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Mill's Political Perception of Liberty: Idiosyncratic, Perfectionist[1] but essentially Liberal

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Abstract: There is a dominant perception of liberty among most contemporary liberals. It is one close to empiricism's portrayal of freedom as a natural right of every person to advance her interests. According to this view, there are no demanding conditions under which people can be regarded as free agents but their unfettered behaviour from external inhibitions. It is widely thought that Mill's liberalism does not deviate considerably from this tradition. The present text suggests a different reading of the gist of Mill's political rationale. Highlighting the positive – in Berlin's sense – aspects of his politically demanding concept of liberty which successfully combines facets of different traditions serves the purpose to stress the alternative features of his approach. Underlining the active political intervention Mill is instructing by implicating the state to preserve the essence of freedom and induce it in society, manifests how his position diverges from that of mainstream neutralist liberals.

Key words: liberty, autonomy, individuality, perfectionism, Mill John Stuart.

Mill is often portrayed just as an unambiguous defender of the freedom to engage in any human behaviour not perceived harmful to others. It will be claimed that such a view of his moral and political philosophy is an unfair and incomplete one. His concept of liberty is overall consistent with his ideal of human flourishing and of a liberal society; a society prospering only when it promotes civic patterns and values transcending the picture of an individual concentrated exclusively in self-interested activity. This conclusion is not though as straightforward as it might sound. Mill's conception of freedom carries strong influences from different and, to a certain extent, antagonistic traditions. They range from empiricism's view of freedom as a natural right of every individual securing her self-interest to ancient Greek and romantic groundings of liberty in the capacity of humans to act in accordance to rational moral law. Contrary to many interpretations of Millian liberty as prioritizing empiricism's emphasis on the freedom to pursue one's private passions[2] I believe that the latter pole of thought had a more profound impact on his understanding of freedom. The German Romantics as well as a direct recovery of Greek ideas of self-development are active influences shaping Mill's ethical thought. "[His] liberal idea was

1] There is an ample range of interpretations attributed to 'perfectionism', e.g. Wall (2008), Haksar (1979), Finnis (1987), Gray (2000b), Hurka (1993), Rawls (1973). The way I use the term here follows more that of Wall. It does not specify the precise content of activities qualifying as perfectionist nor does it dictate political authorities to maximise them. Promoting ideals of human flourishing does not equal promoting excellence. Perfectionism here is compatible with the harm principle in advancing autonomy but in the way I see Mill as interpreting the notion of 'harm' i.e. promoting both negative and positive duties in order for people not to be harmed. It resembles also Hurka's perfectionism in the sense that it pursues as a worthwhile political aim (valuable) autonomous agency.

2] See Berlin (1969), Rees (1985), Ryan (1991), Fiss (2003), Elshtain (2003), etc.

[more] a romantic-hellenic idea of free self-development in every aspect of one's human power." (Skorupski 1999, 224-25)

Notwithstanding the above, Mill challenged the view that ancient classical and modern as well as German romantic and its alleged counterpart, British empiricist views of liberty are at irreconcilable odds. While Mill values empiricism's protection of individual rights, he also shares with the romantics the need for a more substantive view of freedom, one of a competent individual using freedom well. By embracing in his concept of liberty self-legislation and self-determination, he refutes justice as a mere adherence to rules assigning to it an ethical outlook. By encouraging the cultivation of human perfection and general moral development Mill attempts to challenge the view that there is an established antithesis between self-interest and universal obligations in the decision-making process. Challenged forcefully also by Krause (2002) this dichotomy is easily traceable in current political theory and philosophy. It consists, on the one hand, of empiricism's self-interests as expressed by some of its advocates[3] and, on the other hand, of moral idealism's autonomy as expressed for the most part by Kant and Rousseau. Freedom identified with self-interested activities, without a higher or lower content or a direct relation to the public good, contrasts autonomy as a higher form of freedom focusing on acting for the universal good and not for ourselves. Mill opposes this dichotomy by maintaining that forms of self-interested conduct can also be higher forms of freedom and contributors to the general good.

The current prevalent strand of liberalism, dominated by a neutralist approach towards the good, can certainly benefit from such an interpretation of Mill. The influence of such a classical and fervent supporter of freedom on the course of liberal thinking can be powerful since the interpretation of the core concept offered here is distinctive. Particularly when in opposition to what most contemporary liberals suggest, what I see as the gist of his perception of liberty, justifies an interventionist state expected to take active measures in order to be able to essentially defend it. The fact that I will be largely disregarding the utilitarian component in Mill's theory of freedom is not only related to the huge attention his utilitarianism has already attracted. It is also an outcome of the perfectionist analysis that I here suggest as cogent in order to grasp the gist of Millian liberalism. According to this analysis, Mill's thought is permeated by a particular type of perfectionism. Thus, even his concept of utility has a hierarchical and qualitative aspect

3] Devigne (2006) classifies as important empiricists promoting self-interested activities, among others, Hobbes, Locke and Hume. Indeed, Locke follows Hobbes in linking the idea of the good with human desires, pleasure and pain with good and evil (Locke 1975). However, Locke and Hobbes differ considerably since Locke believed in stringent divine limits in the self-interested action (Patten 2006). Thus, Devigne mistakenly classifies him as chiefly instigating self-interest. For Locke God created man and we are God's property (Uzgalis 2007). It follows for example that for him man 'has no liberty to destroy himself' or commit suicide (Locke 1966) restricting accordingly his self-directed activities.

(Utilitarianism CW x, 1985) which lies on a perfectionist basis and undermines the fundamental principles of utilitarianism.[4]

I. USING DIFFERENT FREEDOMS

Leaning towards positive freedom as a self-directed moral existence yet not opposed to the classic liberal tradition as originally conceived, Mill uses indeed the term liberty in various ways. As he acknowledges when young he was more sympathetic to the empiricist thesis accepting the link between 'unprocessed' necessity and freedom. Somehow apologizing for such earlier ideas, in his *Autobiography* (CW) Mill criticizes the lack of a self-conscious state of mind in empiricism's rationale where there is no difference between being "conscious of a feeling" (or desire) and "merely having the feeling." (CW xxxi 1989, 138)

It is not only during his younger age that Mill uses liberty in a different way. A very thoughtful typology of the various uses that we can encounter throughout his work is offered. "Negative freedom", "rational self-direction", "autarchy" and "autonomy" (Gray 1996, 74). This last notion though transmits better the kernel of Mill's liberalism and as such deserves more attention here. Mill should not be associated with libertarianism and a negative conception of autonomy that misrepresents his notion of self-development. It is unfair to Mill's liberalism to use a primarily negative right of autonomy, which, when coming into play, describes solely Millian individuals with powers already partly developed. Such an approach is faithful neither to Mill nor to current accounts of autonomy. It attempts to distance Millian political philosophy from a more collectivist, social democratic version of liberalism, leading it towards its libertarian pole (Donner 1991). Despite getting right Mill's overall evaluation, his 'socially embedded' concept of liberty and his cardinal commitment to help all people to lead meaningful lives, a two-folded comment should complement Donner's position regarding Millian freedoms. Firstly, it is a fact that throughout his work Mill uses the term liberty in different ways. In *Logic* and *Hamilton's Philosophy* for instance Mill argues that in essence only some individuals do in fact self-amend. But overall Mill also confirms Donner's egalitarian description postulating that all individuals should have options to self-amend their character (Devigne 2006, 70). In any case, we should stress that it is not justified to argue that Mill was a restrictive negative libertarian. Even Gray, who is accused for doing that (Donner 1991), actually sees in Mill's work a "positive state action to benefit" people and "a large range of desirable state

4] Bentham's utilitarianism (1996) entitles humans to pursue as an end pleasure and the biggest amount of happiness they can get. This is regardless of how each individual indulges in pleasure since this can be very subjective. His utilitarianism evaluates actions simply based upon their consequences and in particular the overall happiness created for everyone affected by the action. Contrary to this, Mill's utilitarianism (CW x 1985, 212-14) is dominated by the verdict of 'competent judges' who are better equipped to decide the best among pleasures and modes of existence. The 'judges' are people who manage to experience both higher and lower pleasures, and if they have to choose, they opt for the former. This is yet another strong evidence of Mill's perfectionism, an aspect which deserves our attention and dominates not only his liberalism but also his concept of utility.

activities having nothing to do with harm prevention", adding that the Millian principle of liberty is not at all violated by such interventions providing they are not authoritative (Gray 1996, 61-63). Secondly, it is true that despite being blamed for identifying always autonomy with negative freedom, Gray clearly distinguishes between the two of them (1996, 74, 77). He also finds in *On Liberty* "unmistakable traces of a Kantian conception of autonomy, absorbed by Mill [...] from Humboldt" (1996, 78), a romantic view that clearly criticized the empiricist negative conception of liberty.

To thinkers like Rousseau and Kant liberty as self-determination is not just the unfettered pursuit of someone's empirical desires. If people are to be *really* free they must be autonomous managing and regulating their lives in a mode presuming the distinction between the environment and self (Rousseau 1987; Kant 1996). This is exactly the autonomy attributed to Mill when he says that, on top of exercising rational capacities in objective choice-conditions, an autonomous agent should be to some extent disentangled from the conventions of his social environment and from other people's influence. Such an ideal of personal autonomy is among Mill's cardinal commitments. Millian autonomy should by no means be identified with a passive, negative, libertarian and individualistic tradition. Mill argues for liberty not because its protection reassures a society of free men; Mill seeks to *promote* a society of autonomous people whose actions express principles, fruits of a process of critical reflection. More openly than it is with 'autarchy', Millian 'autonomous agency' is something to be achieved and should not be regarded as a natural endowment or inheritance. (Gray 1996)

Gray's typology with the different nuances of freedom is therefore apt to describe not only the strictly negative 'self-regarding area' but also the positive notion of 'self-development' supported strongly by a robust concept of liberty as autonomy, both encountered in Mill's work. They are respectively described by Mill himself: "[Negative freedom as] a sphere of action in which society [...] has if any, only an indirect interest; comprehending all that portion of a person's life and conduct which affects [mainly] himself". Simultaneously, Mill relates the positive perception of freedom with people's interconnectedness. Since the conduct of any society member affects others, the positive encouragement of her development can potentially prevent harm to others. "No person is an entirely isolated being; it is impossible for a person to do anything seriously or permanently hurtful to himself, without mischief reaching at least to his near connections, and often far beyond them" (CW xviii 1977, 225, 280). Mill indeed uses the term liberty for two complementary, but distinct, conceptions of freedom. The first concentrates on limiting the individual's external coercion by the state and society and the second on cultivating developed human beings capable of forming their own decisions and desires. The co-existence of different concepts of freedom does not constitute an inability from Mill's part to define and distinguish adequately self-regarding from other-regarding spheres or the concept of 'effects' from 'interests'. Niggling about such differences seems to be more related to the inappropriateness of an account to accommodate Millian autonomy expressed as perfectionist individuality, supported positively as self-mastery

and linked with a particular type of human flourishing (On Liberty CW, chap.3). Rees (1985) generally subscribes to the view of Mill as a leading exponent of the negative idea of liberty as plainly the absence of restraint. Due to the absence in his work of a methodologically cogent typology of liberty, in reaching conclusions of the outmost importance for the essence of freedom, Mill indeed sometimes uses indiscriminately the term liberty to convey its normative (positive) as well as its more neutral (negative) meaning. This surely explains the agreement between many[5] that his 'one very simple principle' of liberty is anything but simple.

II. PREVAILING AUTONOMY

Despite the ramifications of a process needed to elicit the terminology[6] and the evaluation of the different Millian freedoms, an overall conclusion about the moral and political core of Mill's celebrated principle can be quite effectively deduced. Notwithstanding the ambiguity that a distinction between negative and positive understanding of liberty posits to interpret Mill's spirit as establishing a negative thesis concerning freedom is mistaken (Berger 1984). Berlin commits this mistake when he interprets Mill as primarily focusing on a limited area of personal freedom which should by no means be violated (1969). As Devigne (2006) observes, nearly all contemporary commentators portraying Mill as the archetypical theorist of negative liberty do it by disregarding his concern for wisdom.[7] Construing chiefly Mill's theory as ruling out strictly interference with the freedom of others and forbidding social control, just because Mill said that society may interfere with individual conduct only "to prevent harm to others" (CW xviii 1977, 223), oversimplifies his notion of 'harm' as well as his account of freedom overall. Thus seen, the essence of Mill's work is directed at establishing a negative thesis of freedom. Berger is right to find this misleading since it greatly underestimates the most distinctive features of his work. His liberalism, as Berger puts it, is clearly a powerful, innovative and positive doctrine. "This is the doctrine of the importance to human well-being of individual self-development, or, as I prefer to call it, autonomy." (1984, 229)

Berger's view affirms that such a notion of autonomy – interconnected well with his concept of happiness of the competent judges – is in accord with Mill's perfectionist notion of self-development. It is such a concept of autonomy that can express better the essential spirit of his freedom and his liberalism by combining – as mentioned above – two seemingly different traditions. On the one hand, Mill stresses intellectual development as the core of rational and critical reflective skills indispensable to achieve autonomy, he emphasizes the importance of liberty of choice and of self-determination and he combines individuality and authenticity. On the other hand, he articulates clearly his view of the

5] For example, Gray (1996) and Rees (1991).

6] Mill never uses for example the term autonomy to describe his freedom.

7] Devigne (2006) regards as notable exceptions Thompson (1976) and Berkowitz (1998).

ideal person – one who has achieved balance and harmony between moral, intellectual and affective development – of freedom and individuality with sociality, attachment and caring for others. He enunciates a view of human flourishing postulating no inconsistency in the need to combine in a happy human life these sides of self-development. Such an enriched ideal concept of autonomy combining self-mastery and exertion of social solidarity approximates the essence of Mill's account of liberty and resonates in Donner's explication of it. This is because the latter is aware of the overlapping between such treatments of autonomy and parts of Mill's self-development i.e. what Donner sees as his quintessence of liberty. (Donner 1991)

Such a concept of autonomy as self-development expresses better Mill's gist of liberty and his view of social feelings; in addition, it is also in accordance with his notion of happiness. Mill sees liberty as a prerequisite of happiness for specific reasons. For him human development – a prerequisite of elevated happiness – is feasible only when people are free. An objectively sound ideal is necessary to achieve genuine happiness with altruistic life being such an ideal. While it cannot be imposed as a moral obligation – a condition for the ideal of altruism is its spontaneity – when people embrace it voluntarily it becomes a great source of self-realising happiness. For Mill self-development is linked with ideals of living and forms part of an overall argument connecting happiness and freedom; thereby it has a prominent place in his theory (Skorupski 2006). Mill's liberty does not rest on "the idea of abstract right, as a thing independent of utility"; a utility based on human flourishing depicted in the ideal decisions of competent judges and conceived in order to promote human development, that is, "in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" (CW xviii 1977, 224). Such 'permanent interests' in Mill stem from people's potential for free self-development incorporated deeply in the core of his ethical and political outlook; an essence of human good as something dynamic, developmental and individual (Skorupski 2006). In order to achieve specific human potentialities that Mill clearly favoured, what idealists of the nineteenth century called 'self-realisation', or what he calls 'moral freedom' (see *Logic* and *Hamilton's Philosophy*, CW), he supported good social institutions enabling the flourishing of free self-development. The perfect compatibility between Mill's liberal ideal of self-culture and his greatest happiness principle is evident. Only free self-culture combined with rules protecting society can lead to full self-development, and solely by completing the self-development of people's potential we can obtain high forms of happiness. Once again, we can see that Mill is in favour of self-realisation or autonomy expressed in Aristotelian fashion but possibly via a rationale of romanticism. The teachings of Coleridge, Kant and others had an impact on Mill's initiative to emphasize the capacity for individual self-mastery and the exertion of wilfulness. "A person feels morally free who feels that his habits or his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them knows that he could resist" (CW viii 1974, 841). Mill refers to an advanced quality of rational will as 'moral freedom' and like Kant, identifies it with reliable virtue. This is evident in the following: "[W]e must feel that our wish, if not strong enough to alter

our character, is strong enough to conquer our character when the two are brought into conflict in any particular case of conduct. And hence it is said with truth, that none but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free." (CW viii 1974, 841)

Mill evidently distinguishes between better and worse ways of life and he associates this differentiation closely with freedom. He ranks freedom through self-mastery higher than servility to custom or to pressing physical needs. His freedom resonates the stated Aristotelian view for the priorities of human soul, with reason guiding the mortal clay's passions toward virtue (Aristotle 1985). Unlike Aristotle, though, Mill does not identify in detail the particular life a self-directed individual should lead or the exact choice-worthy goods and virtues he should favour, widening thus the range of life-styles within which any person may hope to attain his excellence. It is what Gray calls Mill's affinity for pluralism (1996) which merges smoothly with the culmination of his freedom, that is, the ability to desire "for its own sake, the conformity of [one's] own character to [a] standard of excellence, without hope of good or fear of evil from other source than [one's] own inward consciousness" (CW x 1985, 95). It is clear Mill promotes an ideal of a certain type of individual as the capable one to attain 'complete freedom' (Logic, CW). This stems also from his discussion in *Utilitarianism* (CW x 1985, chap. 2) where he favours a developed mind forming a type of character that evolves into a good in itself. And this preference can be attributed, among other things, to "love of liberty and personal independence" (CW x 1985, 212). Moral freedom implicates the reassurance of the opportunity for the development of character based on the cultivation of mental faculties and a level of self-consciousness that permits someone to reflect upon his own state of mind. It is a kind of character re-evaluation and self-amendment. "[The] 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" (CW viii 1974, 841). Again, we can observe Mill's emphasis on romantic aspects of individual and liberty. This is because he opposes "the supposed [empirical] alternative of admitting human actions to be necessary" and inevitable, i.e. a result of an excessively deterministic process, "inconsistent with […] instinctive consciousness, as well as humiliating to the pride and even degrading to the moral nature of man." (CW viii 1974, 836)

III. INDIVIDUALITY AS AUTONOMY

It is not only the concept of moral freedom or liberty that occasionally conveys the message of what I called autonomy but also Mill's notion of individuality: "It is desirable […] that in things that do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself. Where […] customs of other[s] […] are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress" (CW xviii 1977, 261). Crisp too draws a parallel between Mill's individuality and a notion of autonomy defined in a perfectionist way. Apart from seeing Millian individuality as a minimum requirement to run our own life and not merely rely on social custom, his elucidation approximates the present one. "We might call this

autonomy, though that term is not found in Mill" (Crisp 1997, 196). Based on a simple analysis of the word's etymology, Crisp attributes to Mill a notion not merely envisaged as a capacity adding to one's welfare but as exertion of that capacity in self-government. Combining the indispensable role of rationality, the value of intellectual development for good self-government and components of individuality – all of foremost importance for Mill's 'true liberty' – Crisp fuses these elements in his notion of autonomy. While involving spontaneity, Crisp's autonomy is not just that. As a constituent of individuality and so of welfare, autonomy necessarily implicates the development of people's own potentialities. Pointing to the ideal-regarding aspect of Millian freedom he draws the parallel between reflective arrival at true belief and the exercise of autonomy as consisting in the cultivation and use of intellectual capacities. (Crisp 1997, 196)

Crisp's assertion finds abundant support in Mill's work. Following Humboldt (1993), Mill ascertains that "individuality of power and development", the "end of man", has two prerequisites, "freedom and variety of situations". Individuality of development and freedom are fused in autonomy because "the human faculties of perception, judgement, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice". And the constituents of individuality – 'freedom and variety' – through their union give rise to "individual vigour and manifold diversity, which combine themselves in 'originality'". It is of a pre-eminent significance for Mill to stress that "the faculties are called into no exercise by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing because others believe it". "He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice" while the one who follows his "own reason", "his own feelings and character" is the one "who employs all his faculties" and therefore "chooses his plan for himself" (CW xviii 1977, 261-62). Subsequently, individuality expressed with originality portrayed in one's own strong feelings, impulses and will – filtered with their appropriate cultivation – is outspokenly linked with a particular ideal of character and grounded in Mill's view of human nature. "To say that one person's desires and feelings are stronger and more various than those of another, is merely to say that he has more of the raw material of human nature and is therefore capable […] of more good". Construed like this, as plentiful of "the sternest self-control", individuality is delineated as the source of "love of virtue" and "energetic character" (CW xviii 1977, 263-64).

> A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture – is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character. If, in addition to being his own, his impulses are strong, and are under the government of a strong will, he has an energetic character. (CW xviii 1977, 264)

Summing up the arguments unfolded here we could claim that vital for the understanding of Mill's liberalism is to recognize that loss of freedom is not identified with coercion by others. Lack of self-development of character also entails loss of liberty.

As we can see human perfection for Mill consists not solely of the application of rationality and of an active attitude towards life. He makes it conspicuous that it also

demands the elevation of the will. He notices the positive role impulse can play to render the individual capable of gaining self-command. Consistent with his analysis of the ancient Greek spirit, Mill links powerful desires with strong wills and postulates that a stronger will facilitates the path to an autonomous and ingenious existence. "There is no natural connexion between strong impulses and a weak conscience. […] Desires and impulses are as much a part of a perfect human being as beliefs and restraints", providing the former ones are "properly balanced" (CW xviii 1977, 263). Hence, Mill contends that when guided internally by will, justice, and reason, desire "contributes to human perfection"; if a society neglects the role of strong desires it impedes progress and it undermines the general good (Devigne 2006, 167). The authenticity therefore of a developed individuality, which among other things presupposes a will forged around strong desires, evokes the picture of human perfection which, in order to be complete, includes promoting the public good.

The gradual unravelling of the Millian autonomy seems to be disclosing a very rich and detailed vision about human flourishing. Genuine individualism is decisively supported by reason, will, strong desires, dignity and duty to oneself; only when such individuality is approximated real social and political progress becomes attainable. The thorough and unfeigned conception of freedom, linked with the ability to overcome barriers like a dominant public opinion and personal impediments like unbridled desires, is in Mill closely tied to self-development. If one wants to pursue an active self-development and determination – in turn linked with Mill's view of human nature and excellence – he "must use observation to see, reasoning and judgement to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision". He definitely requires all these qualities and their exercise to be employed precisely by "his own judgment and feelings" (CW xviii 1977, 263). Without them, the whole merit of human existence is challenged: "What will be his comparative worth as a human being? It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are who do it". And in a direct link between self-development and the underlying basis of forming an admirable human essence, he adds that the task of self-development is to exemplify this kind of man. "Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance is surely man himself". Yet seeing development as multifaceted, Mill stresses that human nature is not a machine to be programmed according to a detailed prescription. It should be treated like "a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing." (CW xviii 1977, 263)

Mill derives his concept of individuality from an explanation of human well-being which takes account of our developmental and 'progressive' nature. Human nature, well-being and individuality are interwoven in a two-fold argument. With complete development of potential, we can reach highest forms of well-being. Also, his liberal ideal of full personal development aims at people's wholeness by stressing both education of feeling and education of reason and will. While Mill's individuality aspires to touch philosophic truth as such, it does so via an innovatively synthesized

perspective combining different elements. His individuality weaves together romantic ideas of authenticity, revealing the unrepeatable and ingenious parts of a person, and the classical "perfectionist emphasis on development" aiming at advancing the higher powers of human nature (Muirhead 2004, 116). Mill does indeed combine several elements of different perspectives in his enriched concept of individuality discerned as autonomy. In addition to the Humboldtian and Kantian perception of autonomy – "the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature" (Kant 1993, 41) – Mill uses for the development of his individual ingredients from various analyses. His affinity to cultivate reason and promote strong will and desires comes from the ancient Greek tradition; his picturing of human perfection combining creativity and concern for the public good used religious and aesthetic culture as instruments of inspiration; his idea of human excellence builds on modernity's fidelity to universal authority while praising Humboldt's view that variety of situations is a requisite to individuality (Devigne 2006). The extended array of different strands of thought that have exerted an influence on Mill's multifaceted concept of liberty could provoke, justifiably at a first glance, an objection about the coherence of such a notion. In addition, if it is to be interpreted as such, a growing scepticism could arise about its compatibility with liberalism as it is commonly perceived. Reconciling Mill's views on reason and the will and identify how they contribute to the individual's freedom is not an easy task.

IV. THE CORE OF MILL'S FREEDOM IS CONSISTENTLY LIBERAL

It is true that Mill faces a challenge when he attempts to reconcile forms of individuality implicating higher thoughtfulness and the habitual pursuit of desires. By attempting to integrate in his thought the reformed platonic dialectic, Coleridge's synthetic dialectic and the morality of German Romantics, he formulates a conception of liberty that combines empiricism's causality and the romantic conception of free will aiming at overcoming the common oscillations in political theory and philosophy. Oscillations between allegedly antagonistic conceptions of liberty, empiricist versus romantic, ancient versus modern. Galston's interpretation of Mill suggests that liberal tradition has space for a conception of an intrinsic individual excellence intertwining freedom with these diversified components: influenced by romanticism, Mill devises a liberal conception of individual excellence as the full flowering of individuality; it innovatively combines the classical Greek impetus to develop human powers through activity with the modern realization of the idiosyncrasy of each individual blending such powers (Galston 1988). Given though Mill's stance to introduce an idea of human excellence, the question if it can be effectively merged with freedom and variety of situations as requisites for human individuality remains. Does Mill's morality of freedom fail to meet the challenge to combine exalted individuality and habitual desires? Can the habitual and the conscious comprise at the same time key features of the free individual? How can the personified expression and strenuous identity and will of his liberal self be

reconciled with his ideal of self-development? To reply to such queries we should recall that while Mill's liberalism values self-mastery and advances its preconditions, the latter do not presuppose only objective rational and emotional skills conceived independently of our personal inclinations to want certain things. Using our faculties efficiently involves partly the resolute pursuing of the desires we desire. Conscious volition is juxtaposed beside cultivated reason and fortitude which through continuing practices make the free individual approximate "the case of the person of confirmed virtue." (CW x 1985, 238)

The rapprochement of seemingly antithetical components in Mill's autonomy is attained by his commitment to human liberation implying an ideal of the person which suggests a conception of the good. There is a profound connection between good life as autonomous and life performed necessarily by a particular ideal type of human being, the autonomous agent. On the one hand, this ideal excludes heteronomous existence dominated by unrestrained emotions or by a tradition which people accept without any challenge. On the other, as Mill postulates the free approach to customs fosters a certain type of person. "A different type of human excellence […] a conception of humanity as having its nature bestowed on it for other purposes than merely to be abnegated"; more of a "Pericles" than "John Knox" or "Alcibiades" (CW xviii 1977, 265-66). Pericles was indeed Mill's greatest hero of antiquity (Bain 1882). Mill compares these historical figures to illustrate his preferred notion of human perfection; a fusion of certain qualities leading to 'the highest possible good'. Aiming at that he consistently puts forward Pericles as an exemplar of human excellence (Devigne 2006). Only a personality of such calibre, and no other with possible concessions in his individual skills, seems to have made it to comply with the demanding requirements of Mill inspiring his ideal of a strong autonomy; an ideal dominating his liberal apprehension of the good. Mill's formulation of a distinctively liberal conception of the good associates the best polity with that which secures that good, the flourishing of the individual conceived as "strongly autonomous". "On this reading, the liberalism of […] Mill is thus 'perfectionist' [even] in Rawls's sense; […] it effectively asserts and enforces a particular conception of the good life." (Crowder 2002, 36)

It is evident that the Millian ideal of autonomy thus conceived could be included in a species of narrow perfectionism[8] as Hurka (1993) defines it, that is, with strong and exclusive foundations in human flourishing. Despite being one of the focal points of Mill's political message and the one that characterizes the distinctive nature of his liberalism, as mentioned above, it cohabits with different, of minor importance for this matter, exegeses of liberty. Whilst his ideals of autonomy and happiness convey the perfectionist weight of Mill's morality, their coexistence with freedom defined – following Gray's typology – as a negative concept[9] confuse Hurka to the extent that he attributes to the latter an

8] The terms 'broad' and 'narrow' perfectionism here signify respectively accounts where autonomous life is presented either in combination with other basic principles (e.g. utility and rights) or as the cardinal one against which the claims of a morality are weighted. I believe Mill's liberalism is described better by the first type of perfectionism. Hurka too uses the above criterion to distinguish 'narrow' from 'broad' perfectionism.

9] Negative freedom is of secondary importance behind Mill's autonomy as exemplified in his

absolute weight. Thus, while I agree with Hurka that Millian autonomy as an intrinsic good can cohabit with another intrinsic good like utility – and in that sense being of broad nature – they are both in turn linked with a particular perception that Mill has about human flourishing. To achieve that Mill does not attribute absolute weight to *any* free choice negatively defined, as Hurka implies, but to autonomous choices expressing his perfectionist aim for individual development. Yet, Mill retains a certain commitment to a negatively defined liberty, meaning that he fosters restrictions on what others can do to the individual by the exercise of their wills.

Thus far, negative liberty is an essential condition for the individual's freedom but freedom as autonomy is not realised merely because one of its conditions has been met. Mill's central aim remains forming individuals capable of exercising choices skilfully, and autonomously. That is exactly the autonomy which Hurka incorporates in his Aristotelian perfectionism and calls "deliberated autonomy". The formerly mentioned Millian test of value as expressed by 'competent judges' presumes some negotiation of liberty. But this 'transfer' of liberty is permissible only to a lower 'negative level', through consulting non-coercive means "because there is much non-coercive promotion of the good that perfectionism approves" which is consistent with the liberal ideal (Hurka 1993, 151, 159). And this negotiation of liberty can only take place to the extent that it contributes to the formation of an autonomous character. Mill clearly supports such a developed character-individual which can result only by 'directing' liberty to such an ideal result. His liberal ideal could "never gain widespread acceptance until most develop the type of personal character requisite to its implementation" (Riley 1998, 157). Hence, his notion of negative liberty independently from his autonomy – proving here the aptness of Gray's (1996) terminology – is clearly not absolute but only of an instrumental role in a wider plan that leads to a perfectionist understanding of liberalism. For Mill a free and potentially happy individual is expected to express her good and competent nature and developed character. Therefore, he establishes a link between liberty as autonomy and perfection.

V. THE ROLE OF THE STATE

While Hurka is decisive in defending autonomy from a perfectionist standpoint and imputing to Mill a similar defence of it, he is ambiguous about Mill's freedom negatively perceived. This specific flaw in Hurka's superficial analysis of Mill's freedom, overly interpreting it as an absolute principle, is demonstrated in the ambiguity of his view on the Millian state. Firstly, he suggests that Mill never wanted the state to interfere with citizens' lives. Then, confirming Mill's perfectionism, he verifies that "neutrality is not a traditional liberal ideal, for it is rejected by Mill: He thinks a person's choosing badly, although no reason to coerce her, does justify 'remonstrating' and 'reasoning' with her". And Hurka

ideas of individuality and self-development. Baum – like I do here – calls the latter Mill's 'freedom as autonomy' (Terchek 2002).

(1993) uses this Millian argument precisely to stress why the state should be using these means actively to support the liberal ideal and why therefore his perfectionism is against state neutrality. Indeed, for Mill, self-development and genuine liberty have certain specific requisites – mental material, institutional – so meaningful development cannot take place under just any conditions. Favourable conditions do exist for Mill (Valls 1999) and under them the human potentiality for autonomous agency must be developed. (Baum 1998)

As it is the case with his happiness, he is in favour of the state and society being actively involved in promoting his ideal of individuality and autonomy. He actually does not see the need why a good state should be a power independent from a society where individual interest and autonomy can flourish. "What was now wanted was that the rulers should be identified with the people, that the interest and will was the interest and will of the nation. There was no fear of its tyrannizing over itself" (CW xviii 1977, 218). A good government should be representing every citizen and hence no one should be afraid of its influence and policies. Mill's view is affected by Coleridge's stance that there is a need for the institutions to help create a national culture which can morally help to develop the citizenry (Coleridge 1983). Mill appears sceptical towards the incentives of many in England who insist in supporting state neutrality claiming that in an opposite case its action would be inimical to the public and private interest. "In England [...] there is a considerable jealousy of direct interference by the legislative or executive power with private conduct, not so much from any just regard for the independence of the individual as from the still subsisting habit of looking on the government as representing an opposite interest to the public" (CW xviii 1977, 222-23). Mill is critical of the obsessive focus to restrain the government's ability to confine liberty of action because it disregards whether the agent's desires and motives are his own or not. Although he often argues forcefully against the state's direct and intrusive interference in private affairs, Mill also maintains that there is enough space for society – within which a functional state operates in accordance to its directives – to mould the "goodness and wisdom" of its individuals. "If society lets any considerable number of its members grow up mere children, incapable of being acted on by rational consideration of distant motives, society has itself to blame for the consequences". As it can be inferred, the state should assume an active role in trying to prevent such an event not only by participating in the shaping of "all the powers of education" but in influencing positively with its policies "the ascendancy which the authority of a received opinion always exercises over the minds who are least fitted to judge for themselves." (CW xviii 1977, 282)

The qualities required for full self-development and autonomy are "self-regarding virtues" as well as "social" ones. "It is equally the business of education to cultivate both" (CW xviii 1977, 277). Mill endorses an activist state which contributes to the material and institutional prerequisites for self-development. There is a moral obligation in Mill's society to help each other cultivate self-regarding virtues. Failing to comply with such duty legitimizes society to censure people or raise taxes guaranteeing state education in self-regarding duties. All this is compatible with Mill's liberty principle and whether

society actually employs such methods is a question of efficient policy, not a matter touching on liberty. "So Mill is not an ethical neutralist about the state" (Skorupski 2006, 49-50). The enforcement of universal education, the aid to help educate the poor, the duty of the state to supervise the educational system (On Liberty CW, chap. 5), are not the only means the state should use to promote the best conditions for an autonomous existence. This is because education should not be perceived as strictly related only to traditional teaching; rather "knowledge and culture, which have no obvious tendency to better the fortunes of the possessor, but solely to enlarge and exalt his moral and intellectual nature, shall be […] obtruded upon the public" (CW vi 1982, 259). Opposing the libertarian wing of liberalism Mill also promotes a legally enforceable taxation for purely redistributive purposes. In addition, he closely relates taxation with an underlying concept about what is *good* for people and how they can acquire more knowledge about it. "It is hence the duty of the state to consider, in the imposition of taxes, what commodities the consumers can best spare" and select "those of which it deems the use […] to be positively injurious". Thus, the state should "indirectly discourage conduct which it deems contrary to the best interests of the agent." (CW xviii 1977, 297-98)

In a rare direct intervention of a moralistic sense Mill is even willing to relinquish to the state the power to "forbid marriage unless the parties can show that they have the means of supporting a family" (CW xviii 1977, 304). Mill usually *suggests* solutions for similar issues and does not resort to morally objectionable imposing measures like this one. The latter though is yet another indication of the significance he attributes to the ideal conditions for mental advancement and consequently for self-development. Mental cultivation is such a laudable goal for Mill that can even entail restricting some individual liberties to ensure a good level of education linked with the well-being of the families. Generating conditions for high forms of individuality is for Mill as significant as establishing equal rights for all. Against the 'free-marketeers' of the time Mill is also in favour of legislative interventions ameliorating the context within which individual choices are made. The legislation to restrict the working week is an example (Skorupski 2006). The imposed limits to free trade and the rules enforced on employers by increasing the amount of public control to prevent fraud or to ensure sanitary conditions and protect the workforce are other examples. "Such questions involve considerations of liberty, only in so far leaving people to themselves is always better, *caeteris paribus*, than controlling them: but that they may be legitimately controlled for these ends, is in principle undeniable" (CW xviii 1977, 293). Promoting self-realisation, self-mastery and self-development, ingredients of Millian autonomy, is a task with which the state should comply. Actively seeking to improve people, the most important feature of good government is "the virtue and intelligence of the human beings composing the community" (CW xix 1977, 390), something which is certainly not an infringement of legitimate liberty. As Skorupski puts it, "a liberal state can legitimately promote conceptions of the good" and "it is not a principle of Millian liberalism that the state should be ethically or aesthetically neutral" or that it "should not have a conception of the good among its core allegiance-inspiring values". A society with a duty to educate its

members about better ways of living should employ the state too for its objective: It breaks no Millian principle to do that through all public institutions and activity funded by a democratic vote of the citizens. (Skorupski 2006, 103-104)

VI. CONCLUSION

Most of the above-mentioned arguments as well as the perfectionist grounds on which Mill is defended here clearly separate him from many contemporary liberals.[10] Most of them, following the dominant current of today's liberalism, think that the state should not promote any conception of the good. Mill consistently focuses on the problem of reconciling wisdom and liberty under his concepts of individual exertion and development as autonomy; to accomplish this he employs the state as an additional help for people's moral education. He criticizes a state sterile and neutral towards its citizens' mental expansion, questioning the value of an administration of justice perfecting its operating machinery while ignoring the task of moral education (Devigne 2006). The government should actively seek to aid and stimulate people's exertion and development. "The worth of the State", Mill asserts, "is the worth of the individuals composing it; and a State which postpones the interests of their mental expansion and elevation […], a State which dwarfs its men […] will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished" (CW xviii 1977, 310). A good polity with a functional government should aim at promoting the health of the individual's character, leading it to flourish in both the public and private domains. Mill contends that whether people become or not autonomous is contingent upon factors – educational, political, economic and psychological – which can advance their capacities for autonomy. And the Millian state plays an active role in ameliorating all the autonomy-generating conditions. Hence, Mill's conception of freedom as autonomy, presupposing the implication of means and the availability of opportunities for self-development and self-government, refutes the ostensibly oppositional relationship between freedom and power; this is because the state's active intervention in favour of this freedom-autonomy often personifies power. The misfortune is that the same negative liberal tradition that assumes this permanent antithesis mistakenly perceives an active Millian state as inimical to freedom. (Baum 1998)

Recapitulating the role of Mill's state in contributing to the active promotion of *liberty as autonomy* we could claim that it stems from the same perfectionist basis inspiring the conception of the notion itself. Hurka's propounded model for the liberal perfectionist state verifies this. Mill's state complies with all the criteria which the Hurkian perfectionist state puts forward. This is because its intervention comes into play in order to defend a particular concept of liberty which comprises the gist of Mill's political thinking. Respecting citizens' autonomy by promoting non-coercively the good, the state favours education not only in its strict sense but also as universal mental

10] E.g. Rawls, Ackerman, Larmore, Nagel, R. Dworkin, etc.

cultivation, provided through taxation and subsidization. While human propensity to follow the good materializes under favourable conditions, people also have other desires which presuppose help to resist or to accomplish. As Mill proves and as Hurka (1993) concludes, it is therefore fitting that politically we can favour liberty but reject the ideal of state neutrality.

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