

The Influence of John Stuart Mill on Oscar Wilde's Concept of Freedom

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the influence John Stuart Mill had on the concept of freedom put forth by Oscar Wilde in his essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. In the first section, we shall explain the doctrine of freedom presented in Mill's *On Liberty*. In this work, Mill contends that liberty rules out blind obedience to custom. According to him, individuals can become free only when they criticize custom and start developing themselves in an autonomous way. For Mill, liberty partakes of an aesthetic dimension: by freely developing themselves, individuals would turn their lives into a noble and beautiful object of contemplation. This thesis is similar to Wildean dandyism, a doctrine according to which human life should be the object of artistic endeavor. In the second section, our goal will be to analyze some key passages from *The Soul of Man under Socialism* where Wilde dwells upon the issue of freedom. In this essay, Wilde explicitly affiliates his concept of freedom to "a fine thinker" who used to characterize liberty in opposition to conformity. It will be argued that the thinker Wilde alludes to is Mill. In order to support our argument, we shall, first, list textual evidences that demonstrate Wilde had already read *On Liberty* by the time he wrote *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. Then, we shall underscore the similarities between John Stuart Mill's and Oscar Wilde's concepts of liberty. In the end, we shall conclude that Wildean liberty is descended from Millian liberty.

KEYWORDS: Oscar Wilde. John Stuart Mill. liberty.

RESUMO

Este artigo procura diagnosticar a influência que John Stuart Mill exerceu no conceito de liberdade desenvolvido por Oscar Wilde no opúsculo *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. Iremos, na primeira seção, explicar a doutrina da liberdade apresentada por Mill em *On Liberty*. Nesta obra, Mill afirma que a liberdade se opõe à obediência cega ao costume. De acordo com Mill, os indivíduos podem tornar-se livres apenas quando criticam o costume e passam a desenvolver-se de maneira autônoma. Para Mill, a liberdade possui uma dimensão estética: ao desenvolverem-se livremente, os indivíduos transformariam suas vidas em um objeto de contemplação nobre e belo. Esta tese, apontaremos, é muito próxima do dandismo wildiano, doutrina segundo a qual a vida humana deveria tornar-se objeto de um empreendimento artístico. Na segunda seção, nosso objetivo será o de analisar algumas passagens cruciais do opúsculo *The Soul of Man under Socialism* em que Wilde aborda o tema da liberdade. Neste ensaio, Wilde afilia explicitamente sua concepção de liberdade a um "excelente pensador" que costumava caracterizar a liberdade em oposição ao conformismo. Nossa hipótese é de que Mill seria o pensador para o qual Wilde alude. A fim de provar nosso argumento, iremos, primeiro, elencar evidências textuais que demonstram que Wilde já tinha lido *On Liberty* à época em que escreveu *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. Em seguida, iremos destacar as similaridades entre os conceitos de liberdade de Mill e de Wilde. Ao término, nossa conclusão será a de que a liberdade wildiana descende da liberdade milliana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Oscar Wilde. John Stuart Mill. liberdade.

1. Mill on Liberty

Published in 1859, *On Liberty* affords a passionate plea for individual freedom¹. The main objective of the essay was to protect individual freedom from a new kind of tyrannical force that had emerged in the nineteenth century: “the tyranny of the majority” (MILL, 1859, p. 8). Such a tyranny was anathema to Mill because it precluded the free development of individuality. In Victorian England, the majority made everyone develop his individuality according to its standards. People were afraid of doing anything regarded as eccentric because, if they did so, they would be frowned upon and cast aside by the majority.

One of Mill’s greatest objectives in *On Liberty* was, then, to struggle against the tendency of the majority “to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways” (MILL, 1859, p. 9). In order to fulfill his objective, Mill elaborated “one very simple principle”:

That 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. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him, must be calculated to produce evil to some one else (MILL, 1859, p. 14).

The principle Mill expounded above is what scholars refer as the harm principle (SHAPIRO, 2003, p. 56). According to the harm principle, social or governmental interference is only legitimate when one’s action is harmful to others. Any individual action that does not harm other people is immune from external interference. Thus the harm principle circumscribes a sphere of action where the individual must always be absolutely free. When an action of one or more individuals does not harm others, such an action cannot be prohibited by society or by the government, regardless of whether the majority approves or disapproves of it².

For Mill, the harm principle was crucial for liberty because it allowed individuals to question the prevailing customs of society. According to Mill, conforming to custom *tout court* was the very opposite of freedom. To be sure, the opposition between liberty and “the despotism of Custom” is constant throughout *On Liberty* (MILL, 1859, p. 78). Where customs – that is, the practices shared by the majority of a people – are despotically imposed, freedom cannot flourish. In order to be free, people need to evaluate whether customary practices are suitable for their circumstances. Millian liberty is therefore inextricably bound up with critique. Public critique of custom should always be permitted because it is both a source of liberty and progress. Albeit it was indispensable to liberty, custom critique was hardly ever practiced in the nineteenth century:

In our times . . . every one lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual or the family do not ask them-

1. Following Mill and Wilde, we shall use the terms “liberty” and “freedom” interchangeably. I am grateful to Michael Rubin for proofreading my text.

2. No wonder Mill thought laws against sodomy were barbarous: “What any persons may freely do with respect to sexual relations should be deemed to be an unimportant and purely private matter, which concerns no one but themselves. . . . [T]o have held any human being responsible to other people and to the world for the fact itself [sc. sexual intercourse between consenting adults] . . . will one day be thought one of the superstitions of the infancy of the human race” (MILL, 1910, p. 382). This kind of law that Mill repudiated was precisely the one invoked by authorities in 1895 in Wilde’s imprisonment.

selves—what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition? or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive? They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? . . . I do not mean that they choose what is customary, in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination, except for what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done: peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes (MILL, 1859, p. 68).

The conformity described above, Mill added, was inimical to liberty inasmuch as it did not allow people to develop themselves. If one is to develop one's self, one cannot adhere blindly to custom. Self-development – that is to say, liberty – requires being able to have some distance from one's background, whereupon critique becomes feasible³. That is why Mill advocates “an intelligent following of custom, or even . . . an intelligent deviation from custom” (MILL, 1859, p. 66). Custom should be followed intelligently. People have to exercise their critical faculties and check whether common attitudes are adequate for them. Once they do that, they become able to direct their own action and explain why they adopt certain attitudes in lieu of others.

A set of practices designed in a particular moment by a group of people may not apply to a different group of people at a different time. That is why deviating from custom “is better than a blind and simply mechanical adhesion to it” (MILL, 1859, p. 66). When people criticize and deviate from prevailing norms, they expose its impropriety. According to Mill, social norms are to be treated as mutable entities. A norm which one generation regarded as conducive to human well-being can become burdensome for the next generation. Hence social norms should be always open to public contestation.

Far from weakening communitarian bonds, the critical examination of custom makes one's respect for community stronger. That is why the intelligent following of custom is a source of social progress, not of deterioration:

[T]o conform to custom, merely as custom, does not educate or develop in him [sc. the individual] any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being. The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, 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. The faculties are called into no exercise by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing only because others believe it. 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 (MILL, 1859, p. 65).

Adhering mechanically to a precept is tantamount to not understanding it. It is only through critical examination that one can grasp the grounds of one's rule of conduct.

If one does not know why one acts according to custom, one does not comprehend it. And since one does not comprehend it, one cannot even say one sincerely respects custom. The critical examination Mill urges us to practice is not a destructive force that threatens communal life (GAIRDNER, 2008). A greater respect for community is compatible with public criticism of its norms.

When individuals are able to follow custom critically, they can exercise their mental faculties and develop themselves (SKORUPSKI, 2006, chap. 3). By breaking free from the despotism of custom, human

3. “Self-development” and “liberty” are one and the same in Mill's philosophy. For a good analysis of the relationship between these terms, see DEVIGNE (2006), DONNER (1991), HABIBI, (2001) and THORLBY (1973). As we shall see, self-development is also a major theme in Wilde's work.

beings can mold their lives in their own way. “Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model . . . , but 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” (MILL, 1859, p. 66). Liberty implies being able to fashion your life according to forces that are inward, not outward. In this sense, the intelligent following of custom proposed by Mill can be associated with the concept of autonomy (GRAY, 2002; SIMÕES, 2008).

As the word “fashion” already indicates, there is an aesthetic dimension in Millian liberty. When they exercise their freedom and start developing their lives in their own way, “human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation” (MILL, 1859, p. 70). “Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself” (MILL, 1859, p. 66). The idea that human life should be the object of artistic endeavor makes up the core of dandyism, a doctrine that permeates all Oscar Wilde’s work, most notably in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*⁴. Indeed one could say that Mill was the writer who imported dandyism into the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century⁵. The thesis that Mill’s work influenced Wilde and his contemporaries is well-established (GAGNIER, 1997, p. 25). What remains to be shown, however, is how Mill’s conception of liberty ended up being endorsed by Wilde.

2. Wilde on Liberty

In an article published in *Paul Mall Gazette* in 1886, Wilde offers a list of philosophical books that all people should read. Among philosophers such as Plato and Cicero, Wilde includes Mill’s *On Liberty* in his list. Here one finds textual evidence proving that Wilde read *On Liberty*. This is important because Wilde never quotes Mill directly when talking about freedom. So one could argue that, notwithstanding the extreme similarities between their concepts of freedom, to posit a link between Millian and Wildean liberty could only be a matter of speculation, a hypothesis that could never be proved. Fortunately that is not the case. We can doubtless affirm that by 1886 Wilde had already read *On Liberty* and that in 1891, when *The Soul of Man under Socialism* was published, Wilde was reproducing in his own way Mill’s idea of freedom⁶.

One of the main theses of *The Soul of Man under Socialism* is that under socialism the human soul will become free (WILDE, 1891, p. 1044). As Wilde sees it, in a socialist regime private property would no longer exist and people would be able to choose the work that better develops their potentialities. That, in turn, would bring about a new kind of individualism⁷. Wilde contrasts this individualism from capitalist individualism, which turn people greedy and does not allow them to develop their individuality freely. “With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things [...] One will live” (WILDE, 1891, p. 1046). According to Wilde’s account, the regime of private property had set up in Victorian England “an individualism that is false”

4. In his magnum opus, Wilde explains that to Dorian Gray “[I]f itself was the first, the greatest, of the arts” (WILDE, 1891, p. 97). The ambition to turn his life into a work of art is indeed one of the major forces guiding Dorian’s life in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

5. For a comparative analysis between Millian liberty and dandyism, see DALAQUA (2015, chapter one).

6. That Wilde was well acquainted with Mill’s works is evident for anyone who reads the Commonplace Book he kept while he studied at Oxford (see ELLMANN, 1988, p. 41).

7. Wilde’s association of socialism and individualism seems surprising at first glance for those who tend to equate socialism with collectivism. The charge that socialism and communism are against individualism has indeed been a common complaint since the Cold War era (see, for instance, Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*). However, as the case of Wilde makes it clear, it is possible to be both a socialist and an individualist. In fact, Wilde was not the only writer who defended socialism because it promoted individualism. Mill did the same thing in his writings on socialism. See MILL (1879).

(1891, p. 1045). It led people to believe that the important thing was to accumulate money and objects, whereas for Wilde “the important thing is to be” Hence Wilde’s conclusion that “the recognition of private property has really harmed individualism” (1891, p. 1045).

The individualism endorsed by Wilde in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* is very similar to Mill’s individualism (MACKIE, 2013). Like Mill, Wilde compares human personality to trees and says that under socialism the individuality of men “will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows” (WILDE, 1891, p. 1046)⁸. True individualism, Wilde writes, implies realizing your personality in a way that rules out blind conformity:

People . . . are less conscious of the horrible pressure that is being put on them, and so go through their lives in a sort of coarse comfort, like petted animals, without ever realising that they are probably thinking other people’s thoughts, living by other people’s standards, wearing practically what one may call other people’s second-hand clothes, and never being themselves for a single moment. ‘He who would be free,’ says a fine thinker, ‘must not conform’ (WILDE, 1891, p. 1049).

For anyone who has read *On Liberty*, it is easy to see that the fine thinker Wilde alludes to here is Mill. The diagnoses of both authors are strikingly similar. According to both, in the nineteenth century most people were not free in England because they were under the yoke of custom. “There is no one type of man” (WILDE, 1891, p. 1049). For Wilde, as for Mill, people should be allowed to lead their lives as they please. Unlike Mill, however, Wilde did not subject the free development of individuality to anything like the harm principle. And here we come up against the main difference between Millian and Wildean individuality (APPIAH, 2005, p. 15). The good pursued by the free Millian individual can never be detrimental to others because, as Mill was careful to add, any action that harms others can be curtailed. That provision finds no equivalent in Wilde’s idea of freedom. Wilde says that the development of human individuality, like all other works of art, cannot be subjected to any external rule (WILDE, 1891, p. 1052). Wilde’s individualism can thus be considered more radical than Mill’s.

Like Mill, Wilde believes that the free development of human individuality is a work of art. “Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine” (WILDE, 1891, p. 1053). This passage is reminiscent of *On Liberty*’s third chapter:

[W]hen the opinions of masses of merely average men are everywhere become or becoming the dominant power, the counterpoise and corrective to that tendency would be, the more and more pronounced individuality It is in these circumstances most especially, that exceptional individuals, instead of being deterred, should be encouraged in acting differently from the mass. In other times there was no advantage in their doing so, unless they acted not only differently, but better. In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained (MILL, 1859, pp. 74-5).

People who are different from everybody else are eulogized by Wilde and Mill because they disrupt the stultifying conformity in thought and action that is imposed by the majority. Eccentric individuals are valuable because they tend to make people question the prevailing social norms. For both Wilde and

8. The comparison of human nature to botanic nature occurs also in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “His nature had developed like a flower, had borne blossoms of scarlet flame” (WILDE, 1890, p. 48). The depiction of human nature in botanic terms is not confined to Mill and Wilde and is part of what Charles Taylor names as “the Expressivist Turn” (TAYLOR, 1989, p. 368). Such a view of human nature exalted human singularity and influenced a whole array of thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Mill, the more diverse a society is, the freer it is. A society composed of different individualities offers an inhospitable soil for the despotism of custom. For both writers, one should always be suspicious of extreme homogeneous societies. Uniformity of human behavior is an artificial state of affairs, a sign that human nature has been forced into a narrow range of preconceived options. Like a work of art, each individual is *sui generis* and unique. A society that enables people to develop themselves freely will be inevitably plural.

One last similarity between Mill and Wilde concerns the salutary role both writers ascribe to disobedience. In the last chapter of *Utilitarianism*, Mill argues that disobedience can be one of the most powerful weapons against unjust laws and pernicious institutions (MILL, 1863, p. 178). Disobedience becomes a moral imperative if after having examined a given law or institution, one realizes that the latter is unjust. If we look back on history and analyze the lives “of the most illustrious benefactors of mankind”, we will observe that disobedience and resistance against unjust practices was a common strategy among them (MILL, 1843, p. 178). Wilde expresses the same idea in his essay. He writes that no one ought to accept the indignant conditions of the working classes in nineteenth-century Britain, and that therefore any workingman who disobeyed and rebelled against the status quo was a virtuous man. Their disobedience, he believed, would expose the injustice of the English situation and improve their predicament. “Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and rebellion” (WILDE, 1891, p. 1043).

3. Conclusion

This essay has argued that Wildean liberty is a direct descendant of Millian liberty. Both Mill and Wilde held that liberty would only be possible if people could break free from the tyranny of custom and start cultivating their lives in their own way. In the end of *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, Wilde writes that, in order to be free, every person must live “in the manner that seems to him most suitable for the full realisation of his own personality; . . . the primary aim of life is self-development” (WILDE, 1891, p. 1063). Such a concept is also present in the second chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when Lord Henry teaches Dorian that the “aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for” (WILDE, 1890, p. 22). Like Mill, Wilde also believed that such self-development partook of an aesthetic existence: “the artistic life is simply self-development” (WILDE, 1897, p. 1080).

As we have already noted, the association of freedom and self-development is one of the main characteristics of the doctrine of liberty spelled out in Mill’s famous essay *On Liberty*. There Mill maintains that “the end of man . . . is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole” (MILL, 1859, p. 81). According to Mill and Wilde, individuals should cultivate their lives like works of art. That means they should not submit blindly to a plan of life set by others. Rather, they should exercise their critical faculties and discover what kind of life best suits and develops their character⁹.

By endeavoring to design their lives as a beautiful and noble work of art, individuals accomplish what Mill and Wilde meant by the word “freedom”. So we can see that Wilde’s and Mill’s defense of liberty is also a plea for tolerance. When freedom becomes a social reality, people will be different from one another. Far from being suppressed, such a diversity should be valued. Social diversity signifies that human nature is unfolding freely. For Mill, the nature of human beings is not mechanical and must not be expected to develop in the same pattern. “The only thing that one really knows about human nature is

9. “He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment 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” (MILL, 1859, p. 65).

that it changes. Change is the one quality we can predicate of it. The systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human nature, and not on its growth and development” (WILDE, 1891, p. 1062). The singularity of each individual should be accepted and respected if human development and liberty is to flourish.

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Recebido em 05 de outubro de 2015.
Aprovado em 10 de novembro de 2015.