



ORIGINAL PAPER

Principles of Individualism in John Stuart Mill: The Role of Emotions and Feelings in Human Action

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Abstract:

In this study, I intend to show that, for John Stuart Mill, emotions and feelings are not only important for each individual but also play a major role in shaping human action. This significant role is used either constructively or negatively, both by individuals and by society as a whole. Understanding and 'guiding' emotions and feelings is of particular importance in his works, especially *On Liberty*, as it supports the political principle of individualism and contributes to happiness and well-being. The method regards the conceptual analysis of John Stuart Mill's works, with a focus on *On Liberty*, to explore how Mill perceives emotions and feelings as fundamental to both individual autonomy and social dynamics.

Keywords: *John Stuart Mill, feelings, emotions, individual liberty, society.*

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Introduction

In 1859, John Stuart Mill published *On Liberty*, an essay that would become the foundation of classical liberalism and the primary (re)source for discussions regarding the status of the individual in a society that had become more complex, diverse, dynamic, yet also more threatening to the individual.

One of the main directions of Mill's philosophy addresses the relationship between society – whether seen as an abstract entity, encompassing collections of impersonal norms, or as beliefs and values passed on to the majority by nominal groups – and the flesh-and-blood individual, with his fluid limits, means, and purposes. Historically, the individual and society have almost always been in conflict. However, particularly interesting is the interface through which this discord is expressed, namely through feelings and emotions, although not exclusively so: “The practical principle which guides them to their opinions on the regulation of human conduct, is the feeling in each person’s mind that everybody should be required to act as he, and those with whom he sympathizes, would like them to act” (Mill, 2003: 77). At the same time, “desires and impulses are as much a part of a perfect human being, as beliefs and restraints” (Mill, 2003: 125). As a result, the understanding and appropriate use of feelings and emotions can tip the balance in favor of the individual.

Mill's central idea asserts the preeminence of the individual over the masses, with the English philosopher criticizing the excessive power of the “tyranny of the majority” over the individual. It is, in fact, the collective action of the crowd that inflicts terrible damage on freedom. Thus, the individual must be free regardless of the direction and effects of his freedom, as long as he does not infringe upon the private sphere of others (Mill, 2003: 122). Moreover, the axiom of individualism is nuanced by numerous empirical observations, which show that individual freedom has beneficial effects on society, even when, at first glance, it may seem to run counter to it. In other words, by respecting the freedom of the individual, everyone benefits, although in ways that are not without challenges: “The pressure to cope with the liberties of others will tend to bring it about that you appreciate their motivations, and sometimes in a way that can motivate you” (Millgram, 2019: 130).

To convince readers of the importance of individual freedom, Mill is compelled to critique collective representations regarding the exercise of society's power over the individual, as well as common metaphysical prejudices. Thus he argues that the psychological laws, the motives behind action, do not have an a priori nature, as Kant believed, but are acquired through experience: “If there really is this preponderance – which there must be, unless human affairs are, and have always been, in an almost desperate state – it is owing to a quality of the human mind, the source of everything respectable in man either as an intellectual or as a moral being, namely, that his errors are corrigible. He is capable of rectifying his mistakes, by discussion and experience. Not by experience alone.” (Mill, 2003: 90) Consequently, most individuals will naturally pursue reason, utility, happiness, self-expression, or creativity, learning from mistakes as well as from cooperation with others to achieve their goals. Mill is encouraged in this empirical direction by the scientific future of social science, whose foundations were laid by Comte (Hamburger, 1999: 123). However, not all critics agree with this point of view, as there are areas of action (economics, for example) that are interpreted speculatively, without practical experience (Mazlish, 1988: 99).

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Just as with intellectual laws, social laws do not have a metaphysical origin; instead, they are the result of interpersonal experiences or are often generalizations of particular, impactful experiences. These stem from meritorious individuals who transmit not only “examples of more enlightened conduct” but also “better taste and sense in human life” (Mill, 2003: 129). Yet, even these are merely general patterns whose versatility should ideally foster social evolution after first enhancing individuality. However, it must be clarified that society is only a collection of individuals. Where we observe “personalized” qualities within the profile of abstract society, such as strong feelings of aversion and envy, we must understand that they originate from various situations involving specific individuals, even if collective memory does not retain their names.

In his famous essay, Mill highlights the important historical role of emotions and feelings, observable in individual people, explicit groups, and even within the nation as a whole. Thus, certain strong emotions and sentiments-whether positive or negative, real or merely desirable to specific individuals or groups, beneficial to the majority-have contributed to the “establishment of moralities”. Mill notes: “The likings and dislikings of society, or of some powerful portion of it, are thus the main thing which has practically determined the rules laid down for general observance, under the penalties of law or opinion” (Mill, 2003: 78).

Truth and Error in Emotional Subjectivity

Under the pretext of forming social, moral, or political rules, society has come to stifle individualism even before it can manifest. This has led to (self-)censorship functioning primarily as a brake on potential actions, impacting both freedom of expression and, by implication, freedom of thought. Although society accepts the notion that each individual should have a personal contribution within their existential context, it simultaneously upholds the clause of tradition and established behavioral norms that were suitable to certain individuals in specific past circumstances. The influence of society on the individual has become so pervasive that, as Mill asserts, no one has focused on eliminating this political and moral harm but has instead aimed only for isolated changes. Although major historical ideological conflicts (such as universal church vs. confessions, faith vs. atheism) have allowed for the acknowledgment of some political rights for the individual and certain unsanctioned ideas and feelings, the threat of intrusion into the private sphere-whether by society or by government-has been met only with feelings of resistance, whose effectiveness is questionable. It’s important to note that the idea of a state as a protective intervention is an illusion; the government also makes subjective decisions on various types of abuse that are “improperly invoked and improperly condemned” (Mill, 2003: 80).

To stop the assault on individuality, especially as a political principle, we must understand that prejudices and errors in thinking have enabled this situation. Generally, people are accustomed to their own “opinion, of which they feel very certain” (Mill, 2003: 88). These lead them to avoid examining the foundation of their beliefs. Mill argues, “That mankind are not infallible; that their truths, for the most part, are only half-truths; that unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good, until mankind are much more capable than at present of recognising all sides of the truth, are principles applicable to men’s modes of action, not less than to their opinions.” (Mill, 2003: 88). Despite this, many people remain trapped in a vicious circle of error, from

which they find it difficult to escape, whether this originates from their own minds or from others' beliefs upon which they rely unjustifiably. Furthermore, truth is more challenging to obtain than error, as individuals are not naturally and a priori capable of holding truths, and as a result, "for in proportion to a man's want of confidence in his own solitary judgment, does he usually repose, with implicit trust, on the infallibility of 'the world' in general" (Mill, 2003: 88).

Thus, individuals' resistance to the pressure of dominant or representative opinion (church, political party, reference groups) is minimal. Authentic opinion is often surrendered to authority of any kind, without the individual being troubled by the fact "that mere accident has decided which of these numerous worlds is the object of his reliance, and that the same causes which make him a Churchman in London, would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Pekin" (Mill, 2003: 88).

The Natural Barrier of the Intellect

The natural limitations of the intellect also stem from the confusion between the ideas to which individuals adhere by chance (family, friends, etc.) and the diversity of opinions in the entire world—a diversity that includes both the past and abstract ideas entirely different from one's own. In other words, people fall victim to a subjective network of knowledge, often shaped by emotions and feelings unrelated to objective reality.

In this vicious circle of knowledge, immoral strategies of ideological domination have proliferated through inflexible, absolute ideas constructed precisely to be irrefutable. In contrast, the opinions advocated by the English philosopher should be grounded in experience—experience that has not yet been practically disproven. This category of truth, valid *hic et nunc*, is based on trial, error, validation, and invalidation. Mill's method is closely tied to engaging all intellectual faculties: "The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular powers, are improved only by being used" (Mill, 2003: 123-124).

The incomplete person, one who does not possess their own goals and means, becomes an instrument through which authority can absolutize itself, thanks to unconditional submission. Mill argues that some doctrines falsely claim that "all the good of which humanity is capable, is comprised in Obedience" (Mill, 2003: 126), mistakenly deducing that subordination to anything human should follow from worshiping God, even though "the true virtue of human beings is fitness to live together as equals" (Mill, 2008: 79). For such a doctrine, eradicating unyielding instincts seems natural. In reality, an authentic religion aligns God's goodness as a creative being with the fullness of "all human faculties that they might be cultivated and unfolded, not rooted out and consumed, and that he takes delight in every nearer approach made by his creatures to the ideal conception embodied in them, every increase in any of their capabilities of comprehension, of action, or of enjoyment" (Mill, 2003: 127). Beyond this, methodologically sustainable opinions are those open to debate and testing against opposing hypotheses. Mill emphasizes that the truth has to be accepted only after someone "tests it, gives it a scientific or practical form, and fits it into its place among the existing truths of philosophy or science" (Mill, 2008: 125).

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Intellectual errors are common because error is much more likely than truth. Beyond self-evident matters, people cannot fully grasp reality, which explains why many geniuses of the past supported erroneous beliefs. However, anyone can turn to verification and experience, to critiques and opposing viewpoints, but this pursuit is always the prerogative of the individual, not society. The entirety of history's rational strength is simply an accumulation of individual experiences that have proven useful and trustworthy. Furthermore, wisdom is the result of human cooperation, born from each person's instructive interaction with others. As Mill asserts that: „The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner” (Mill, 2003: 90).

Once knowledge is achieved, it can be emulated by other minds, facilitated by emotions and feelings that ease its transfer: „The honour and glory of the average man is that he is capable of following that initiative; that he can respond internally to wise and noble things, and be led to them with his eyes open” (Mill, 2003: 131). This is why people of genius should be naturally and spontaneously imitated by the masses.

Despite the collective errors, negative feelings, and emotions that typically undermine individual liberty, as previously discussed, the fallacy of collectivist thinking can be defeated. The arguments supporting individual freedom are numerous. The benefit of sincere expression and free thought far surpasses merely repeating “good” standards, which are upheld by minds incapable of critical thinking and reason. Freedom of thought has the unique virtue of allowing ordinary human beings the ability to reach the mental development they are capable of. When most of society embraces this freedom as essential ideas and topics large enough, then the “yoke of authority was broken” (Mill, 2003: 103).

Emotions and feelings provide a special lens through which to interpret Mill's ideas and his solid belief in political liberty. Looking at the individual, we see that “desires and impulses are part of a complete human being, just as much as beliefs and restraints; and strong impulses are dangerous only when they are not held in proper balance, when one group of goals and inclinations develops strongly while others that should coexist with them remain weak and inactive: “Yet desires and impulses are as much a part of a perfect human being, as beliefs and restraints: and strong impulses are only perilous when not properly balanced; when one set of aims and inclinations is developed into strength, while others, which ought to co-exist with them, remain weak and inactive” (Mill, 2003: 125).

However, seemingly irrational impulses arising from feelings can, in fact, serve rational actions: “Energy may be turned to bad uses; but more good may always be made of an energetic nature, than of an indolent and impassive one. Those who have most natural feeling, are always those whose cultivated feelings may be made the strongest” (Mill, 2003: 125). “Good” feelings are a vital component when they align with the opinions one holds: “If the grounds of an opinion are not conclusive to the person’s own reason, his reason cannot be strengthened, but is likely to be weakened by his adopting it: and if the inducements to an act are not such as are consentaneous to his own feelings and character (where affection, or the rights of others, are not concerned) it is so much done towards rendering his feelings and character inert and torpid, instead of active and energetic” (Mill, 2003: 124).

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Mill's philosophy thus underlines the importance of balancing personal convictions with emotions that genuinely reflect one's nature and moral reasoning. This balance empowers both individual freedom and the society that benefits from diverse, critically formed perspectives. Viewing society as a whole, feelings and emotions are both indicators of its current state and markers of significant change. Although the English philosopher often speaks of their negative role, there are situations in which these emotions drive political reforms or motivate a mindset adapted to innovation, beneficial to all.

As previously stated, society is not a living organism; any resemblance to people is a mere metaphor, as it lacks a body, will, and, most importantly, purpose. Rather, it represents a collection of general information about the groups of individuals who make it up. This social *modus vivendi* often operates through public sentiments and emotions. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary for society not to be politically oriented, first and foremost, against the individual. The historical exceptions to this rule, according to Mill, include the political and spiritual fervor after the Renaissance and the latter half of the 18th century, the era of Fichte and Goethe in Germany.

Conclusions

While Mill does not entirely exclude the idea of authority intervening in individuals' private lives, particularly on broad and general grounds, he finds such intrusion usually inappropriate: "with respect to his own feelings and circumstances, the most ordinary man or woman has means of knowledge immeasurably surpassing those that can be possessed by any one else" (Mill, 2003: 140). Furthermore, negative feelings toward individuals cannot justify "correction" through social intervention. Even the flaws of "depravation of taste" cannot be eliminated by force from their possessors; instead, such flaws could even be adopted by those incited to despise them (Mill, 2003: 141).

Public sentiments toward specific individuals should be assessed based on how the private sphere of those individuals' actions affects others, with the type of harm caused being crucial. If these sentiments negatively affect others, only non-intrusive or non-coercive actions, such as isolating the behavior and distancing from the agent, should be considered. If the effects on others are severe, punishment can be more drastic (imprisonment, fines, etc.); however, if the behavior affects only the individual, no one has the right to intervene by force, except as a moral duty that functions only if first accepted by the troubled person. In addition to the moral disagreements over group intervention in an individual's life, Mill lists other dysfunctions frequently arising from such corrections. Among these, notably, is the lack of adaptation in the response, because "the odds are that it interferes wrongly, and in the wrong place" (Mill, 2003: 147). Furthermore, the boundaries of group intervention relate to those of deontology, a series of imposed precepts and moral laws never fully internalized by ordinary people, though often applied by them with fanaticism.

The tyranny of feelings also emerges along the lines of political power's intrusion into people's private lives. The main issue here lies in the popular support for this injustice and the complex and often obscure mechanisms that enable it. Because Mill's analysis of such issues (state education, slavery, etc.) mainly focuses on the limits of governance, we reiterate that the individual is complete, endowed with reason and emotions, experiences and judgment, good and bad qualities, only when genuinely free,

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regardless of their chosen actions and goals. No one has the moral right to censor an individual's actions, judgment, or feelings if they do not negatively impact others.

In conclusion, Mill examines the relationship between the individual, with their subjective and objective limitations, and the powerful society in which they live, often unconstrained in relation to the individual. The English philosopher shows that this relationship is frequently mediated through emotions and feelings. Unfortunately, merely describing the effects does not change the cause, as long as individuals persist in foundational errors in their ideas without resorting to experience, openness to diverse perspectives, or a critical stance. Mill's solution is to understand this mechanism and to use it positively—emotions and feelings should become the basis for the individual's evolution and, by extension, that of society. Emotions and feelings play a vital role in a complete being, who should embody enthusiasm, impulses, empathy, sincere belief in one's own opinions, and other "vivid" emotions that provide motivation and energy for action, change, adaptation, or growth.

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Article Info

Received: November 10 2024

Accepted: November 17 2024

How to cite this article:

Răduică, I. (2024). Principles of Individualism in John Stuart Mill: The Role of Emotions and Feelings in Human Action. *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, no. 84, pp. 181 – 187.