Thus, limiting the power of government over individuals “loses none of its importance when the holders of power are regularly accountable to the community, that is, to the strongest part therein” (5).

The problem of tyranny is thus perennial, but the character of tyranny has altered as the danger of the tyranny of the majority has emerged. Now we must defend against “the tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling” by finding the limit to the “legitimate interference of collective opinion” (6). Does this make the question of what we mean by the per-

ennial more difficult to answer? We cannot return to the past for more than inspiration to gain our bearings in the distinctive conditions of our present. Mill studied the history of western culture and, like Hegel, believed that philosophical issues must be resolved through historical understanding of how they have altered through time, and thus have come to be what they are for us. Wisdom is cumulative but yet there may be decisive moments in history which reveal opportunities for dramatic achievement. Mill was not alone in thinking that he stood at such a point. Man's permanent interest, he insisted, is as a progressive being (12); it is only in this new age, with its new spirit, that Mill believed we could see this fully. What had emerged was the possibility of a society of free individuals who understand themselves to be free and expect to be treated as free.

However, emergent with this new age was the threat of majority tyranny or collective opinion. The prospects of any age's accomplishments are accompanied by characteristic threats to their fulfillment. The fundamental principles of the new age must be articulated if we are to arm ourselves against misunderstanding those principles. The philosophical examination of Liberty and Authority requires both that we understand what these concepts have meant in different times and places, and also what they are for us now. We are dealing with continually transforming, if persistent, questions. The insights of the past are permanently germane to the predicaments for which they are the proper responses. As such, they do not cease to be valid and true, and just so far they are valid and true for us. But to the degree that we must respond to altered conditions, the validity and truth of the latter insights cannot comprehend all that is valid and true.

Thus it becomes necessary for Mill to formulate the basic principle for the new age, that is, the age in which "mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion" (11). The basic 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. 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. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. (10–11)

The rest of *On Liberty* presents the well known and powerful arguments for free thought and discussion as antidotes to the “tendency of all the changes taking place in the world...to strengthen society, and diminish the power of the individual” (15).

At the same time, the utility of strengthening the individual and constraining the power of social opinion lies in the fostering of collaborative inquiry into the ways of continual improvement so that stagnation might henceforth be kept at bay. We must defeat collectivization but at the same time enhance collaboration. The evil of oppressive society will not spontaneously disappear. The temptation to relax and stagnate cannot be eradicated (15). The age of democracy, as is true of all ages, carries both possibilities and perils. The task is to cultivate attitudes and understandings which will keep open the way of improvement against the powerful tendencies to slip back once more into an ossifying age.

On the one hand, free thought and discussion will contribute to a growing convergence of understandings on what is true and best for us. On the other hand, the consensus must emerge through voluntary assent to convincing arguments, not through coercion. For the right to such coercion is no less prohibited to the best governments than to the worst (18). Indeed, only by preserving the possibility of open skepticism about what is thought to be true can we have confidence at all in what we believe and in the method by which we arrive at it. Truth must be understood as a temporary conclusion always subject to revision, a way station on the path to final insight.

Moreover, the vibrancy of the truth depends on the felt need to ponder it and defend it, if not to reformulate it, in light of ongoing criticism. Mill says that “Truth gains more even by the errors of one who, with due study and preparation, thinks for himself, than by the true opinions of those who only hold them because they do not suffer themselves to think” (33).

Progress promises an ever-expanding knowledge of what is best for human beings in the spontaneously improving society. It is only

now, according to Mill, that we can fully visualize this possibility as something more than utopian aspiration. Yet Mill does not think this vision originated in the present. On the contrary, he thinks that it was expressed in the past through extraordinary individuals, the “best men and the noblest doctrines” (24). Mill especially invokes Socrates and Jesus who became martyrs in the cause to realize the vision. What separates our age from all preceding ones is the prospect of universal recognition of the open and progressive society such that the need for martyrs to it will be superseded.

As Mill reminds us, Socrates, the “acknowledged master of all the eminent thinkers who have since lived—whose fame... all but outweighs the whole remainder of the names which make his native city illustrious,” was executed by Athens for his impiety (25). Jesus, “[t]he man who left on the memory of those who witnessed his life and conversation such an impression of his moral grandeur that eighteen subsequent centuries have done homage to him as the Almighty in person” was killed as a blasphemer (25). However, in defeat they were victorious insofar as they kept alive for future generations the thought of the good society which they themselves could possess only in their visions of it.

Mill also believed that, if Marcus Aurelius, whom he described as “a better Christian in all but the dogmatic sense of the word than almost any of the ostensibly Christian sovereigns who have since reigned” (26), had pre-empted Constantine by adopting instead of persecuting Christianity, the day of the good society would have dawned sooner. That this did not happen, Mill calls “one of the most tragical facts in all history” (27).

Mill’s reflections inspire him to the thought of that society in which the price of truth will never again be tragedy and martyrdom, in which the martyrdom of the seekers of wisdom will be rendered unnecessary. Mill’s liberal vision is of the vindication, finally, of Socrates and Jesus, not by directing us to an encounter with the divine, unchanging things above and beyond our temporal existence, but by gaining for their example public recognition in a spontaneously-improving, progressive society. Their vision can now be accessible and known as practicable,

no longer being reserved to the grasp of the philosophic few or the spiritual virtuosos.

Considering the Platonic Socrates, one might ask if Plato's point is rather that there is a tragic conflict between the philosopher and the city, exemplified in the fact that Athens was open to philosophy but also executed the true philosopher because they could not understand Socrates or experience him unambiguously. Could Plato agree with Mill as to the insight to be derived from the example of Socrates? One might also wonder whether Saint Augustine, who saw Christ to be the pivot of world history, could hope for the earthly fulfillment that Mill articulates. We are struck by the thought that the presence to us of great philosophical and spiritual inspirations of the past.

Mill did not think that truth always triumphs over persecution; such optimism, he says, is a "pleasant falsehood" (28). "The real advantage which truth has," Mill argues,

consists in this, that when an opinion is true, it may be extinguished once, twice, or many times, but in the course of ages there will generally be found persons to rediscover it, until some one of its reappearances falls on a time when from favorable circumstances it escapes persecution until it has made such head as to withstand all subsequent attempts to suppress it. (29)

In short, fulfillment may be expected immanently in history. In Mill's time, the practice of executing those of unacceptable opinion had declined dramatically, but other forms of more subtle persecution persist:

Socrates was put to death, but the Socratic philosophy rose like the sun in heaven, and spread its illumination over the whole intellectual firmament. Christians were cast to the lions, but the Christian church grew up a stately and spreading tree, overtopping the older and less vigorous growths, and stifling them by its shade. Our merely social intolerance kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men to disguise them, or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion. It maintains all prevailing opinions outwardly undisturbed, while it does not absolutely interdict the exercise of reason by dissentients afflicted with the malady of thought...the price paid for this sort of intellectual pacification is the sacrifice of the entire moral courage of the human mind. (32-3)

Mill's contemporaries, which include us, are stuck between routinized opinion and the obscure investigations of the isolated experts. To cultivate the fruit that flourishes in the atmosphere of a universal commitment to open discussion and inquiry is the prerequisite to the society Mill believes possible for us. It is important to stress that, for Mill, this is really possible. While we could fail to realize the possibility, we have a special opportunity to achieve it. In one way, Mill is far from being a sentimentalist about the course of history, but in another way he transposes ancient experiences of transcendence into an historic project to moralize political and social life.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we are compelled thoughtfully to ask what we hope for in teaching the classics of the Western tradition. With Mill we have a triumphal story of what is possible for us. Mill stops just short of guaranteeing progress, but there is the assurance of perceiving the broad outlines of what progress must be, what the goal is towards which we are progressing ("convergence on truth"), and what we must do to realize it, together with the confidence that certain societies, admittedly imperfectly, increasingly instantiate the good and progressive society. But the intervening destructiveness of the twentieth century cannot be contemplated without wondering whether we are entitled to maintain the perspective Mill offers. If we go back to the old question (famously "raised again" by Kant) whether the human race is progressing or declining, we might wonder whether Kant and later Mill posed the right question. Mill defends the free society, on the one hand, as intrinsically right for us, but, on the other, as instrumental to a convergence on truth. He did not consider, as Nietzsche was to do, that the truth about ourselves might be unbearable. He also did not consider, as Plato and Augustine would have, the flimsiness and evanescence of all human structures.

Might it have been possible for Mill to have seen further? Mill wished to end the tension of the perennial and the historical by subordinating tradition to contemporary appraisal, such that "order" (past accomplishment) is judged and appropriated by the progressive understanding of the "best minds," the progressive minds, of the present. Yet even for Mill, absolute freedom of thought and discussion requires

guidance and direction from those best qualified to offer such guidance and direction. Some have, after all, seen further along the path of improvement. But this seeing further does not precisely fit with Socratic ignorance or Christian humility, both of which looked beyond the sequence of temporal events for their grounding. It is not clear that Mill's absolute freedom of thought and discussion is in real dialogue with the ancient responses to the perennial questions as Plato and Augustine meant them. Furthermore, as we in the twenty-first century reflect on the past century of total war and holocaust and the prospect of renewed terror and destruction, we must ask what is the status of the "spontaneously improving, continually progressing" society? Has the need or unavoidability of martyrdom become less urgent? What we must confront, it would seem, is the need for deeper thoughtfulness about the experience of the twentieth century in clarifying what we intend—what we hope for—in our endeavor to do what is best for ourselves and our students. To do so is to restore consciousness of the tension between the perennial and historical, the pertinence of past voices in the tradition, to reconsider anew what the ancients have to say to us.

Endnotes

1. All quotations will be from the Norton Critical Edition of *On Liberty*.

References

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