

# Autotrophic Ethos in Mill's Arboretum

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**In this paper, I use the tree analogy at the heart of Mill's discussion of individuality as a lens through which to interpret *On Liberty* and its connection to Utilitarianism. I propose five alternative interpretations: (1) the tree as a symbol for Enlightenment progress as an outgrowth of originality, (2) the tree as a symbol for the capacity for choice within Mill's hedonistic conception of happiness, (3) the tree as the mystery of human choice, (4) the tree as the uninhibited human spirit, arising out of a plant-animal dialectic, and (5) the tree as the embodied ideal conception of the self. I then argue that the multiplicity of interpretations lends itself to an autotrophic intellectual ethos, wherein the tree becomes as a symbol of the liberty of interpretation.**

## Introduction

At the heart of Mill's discussion of individuality in *On Liberty* lies his famous tree analogy. Mill remarks:

Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, 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.<sup>1</sup>

This image of the tree serves not only as a powerful symbol of Mill's Romantic departure from the anthropology of the Enlightenment, but also as a lens through which to interpret *On Liberty* and its connection to *Utilitarianism*. To that end, I propose five alternative interpretations of Mill's tree metaphor: (1) the tree as a symbol for Enlightenment progress as an outgrowth of originality, (2) the tree as a symbol for the capacity for choice within Mill's hedonistic conception of happiness, (3) the tree as the mystery of human choice, (4) the tree as the uninhibited human spirit, arising out of a plant-animal dialectic, and (5) the tree as the embodied ideal conception of the self that we must tend to. I then argue that the multiplicity of interpretations lends itself to an exploration of the possibility of an *autotrophic intellectual ethos*, wherein the tree becomes as a symbol of the liberty of interpretation, as distinguished from the consumptive "Great Chain of Ideas" model that I term the *heterotrophic intellectual ethos*.

## Why We Ought to Take the Tree Metaphor Seriously

Mill's choice of metaphor is striking, not only for its Romantic departure from the mechanistic anthropology of the Enlightenment, but also because this kind of tree

imagery permeates Mill's writing.<sup>2</sup> The tree is a recurring image not only in *On Liberty*, but also in *Utilitarianism*. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill writes, "capacity for other nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed."<sup>3</sup> Mill could have written that human nature is *like* a tree or that capacity for the nobler feelings is *like* a very tender plant, but in both instances he opts for an extended metaphor instead. A simile would have prompted a briefer comparison, and it lacks any correlative expectation to carry the image through to other parts of the theory. To say that human nature is *like* a tree also implies that it nevertheless possesses certain qualities that are not like a tree. By employing an extended metaphor in both instances, however, Mill invites the reader to extend the image of the tree both within and across his books.

## The Optimistic Interpretation of the Tree

I begin with an optimistic interpretation of the tree metaphor. While perhaps estranged from the trajectory of Mill's own views, this interpretation arises naturally from the text itself, and might prove fruitful for appreciating his theory in practice. Mill views human nature organically like a tree. As such, people are meant

<sup>2</sup> Compare these two passages with the following, all taken from Mill's discussion of individuality and human nature: "...just as many have thought that trees are a much finer thing when clipped into pollards, or cut out into figures of animals, than as nature made them" (Mill, *On Liberty*, 59); "Persons of genius, it is true, are, and are always likely to be, a small minority; but in order to have them, it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow" (Mill, *On Liberty*, 62); "different persons also require different conditions for their spiritual development; and can no more exist healthily in the same moral than all the variety of plants can in the same physical, atmosphere and climate" (Mill, *On Liberty*, 65).

<sup>3</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 10.

<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 56-57.

to be governed by internal forces. These forces include not just understanding (rational faculties), but desires and impulses as well.<sup>4</sup> Trees will grow in accordance with their nature, not according to social pressure, and therefore Mill strongly believes in eccentric self-determination. Individuals may be “rooted” in the ground (i.e. born into a certain family in a certain country with certain traditions already in place), but it is the individual seed and not the soil that determines what the tree is going to be. They are free to grow toward the light according to their nature, so the sky is the limit as far as Mill is concerned.

Someone might object that without societal constraints, such growth will be out of control. One worries that Mill is encouraging us to pursue originality even at the expense of truth. The tree analogy actually safeguards against these excesses. Trees come in all different types, but all trees have at least two vital features in common: (1) they are rooted in the ground and (2) they grow toward the light. The first of these is important because Mill is not saying that we should reject tradition altogether, but rather that we plot (locate) ourselves within tradition and then grow above and beyond it. The second is important because Mill sees humans as progressive beings, and as various as these trees may be, they are all growing (i.e. progressing) toward the light of truth. Mill is not encouraging eccentricity for eccentricity’s sake. Rather, Mill encourages individuals to experiment with new ways of living in order to discover new paths to truth.

### The Hedonistic Interpretation of the Tree

The optimistic account described above ignores the essentially hedonistic nature of Mill’s theory. Trees grow toward the light, yes, but the light is merely a stimulus. Moreover, while Mill considers truth something to be approached, it does not follow that we should look for truth from without, as if all the truth already exists as some source to which individuals must return. Trees strive, and that striving is always toward some type of growth. Eventually this growth may begin to level off, but it never ceases completely. We must be wary, however, of interpreting this growth as possessing any higher purposivity than mere preference satisfaction. Mill defines liberty as simply the ability to do what one wants, ostensibly without any requirement of moral duty. That said, Mill values the very capacity of “moral preference” as one of the distinctive faculties of a human being, and one that can only be cultivated by making a choice.<sup>5</sup> Choice, for Mill, is an intrinsic good, and so long as our choices do

not harm others, then we ought not to be restricted in what we choose. All plants are welcome so long as they do not become invasive.

The tree paradigm actually unites the general happiness principle from *Utilitarianism* with the freedom and originality of *On Liberty*. These key images of the tree each occur in sections describing the nature of individual human beings. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill makes a qualitative distinction between higher and lower pleasures based on the idea of a competent judge. This competent judge is someone who, having experienced both of two pleasures, expresses a decided preference for one over the other.<sup>6</sup> That pleasure which all or nearly all of the competent judges deem preferable is then considered qualitatively superior to the other. Mill then extrapolates from this idea of the competent judge that these higher pleasures are in fact the mental pleasures, and the capacity for appreciating them is then like the tender plant so easily killed.<sup>7</sup>

As it stands, this interpretation leaves Mill open to a charge of inconsistency. After all, *On Liberty* reads as a defense to individual choice, and yet in *Utilitarianism* Mill seems to claim that the relative value of pleasures must be socially rather than individually determined. As such, the qualitative distinction appears to be a matter of elitist pretension rather than objective fact. In what follows, I argue that the tree analogy lends itself to a reinterpretation of Mill’s qualitative distinction that shifts the emphasis from the pleasures to the act of choice itself.

Let us examine the function of this tender plant a bit more closely. The plant happens to serve as a symbol for the capacity for the nobler feelings, yes, but that is not all. The plant also represents the capacity for choice, for prior to its designation as the capacity for nobler feelings, it was necessary for there to be a competent judge to discern between two pleasures. The symbolism as a capacity for the higher pleasures came only after the act of choice, so we can say that its meaning acquired specificity. What is important for our purposes, however, is to remember this fundamental link between the pleasures that we choose and their designation as the higher pleasures. Although Mill insinuates that the mental pleasures are intrinsically higher pleasures, what he neglects to mention is that they are higher only by virtue of a majority of competent judges preferring them. Taking it a step further, one might say that the real qualitative distinction is between choosing for oneself and allowing custom to dictate one’s choices. Only the competent judge can appreciate the value of choice, as everyone else has already bowed to

4 Mill, *On Liberty*, 57.

5 Mill, *On Liberty*, 56.

6 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 8.

7 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10.

the yoke of custom, allowing their choices to be made for them.

Now let us turn to *On Liberty*, in which Mill claims, “the danger which threatens human nature is not the excess, but the deficiency, of personal impulses and preferences.”<sup>8</sup> Mill believes that choice is essential to our development as human beings,<sup>9</sup> so the more personal impulses and preferences, the greater our capacity for happiness and human flourishing. The tree then serves as a symbol for individuality, and, by extension, of the capacity for choice.

Liberty, as Mill defines it, is the ability to do what one wants. The implication, then, is that individuals must actually know what they want, and furthermore, that what individuals think they want is what they actually want with their inmost nature and not merely what society dictates that they ought to want. If the latter is the case, then one cannot truly be making a choice, and we cannot truly call that liberty. Liberty, then, suggests not only a legal ability to choose, but also the mental capacity to avail oneself of that opportunity. According to Mill, human nature is like a tree in that it is governed by “inward forces”—humans’ actions are meant to be governed by what they want, not what society dictates. Without liberty we are thus missing a core aspect of our nature as human beings and thereby lack one of the necessary ingredients for human happiness, for we can only experience the higher pleasures through the making of a choice. It follows that through the plant analogy, *On Liberty* completes the work of *Utilitarianism* in asserting that the highest good is liberty, and that the greatest good for the greatest number is achieved through the increase of liberty.

### Tree as the Mystery of Human Choice

One normally thinks of trees (and plants in general) as being passive—governed by inward forces, yes, but conscious of them, no. Mill’s emphasis on energetic activity does not jibe with plants’ lack of sentience. In fact, these internal forces, if we are to take them seriously, suggest that our natures are far more determined than Mill is willing to acknowledge. It clashes with Mill’s other claim that the only exercise of freedom is in making a choice,<sup>10</sup> for these inward forces that govern activity do not suggest a conscious choice. These inward forces consist of “perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mutual activity, and even moral preference.”<sup>11</sup> Insofar as human excellence is to be modeled on that of a tree, even activities typically

8 Mill, *On Liberty*, 58.

9 Mill, *On Liberty*, 56.

10 Mill, *On Liberty*, 56.

11 Mill, *On Liberty*, 56.

believed to be conscious such as judgment are determined completely by our nature. Mill is right to recognize that plenty of energy, the “raw material of human nature,”<sup>12</sup> can be present, but it is debatable to what extent free will can exist under such a model as it has been presented in the two previous interpretations.

As a third interpretation, I propose that free will can be incorporated into Mill’s theory by focusing on the distinction between internal and external life. The mechanistic model of the Enlightenment assumes that all of human behavior can eventually be explained and governed according to natural laws analogous to Newtonian mechanics. This model fails to appreciate that such knowledge will always be of the experience from the outside. Mill’s tree analogy cautions us lest we forget the significance of individuals’ interior lives. We could learn much about a tree by chopping it down and examining its rings, but in doing so we kill the tree in the process. What we learn does not help us to improve the life of that tree, as we only gain full knowledge of its workings by rejecting its interior life. In a similar vein, the more society tries to understand and control the inner lives of individuals, the more those lives get destroyed. An interventionist approach assumes that we can better know the good for someone else without having experienced that person’s interior life. Unlike machines, plants have very active inner lives, the experience of which we cannot fully analogize from our own subjective, first-personal experience. Since choice is tied to this first-person subjective experience, it thus belongs to that inner realm of experience that cannot be explained.

### The Tree’s Individuality in Conflict with the Animality of Custom

Another and in some ways even more striking connection between the tree metaphor’s usage in *Utilitarianism* and in *On Liberty* is its use as a foil to humans’ animal nature. As I mentioned earlier, the tree, or “tender plant,” symbolizes the capacity to choose, as it can only be alive in a competent judge who can choose between the so-called higher and lower pleasures. Mill implies that those who would opt for the lower pleasures are somehow bereft of the requisite faculties of a competent judge, i.e. they lack the capacity for the nobler feelings and are thus consigned to baser pleasures. Since the primary focus of this essay is Mill’s use of the tree in *On Liberty*, I will grant Mill this distinction even though one might accuse him of cherry-picking data. I merely bring up the connection to *Utilitarianism* to point out how Mill contrasts the tree-

12 Mill, *On Liberty*, 57.

like capacity for the higher pleasures with what he deems “a beast’s pleasures.”<sup>13</sup> This sentiment is epitomized by Mill’s statement that “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied,”<sup>14</sup> that there is something qualitatively superior to our animality. In an interesting twist on the typical hierarchy of human-animal-plant that we inherit from Aristotle, Mill seems to be claiming that it is our inner plantlike nature that we must cultivate and our animal desires that must be overcome.

In *On Liberty*, we see Mill’s discussion of individuality cash out in terms of this plant-animal dialectic, but taken to a much further extent. There are two key images in this section: the tree that freely grows according to its inner nature and the farm animal enslaved by the yoke of public opinion and afraid of the whip of social opprobrium. Revisiting Mill’s famous remark that human nature is not a machine, but a tree, it would at first appear to be setting up a dialectic between the organic qualities of the tree and the inorganic qualities of machines.<sup>15</sup> There is nothing wrong with this interpretation except that it does not go far enough. The main difference between Mill’s characterization of animals and machines is that animals are living beings capable of suffering. Choice has no place here, as Mill refers to domesticated animals that have long-since bowed to the yoke. Animals can suffer, and in terms of the greatest happiness principle, Mill would probably take this capacity to suffer into account. In this case, however, Mill evokes the subordinate nature of animals, and the main difference between them and machines is simply that animals can be objects of pity. Indeed, we are made to pity those human beings whose inner nature has been crushed by the despotism of custom, since as far as Mill is concerned, they have been reduced to a lower grade of existence. While the tree functions as a symbol of individual freedom and self-determination, the image of the animal functions primarily as a symbol of captivity.

Such an interpretation is reinforced by the context in which this quote arises. Earlier in the same paragraph Mill asserts, “He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other

13 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 9.

14 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10.

15 Taken out of context, one might interpret this passage as merely a departure from the Enlightenment conception of human beings as machines, governed by natural laws that we merely need to discover. Then one day, once we have discovered the ultimate truth about human nature, we can create an infallible system for governing human behavior according to these perfect laws. Mill, reacting to the sterility of the machine metaphor, employs the tree to breathe some life back into our model of human nature. These forces are internal, not external, so humans cannot be fully explained in terms analogous to Newtonian mechanics.

faculty than the *ape-like* one of imitation.”<sup>16</sup> Here Mill invokes this animal imagery to emphasize the unthinkable nature that total commitment to custom fosters. One imitates,<sup>17</sup> but one does not exercise the distinctly human faculties of reason and understanding, much less the capacity to make a choice. Our actions, insofar as we do not have reasons for their performance, constitute a failure to overcome our animal nature.

As this is by nature a political work, Mill is concerned with more than just individuals’ failures to exercise their human faculties. So pervasive is the spirit of custom that “the mind itself is bowed to the yoke.”<sup>18</sup> Normally one associates animality with the body and the sensual pleasures, while the mind remains that bastion of individuality and the higher pleasures, but here Mill claims that public opinion has begun to domesticate the mind itself. The mind is so closely associated with the tree metaphor that we must recognize this encroachment by animality as an act of violence against human nature. This animality impoverishes the soil once fertile with diversity and reduces the stream of conscious experience to a trickle, and as a result, “their human capacities are *withered* and starved, they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own.”<sup>19</sup>

Mill rejects such a fate for human nature. Humans should not be forced into some limited number of molds or stations, for “Human beings are not like sheep; and even sheep are not undistinguishably alike.”<sup>20</sup> Here Mill likens those who unthinkingly follow custom to sheep, as like sheep they have succumbed to the herd mentality. Mill then ironically notes the variation among sheep as if to point out how ludicrous it is to try to make all human beings the same or to force them to subscribe to the same norms. Rejecting this sheep-like nature, Mill claims, “[D]ifferent persons also require different conditions for their spiritual development; and can no more exist healthily in the same moral than all the variety of *plants* can in the

16 Mill, *On Liberty*, 56.

17 We ought not to interpret Mill as criticizing all forms of imitation. Here Mill is saying that it is beneath human dignity to live a life devoid of originality. It is not wrong to imitate so long as we choose to do so for some greater purpose. Consider the Roman practice of adapting Greek texts. Roman writers would typically imitate the style of the original Greek, but then introduce some form of variation that gave the story a distinctly Roman meaning. Such imitation is permissible precisely because it has to strike a balance with originality, and that requires the kind of mental activity that Mill praises.

18 Mill, *On Liberty*, 58.

19 Mill, *On Liberty*, 59, emphasis added.

20 Mill, *On Liberty*, 64.



same physical, atmosphere and climate.”<sup>21</sup> Not everyone can thrive in the same environment, and Mill is not merely calling for diversity among individuals, but also a diversity of climates within society so that individuals can choose which among them is most conducive to growth. Humans do not need the shepherd of public opinion to guide them along the straight and narrow path of custom. They just need the right soil in which to grow.

### The Tree as an Embodied Ideal Conception of the Self

The aforementioned interpretations treat the tree as representative of the individual as that individual relates to society and the state. I now propose an alternative interpretation based on the tree as an embodied ideal of human nature, which arises from Mill's reaction to the inner life-denying tendency of Calvinism. Mill writes:

[I]f it be any part of religion to believe that man was made by a good Being, it is more consistent with that faith to believe that this Being gave 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.<sup>22</sup>

The ideal conception refers to the idea that God created humankind in his own image, like the divine spark that is then embodied through our corporeal existence. We then interpret the tree (human nature) to be this ideal conception that is embodied within us. Under a traditional theistic framework, it follows from the principle of sufficient reason that we were given each human faculty for some purpose. Since it is a “good [omnibenevolent] Being” that created us, that Being must have given us each faculty for some good. The greatest good is understood to be happiness, by which is meant “pleasure and the absence of pain.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore every human faculty was given to us for the purpose of increasing happiness.

Mill then invokes the image of the tree in describing how these faculties are used and abused. In so doing he actually employs two concepts of the tree. (1) We have the idea of a tree—always growing, governed by internal forces, branching out, establishing deep roots—that we embody. Mill identifies human nature (universal) with this tree. (2) We have each individual's inner life of intellect

and feeling—a unique instantiation of the ideal tree. The ideal tree is what is embodied, and the individual treelike nature is that embodiment. Thus we read how our faculties must be *cultivated* and through experience we allow our branches to *unfold* in every direction. Calvinism's practices are then portrayed as acts of violence against trees, as it seeks to *root out* and *consume* them. Mill appeals to the ideal conception to justify the development of our human faculties and to vilify their abuse.

If human nature is a tree, then society ought to be an arboretum. Instead, everywhere we see acts of deforestation. People mistakenly assume that “[human] trees are a much finer thing when clipped into pollards, or cut out into figures of animals, than as nature made them.”<sup>24</sup> Mill gives us a powerful image the marring of humans' inmost natures, and it makes us realize just how fragile human nature is under this interpretation. These human trees can wither and die from lack of rain (experience/exercise of their faculties), they can easily be cut down by the majority opinion, or they can even fail to take root at all from lack of proper soil (diversity of opinion). Mill cites the “despotism of Custom” in the East as proof that this fundamental aspect of human nature can and has been destroyed.<sup>25</sup> He is actually rejecting the Enlightenment optimism that progress is inevitable. The more we come to view human nature like a machine, the easier it is to assume that originality is also governed by natural laws, and to assume that the genius of past ages will continue. Mill's point is that those qualities that make us most human, if not actively exercised and allowed room to grow, will wither and die.

This interpretation of the tree makes even truth itself vulnerable for Mill. Although people are wont to think of truth as something fixed and eternal, Mill's empiricism suggests a more proto-pragmatist conception of truth. We call ‘true’ those opinions that stand the test of time and are acknowledged to do so by society at large. Mill claims these truths should be constantly tested lest they “be held as dead dogma, not living truth.”<sup>26</sup> Here Mill refers to truth as something that exists in space and time: it lives, and if we are not careful, it will die. Such is truth as we

21 Mill, *On Liberty*, 65.

22 Mill, *On Liberty*, 59, emphasis added.

23 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 7.

24 Mill, *On Liberty*, 59.

25 Mill, *On Liberty*, 67-68.

26 Mill, *On Liberty*, 34.

experience it.<sup>27</sup> Truth, then, is something that expands and grows from individuals' experience of struggling with traditions of the past. Absolute truth is not some immutable thing that we grow and expand toward. Just as the tree is the ideal embodied within us and the particular tree is our particular nature, absolute truth is an embodied ideal that we approach through our individual striving.<sup>28</sup> When that striving ceases, our truth goes with it.

### Objections

One might object to Mill's very use of this tree analogy as undermining his commitment to individuality. Trees come in many varieties, but there are only so many types of trees. They may vary in slight details, but then again, it is theoretically possible that two different seeds could produce trees that are virtually alike. We also do not generally think of trees as existing in isolation, but rather as being found in forests. There are finitely many types of trees, the forest itself determines the types of trees that grow in it, and the well-being of one tree is dependent on the well-being of the forest as a whole. Such an objection is actually not problematic. Mill acknowledges the importance of society, and his whole point in calling for liberty is to promote an environment more conducive to a free marketplace of ideas. The similarities among trees actually allow individuals to appreciate others by analogy. If Mill were to use a broader metaphor, it could undermine our capacity to empathize with others.

In a similar vein, one might press Mill on his assumption that there is a single human nature and not human *natures*. This assumption gives way to one of the most problematic parts of Mill: his claim that "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with bar-

<sup>27</sup> Mill makes a similar distinction with belief. On the one hand, there are those beliefs that we inherit and subscribe to simply out of tradition. Such dead belief is contrasted with "that living belief which regulates conduct" (Mill, *On Liberty*, 40). By *living belief* and *living truth*, Mill means that belief and truth ought to have practical utility as motivating forces for action and growth. Truth and belief are really two sides of the same pragmatic coin for Mill; he simply uses truth for the secular sphere and belief for the religious sphere, but functionally we see that they are both outgrowths of the principle that ideas only have meaningful content insofar as they are put into actual practice.

<sup>28</sup> Put another way, absolute truth is a personal goal that we set for ourselves. Because of Mill's empiricism, this absolute truth cannot be deduced a priori, and therefore all truth is derived from experiments in living. Because we lack the eternal a priori scaffolding of the rationalist, we have no guarantee that our truths will persist except by persistently testing them. Although an individual cannot test established truths against all comers, he/she can nevertheless conceive of absolute truth as the residue left over when tested against the set of all possible experiments in living.

barians, provided the end be their improvement and the means justified by actually effecting that end."<sup>29</sup> Despite the optimism of improving quality of life of those affected and of promoting liberty and progress, in reality the supposedly benevolent despotism would merely justify continued occupation and oppression. As long as the despot claims to be working toward the people's improvement, he/she can continue to project the achievement of that end (and thereby postponing the justification of the means) to some future date. But trees' progress cannot stagnate: they either grow or they die and there is no excluded middle. The despot is only justified if growth continues; otherwise it is merely killing human nature.

Even that scenario will prove problematic in practice. Occupation of so-called "barbarian" nations will be checked by natural self-interest. Imperialism is based on the principle of colonies benefitting the home nation, often at the expense of the occupied nations. If there is no growth in the occupied nation, then the ends do not justify the means. If, on the other hand, there is growth, it will reach a point where advancing the liberty of the occupied nation conflicts with interests of the citizens of the home nation, and the nation will withdraw to appease public opinion.

Furthermore, Mill assumes a single human nature because that allows us to benefit from diversity. The model of the tree allows for more than enough individual variation. Moreover, if we interpret the tree as the embodied ideal conception of the self, then we can distinguish between *human nature* as an embodied ideal and the different *human natures* that constitute embodiments of that ideal.

### Not Missing the Forest for the Trees

In this essay I have outlined five possible interpretations of Mill's metaphor of human nature as a tree. Despite much overlap, these interpretations lead to very different conceptions of the individual. The optimistic model suggests that individuals will inevitably grow toward the good if society only allows them to do so. The hedonistic interpretation suggests that we have to be willing to accept other definitions of the good that differ drastically from our own, so long as they do not cause any physical, psychological, or financial harm. The mystery of human choice interpretation suggests that we not try to manipulate others for their own good, since we cannot possess the knowledge of their inner experience. The animal-tree dialectic defines the individual as one who resists the yoke of animality. The embodied ideal reveals the tree to be

<sup>29</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 10.

the inner source of personal progress. One might object that Mill's ambiguity in using this extended metaphor is a weakness of his argument that needs clarification. It reveals how metaphorical speech obfuscates an otherwise clear position. I argue that this ambiguity actually illustrates the point of Mill's theory rather than the problem.

We are tempted to say that multiple and conflicting interpretations somehow need to be resolved. Even if there is not a single perfect interpretation, there must nevertheless be a best one that we ought to adopt until a better one comes along. Notice how such arguments hinge on a Great Chain of Ideas model. This model is predicated on the idea of a *heterotrophic intellectual ethos*, by which I mean that ideas can be arranged into a sort of hierarchical chain whereby the lower rungs are consumed by the superior ideas of the upper echelon. Ideas must engage in conflict, and the superior idea will win out. We see such an ethics played out in the idea of the dialectic: two ideas (thesis and antithesis) face off, and the synthesis between the two consumes them and absorbs their best aspects for itself.

Mill, however, seems to be advancing a new model for an *autotrophic intellectual ethos*: different ideas and experiments in living are not there to be consumed, but to be admired like works of art. As with works of art, we can appraise the relative aesthetic value of these ideas and interpretations, but we need not consume them in the process. Consider the image of a tree as if it were itself a seed. Planted in any individual's mind, it yields itself to myriad interpretations. Each of these interpretations depends on the web of belief (soil) that the individual brings to it, the experiences that this individual has had (water), and the reason (light) that he or she brings to bear on it. From the single idea of a tree, countless trees of interpretation can spring forth. Their contributions will enrich the overall environment of the forest, but our own interpretation must come from within, arising from inward forces. This is what Mill means when he talks about debate benefiting the disinterested bystander.

Furthermore, the heterotrophic ethos lends itself to bifurcation. We set up two ideas, and one of three scenarios is possible: either the thesis is true and the antithesis is false, or the thesis is false and the antithesis is true, or the thesis and antithesis are each half-truths. That is the scenario that Mill presents when he makes his case for diversity of opinion. But if we really take Mill's plea for individuality to its most logical conclusion, then we ought to recognize that such bifurcation is not possible in an autotrophic ethos. When we take in the whole span of the trees in the arboretum, we are faced with virtually limit-

less variation, and our logic becomes fuzzier. Absolute truth, if it is to be found at all, lies in the arboretum, in the aggregate of all these interpretations.

### Conclusion

In this essay I have explored five possible interpretations of Mill's analogy of human nature to a tree. Through the introduction of an additional level of abstraction, I proposed an autotrophic intellectual ethos for aesthetically appreciating this forest of interpretation without the need for consumptive reconciliation. As my focus has been on the tree metaphor as it applies to Mill's *On Liberty* as a whole, I have granted Mill his depictions of animality, his assumptions about the East, and his definition of happiness and merely explored how they function together with that metaphor. Mill grants the higher human faculties to the plantlike part of human nature, while casting animals in an extremely unfavorable light. Animals can feel pain, which could be sufficient justification for animal welfare; however, Mill's emphasis on liberty and the necessity of choice for the higher pleasures could undermine the case for animal rights. Mill also relies on the East as a major example of what can happen when the despotism of custom is complete. By relying on this East-West binary, Mill succumbs to the very kind of heterotrophic ethos that the tree analogy encourages us to avoid.

I thus conclude with a cautionary note: while the prospect of an autotrophic ethos proves promising, it is rooted in certain ideas that could potentially violate Mill's harm principle. We ought to weigh the cost of accepting this autotrophic ethos against that of accepting its fundamental assumptions.

### Works Cited

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