

## **The Self-Development Argument for Individual Freedom**

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### **Abstract**

The argument that individual liberty is valuable as a means to self-development is examined in five sections. First, what is self-development? Second, why is self-development valuable? Third, is it always valuable and is it of pre-eminent value? Fourth, does it require individual liberty? Finally, two interpretations of self-development are distinguished which show that the argument for freedom is either qualified or question-begging.

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One argument for the value of individual freedom is that freedom is instrumentally valuable as a means for self-development, enabling people to develop their inner natures and capacities. According to this self-development argument, all restrictions of freedom are presumptively wrong since they undermine self-development. And paternalistic restrictions are self-defeating because rather than advancing the interests of people who have their freedom restricted, they would set back people's well-being by undermining their self-development. Consider, for example, an extreme case of restriction of liberty such as slavery. Even if slavery did not involve the more obvious forms of harm such as the cruel treatment usually meted out to slaves, even that is, with a relatively benign slave-master, a slave is harmed insofar as the various talents and abilities that he would be otherwise able to develop are left dormant while he is made to perform only menial tasks.

This self-development argument will be examined in five sections. In the first, what is meant by self-development will be explained more fully. Next, why it might be thought valuable — something that defenders of the argument have seldom expanded upon — will be examined. I argue that self-development is a plausible view of

personal well-being. Third, there is the matter of whether it always contributes to well-being or only sometimes, and whether it is the only or the highest component of well-being. The fourth and most important step of the argument is to show that self-development requires liberty. Do restrictions of freedom undermine self-development, or can such restrictions further people's development? Several arguments for the former will be examined, and the conclusion reached is that self-development provides some, but only qualified support for individual liberty. Finally, in the fifth section an ambiguity with the idea of self-development will be pointed out. This ambiguity affects the argument at the most fundamental level for it means that self-development either supports freedom in only the qualified sense, or if it supports freedom unqualified, it does so in a way that makes the argument question-begging.

### **1. The Concept of Self-Development**

Self-development is achieved when a person develops her talents, abilities, capacities, and faculties. It is sometimes referred to as the highest and most harmonious development of a person's powers to a complete and consistent whole (Humboldt 1854, 11). It is achieved when people fully realise their talents and potentialities, pursuing projects that fit their nature, agree with their innate proclivities and bring to fruition their skills and capacities (Wall 1998, 130). Self-development requires the development of one's aptitudes into talents, and the unfolding of all basic tendencies and inclinations (Feinberg 1986, 57).<sup>1</sup> It can be contrasted with idleness, drudgery, and passive consumption. John Stuart Mill, the writer who more than anyone else developed the self-development argument for liberty, expressed the ideal more fully:

Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself. Supposing it were possible to get houses built, corn grown, battles fought, causes tried, and even churches erected and prayers said, by machinery — by automatons in human form — it would be a considerable loss to exchange for these automatons even the men and women who at present inhabit the more civilized parts of the world, and who assuredly are but starved specimens of what nature can and will produce (Mill 1975, 56).

Developing one's abilities to their fullest, according to Mill, is or ought to be the goal of human endeavour.

The ideas of self-development and self-realisation are often used interchangeably, but although closely related they are not identical. Self-development refers to a person's development of his abilities but this development might not be fully realised, that is, his abilities might not be developed to their fullest. Only when they are developed to their fullest is self-realisation achieved. Although conceptually distinct, I shall set aside here whether the distinction makes any difference to the arguments for freedom.

Self-development has been considered by many thinkers to be a worthy ideal. One author lists Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Hegel, and Mill as among those who identify a person's good with this ideal (Feinberg 1986, 57). Views of self-development differ according to which abilities are seen as the valuable ones to develop. Aristotle emphasised rationality, Marx creative labour, Nietzsche the will to power (Hurka 1993, 3). The particular view of self-development that is most relevant for the argument for freedom is one that takes a pluralistic view of valuable abilities. Instead

of picking out one or a small set, it emphasises the many various abilities people have.

The range of activities that can lead to self-development is large:

Playing tennis, playing piano, playing chess, making a table, cooking a meal, developing software for computers, constructing the Watts Towers, juggling with a chainsaw, acting as a human mannequin, writing a book, discussing in a political assembly, bargaining with an employer, trying to prove a mathematical theorem, working a lathe, fighting a battle, doing embroidery, organizing a political campaign, and building a boat (Elster 1986, 99).

There are — though this list is not exhaustive — physical, intellectual, relational, and artistic abilities. Elsewhere Mill distinguishes intellectual, practical, and moral abilities (Mill 1862, ch. 2). Each type of ability is a broad category subsuming more specific abilities. Amongst athletic abilities are those for running, jumping, kicking a ball, etc. Within the last there is the ability to kick a round ball or an oval, to kick with distance or with precision. Amongst the intellectual abilities are those for abstract mathematical thought and those for imaginative creativity (the connection between this and artistic ability shows that the categories are overlapping rather than discrete). And so on.

People differ in their abilities; some people's talents lie in creativity while others are more suited to athletic ability; some rare individuals may possess a wide range of these, each to a significant degree. This individual diversity of abilities is central to the argument for liberty. Since people are highly diverse in their talents and abilities, there is no single lifestyle or small set of them which will lead to self-development for all. As Mill eloquently puts it:

different persons ... 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. The same things which are helps to one person towards the cultivation of his higher nature, are hindrances to another. The same mode of life is a healthy excitement to one, keeping all his faculties of action and enjoyment in their best order, while to another it is a distracting burden, which suspends or crushes all internal life. Such are the differences among human beings in their sources of pleasure, their susceptibilities of pain, and the operation on them of different physical and moral agencies, that unless there is a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable (Mill 1975, 64).

This, I believe, is what Mill means by the term ‘individuality.’ Individuality, which is the basis of his case for liberty, ‘is the same thing with development, and ... it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings...’ (Mill 1975, 60). ‘Individuality’ refers to self-development, but understood as the development of an individual’s own particular abilities - rather than those shared by all humans or a select few that are valuable for all - along with the view that individuals differ quite markedly in their abilities. For Mill, the best life is one in which an individual actively exercises his or her faculties to the fullest, which will often involve the development of a unique package of abilities.

## **2. Well-Being as Self-Development**

Given this understanding of self-development the next question regards its value. For even if freedom is instrumental for self-development, that is an argument for freedom only if self-development is a worthwhile goal. Why might it be thought a worthwhile goal? Defenders of self-development seldom provide an answer, often thinking that its

appeal is evident. But by considering some competing conceptions of well-being we may see why self-development is plausibly thought of as an attractive ideal.

In recent discussions of well-being it has become common to distinguish three different conceptions (Parfit 1984, 493-502). According to mental-state accounts, a person's life goes well by having certain mental states such as pleasure or happiness. This has the virtue of capturing a common-sense view of what well-being is, identifying it with a sense of contentment or satisfaction with one's life. Classical utilitarian philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham thought that the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain were and ought to be humans' goals. However, imagine that scientists create an experience machine that can give you pleasurable mental states. Once you are plugged in you will never know the difference between the experiences and reality. Would being plugged in be a good life? Surely not, for mental-state experiences are not the only things that count for well-being. People don't just want the experience of having an interesting job, falling in love, spending time with friends. They actually want *to do* those things. The mental-state account of well-being is unacceptable (Nozick 1974, 42-5).

Perhaps, then, well-being consists in desire-satisfaction, so that a person's life goes better by getting more of whatever she wants. Again, this fits some common-sense views in that it is often thought that a good life is getting what one most desires. Although people sometimes have desires based on mistaken beliefs, as when I want to drink from a glass in front of me not knowing that it contains poison, the idea can be

adjusted so that well-being consists in the satisfaction of one's *informed* desires. But even on this adjusted view, there is something faulty with the idea. It is not because we want something that getting it makes our life go better. Rather, there are reasons why we want it and these reasons ground why something contributes to the quality of our lives. Consider friendship and the plausible claim that having close friends makes my life go better. I may want close friends and be fortunate enough to have them, but it is not the wanting that grounds why having them is good. Rather, having friends is valuable and that is why I want them. If I did not want them, I would think my life worse.

Such considerations push us towards a third conception of well-being, an objectivist view. On this view, one's life goes well by getting certain objectively valuable things, whether the person wants them or not: 'The good things might include moral goodness, rational activity, ... having children and being a good parent, knowledge, and the awareness of true beauty.' (Parfit 1984, 499.) The objectivist view might consist simply of a list of items such as those above, but it might instead give an account of what these have in common, and hold that this unifying feature is ultimately what determines well-being. Self-development seems a plausible unifying feature. Understood in the pluralist sense explained in the previous section, one's life goes better if one develops one's abilities to their fullest, where this development can occur in any of a wide range of activities.

Hence self-development is a plausible view of well-being because it provides a unifying objective explanation of how people's lives go better, avoiding the difficulties of more subjectivist accounts. This line of reasoning is suggested by Humboldt's comment that self-development is the true end of mankind in the sense that it is 'prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires' (Humboldt 1854, 11. See also his comments at 7-8) and by Mill's claim that his case for individual liberty rests on utility, but 'utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being.' (Mill 1975, 12.)<sup>2</sup>

Much more would have to be said of course to provide a complete argument for the value of self-development. There are replies to the criticisms of the mental state and desire-satisfaction views and objections to the objectivist view (Griffin 1986, chs. 1-4). But I hope to have given some indication of why self-development may be thought a plausible conception of well-being.<sup>3</sup> (In the final section, some more arguments for the value of self-development will be examined.)

### **3. Self-Development and Other Values**

But even if self-development has value, two further questions arise. Is it always valuable? And is it the only value? Regarding the first, one may wonder if all abilities are valuable. Some, such as the ability to count the number of blades of grass in a lawn, seem worthless (Rawls 1971, 432). Others, such as the ability to torture people, seem positively evil. Is a person's well-being advanced by having such abilities

developed? If so — if what may be called the *broad value* of self-development is true — the stronger is the self-development argument for freedom. For if a person's well-being is advanced by the development of only valuable activities (those that are not worthless or positively evil) — in other words if instead self-development has only *narrow value* — then restrictions that interfere with abilities that are not valuable would not undermine self-development in any significant sense. If the narrow view is true, there is more scope for restricting freedom without undermining self-development.

Fortunately for the self-development argument, the broad view is more plausible than the narrow. While it seems odd to say that the ability to torture people could be good for a person, we should accept this as true if we are at all drawn to the value of self-development. It may not be good for others that a person has torturing abilities, and it is probably the case that, all things considered, it is better that people not have such abilities developed. But this is not because such abilities do not contribute to welfare — they do contribute, but the value of that contribution is outweighed by concerns about harm to others. What of the blades-of-grass-counter? Again, many would hesitate to say that having such abilities advances well-being. But again, I think this is because other considerations are affecting the judgement. Not considerations of harm to others, for in this case there is none, but there is the possibility that this person could be developing other abilities instead of that of pointless counting. He could be developing some alternative ability that is richer and more complex and he could be developing more abilities than just this one. It is these considerations, I suggest, that

make us reluctant to accept that developing such an odd ability could contribute to well-being. Imagine however that there is a peculiar person for whom this is the only ability he is capable of developing. His nature is such that it is either this or nothing. It does not seem implausible to adjust our intuitions and accept that there is some contribution to the person's well-being — if only a small amount — by developing this strange ability rather than none at all.<sup>4</sup>

Independently of this issue — that is, whether we accept the broad or narrow value of self-development — there is the second question of whether self-development is a complete view of well-being or only one element of it. Is developing one's abilities the only good thing in life? Mill seemed to think that there were other contributions to well-being. The title of his chapter where he makes the self-development argument is 'Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being' and in the opening paragraph of the chapter he describes individuality as 'one of the principal ingredients of human happiness' (Mill 1975, 54), both of which imply that it is not the only ingredient. It seems plausible to think that other things contribute to a good life, for example pleasurable mental states,<sup>5</sup> and loving relationships with others. One view is that well-being consists of two elements, self-development and happiness:

Of goods or absolute ends, there are for man but two — perfection and happiness. By perfection is meant the full and harmonious development of all our faculties, corporeal and mental, intellectual and moral; by happiness, the complement of all the pleasures of which we are susceptible (Hamilton 1859, 14).<sup>6</sup>

Whether there are only two or more than two, these other components of well-being seem valuable apart from the development of abilities that they may involve.

Again, the correct answer to this question will affect how strong the self-development argument for freedom is, because even if freedom is conducive to self-development (the case for which will be examined in the next section), if self-development is only one part of well-being then that leaves open the question as to whether the other parts are also conducive to freedom or instead support restrictions on freedom. If the latter, then the support for freedom will be weaker than if self-development were the whole of well-being. Mill, however, advocates the liberty principle not merely as a presumptive one but as an absolute one. He claims that liberty may *never* be restricted except to prevent harm to others, not simply that such restriction would be merely in one way bad. But to reach this conclusion from the self-development argument, it must be the case either that self-development is the whole of well-being or if it is only a part, it has lexical priority over the other parts.

To find an argument for self-development being a dominant component of well-being, we can look to Hamilton's discussion of the values of knowledge (understood as 'possession of truth') and intellectual development ('the power, acquired through exercise by the higher faculties, of a more varied, vigorous and protracted activity'). Hamilton argues that the latter is the fundamental value, and that the former only derives its value from it. A scientist, he suggests, does not seek knowledge but rather seeks to exercise his faculties in the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is the

activity of pursuing knowledge that is of value, not the end-state of having knowledge. He generalises the point so that it is the pursuit of goals rather than their achievement that ultimately matters. Hamilton writes, ““In life,” as the great Pascal observes, “we always believe that we are seeking repose, while, in reality, all that we ever seek is agitation.”” He continues:

Alexander assuredly did not foresee that the conquest of one world would only leave him to weep for another world to conquer. It is ever the contest that pleases us, and not the victory. Thus it is in play; thus it is in hunting; thus it is in the search of truth; thus it is in life (Hamilton 1859, 8).

Humboldt also seems to suggest such a view. Immediately after extolling the value of developing one’s ‘moral and physical energies’ he suggests that this process is of more value than the end-states it produces:

to the conqueror his triumph affords a more exquisite sense of enjoyment than the actual occupation of the territory he has won, and ... the perilous commotion of reformation itself is dearer to the reformer than the calm enjoyment of the fruits which crown its successful issue (Humboldt 1854, 3).<sup>8</sup>

This suggests an argument against a view of the good life that sees it as consisting of independent components such as self-development and happiness. While Hamilton’s concern was specifically with knowledge and intellectual development, the argument may be generalised. Self-development is the whole of well-being and not merely one component to be weighed against others, the argument would go, because a good life is an active process, not an end-state to be achieved. Well-being lies in the *doing* of activities that develop one’s abilities rather than *having* certain states of affairs. If so,

then development, understood as a verb rather than a noun, seems a plausible candidate for a worthwhile process of human nature, a process that has priority over end-states such as knowledge and happiness.

It seems plausible to accept this argument's contention that processes are part of a good life and to reject the view that well-being consists only in end-states. Having a good life consists in doing certain activities not just having certain things. However, it is less plausible to suppose that the former is the only thing that matters or is always more valuable than any amount of the latter. Accepting that processes matter does not mean that end-states do not also count. A more plausible view would say that a good life could consist of both, giving priority to neither. Nor does it seem that the value of end-states is entirely derived from the processes that led to them. Hamilton may be right that part of the value of having knowledge is that in reaching it one has exercised one's abilities to gain knowledge. But there also seems some independent value. Having knowledge could sometimes contribute to well-being even though no faculties were developed in gaining it. So Hamilton's argument shows us that self-development is a process valuable in itself apart from any results of that process, but it does not support the stronger view that that process is the entire value or that the value of the results is entirely derived from the value of the process. Neither Hamilton nor Humboldt provide an argument for this stronger view. Hamilton instead appeals to the authority of Plato, Aristotle, Scotus, and Malebranche, amongst others, of holding the strong view (Hamilton 1859, 8-9). But appeals to authority are not legitimate arguments, so we should set them aside.

#### **4. Self-Development and Liberty**

Assuming then that self-development has broad value and that it contributes significantly to well-being, does it require freedom? In this section three strategies for showing how self-development supports liberty will be examined – the best-judge view, the choice-emphasising capacities, and the range-of-options requirement. I shall try to point out some problems with each argument and then in the next section turn to a deeper problem with the claim that self-development supports liberty.

##### **I. The Best-Judge View**

Mill claimed that people are the best judges of what is conducive to their own development. An individual is the best judge of his interests, says Mill, for two reasons. First because ‘he is the person most interested in his own well-being.’ (Mill 1975, 71.) Others may be genuinely concerned with my welfare. But they are not as concerned as I am. Since I am the one who cares most about what happens to me, I am more likely to get it right. The second reason is that ‘with respect to his own feelings and circumstances, the most ordinary man or woman has means of knowledge immeasurably surpassing those that can be possessed by any one else.’ (Mill 1975, 71.) Individuals have ‘privileged access’ to information regarding what would be conducive to their own development and hence again are more likely to be right (Goodin 1990, 183). Call these two reasons the motivational and the epistemic reasons for the best-judge view respectively. Their conclusion is that while people are

not perfect judges, they are better than anyone else at developing their abilities and so should be left free to choose for themselves.

There are at least two types of exceptions to the best-judge view, each corresponding to the motivational and epistemic reasons for that view. The first type of exception concerns motivation. Some people may not be motivated to choose activities which develop their abilities. One reason for this is that self-development is often initially painful and only later — if at all — pleasurable and people sometimes give more weight to their immediate experiences (Elster 1986, 104-7.) Learning to play piano is a frustrating experience, especially at the start, while watching television is comparatively easy. So coercion or other restrictions of freedom could overcome these initial start-up disincentives and make people pursue developmental activities. As one of Mill's early critics put it 'Habitual exertion is the greatest of all invigorators of character, and restraint and coercion in one form or another is the great stimulus to exertion.' (Stephen 1975, 147.) Mill anticipated this objection and responded by arguing that although 'the spirit of improvement is not always a spirit of liberty, for it may aim at forcing improvements on an unwilling people, ... the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is liberty, since by it there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals.' (Mill 1975, 66). This is an appeal to the diversity of people's abilities that we have seen is central to the self-development case for liberty. But accepting this diversity claim does not support Mill's conclusion because people who are not motivated to develop their abilities are unlikely to choose activities that result in self-development. It may be true that for

each individual there is a unique route to self-development given his or her various abilities, but it does not follow that each individual will follow this route if he or she is not motivated to.

More recently, one writer has countered the objection to the motivational reason by maintaining that as well as motivating people, coercion will close off routes to self-development. Hence coercion may make self-development less rather than more likely (Wall 1998, 154). But there are four reasons to doubt this. First, this seems true only for clumsy coercion. Careful use of threats of fines or imprisonment would motivate people to develop their talents and abilities and would only close off the option of idleness. No routes to self-development would be closed off assuming, plausibly, that idleness is not a route to self-development. Second, while it is true that some forms of coercion such as imprisonment prevent a person from achieving self-development, if the person would not achieve self-development anyway due to lack of motivation there would be no loss. Third, if the threats were effective in making people more active, imprisonment would not occur. And fourth, even if it does occur, closing off routes to self-development for some may be worth it in order to provide example to others and motivate them into developing their abilities. Hence people could be forced out of lifestyles that do not develop their talents and abilities without interfering with options that lead to self-development. And hence people who are not motivated to develop their abilities remain exceptions to the self-development argument for liberty.

The second type of case that is an exception to the best-judge view is where it is not true that people are the best judge of what projects would develop their talents and abilities. Even if it is true for most people most of the time, there are some who will not be the best judges of what options are most likely to lead to self-development and even for those who generally are, there will be occasions on which they do not choose accurately. They mistakenly choose a lesser option in the belief that it is the one that best develops their talents and abilities. Hence, for some people freedom is generally not conducive to self-development and for most people there will be occasions when it is not. Self-development would be better promoted by limiting some people's liberty much of the time and most people's liberty some of the time.

It may be thought that these exceptions are not significant problems for the self-development argument. As one defender of the argument puts it, the claim is not that liberty is an indispensable condition for self-development. The latter may be achieved without freedom. Moreover, liberty does not always lead to self-development. Someone who is free may or may not achieve it. All the self-development argument claims is that other things being equal, people who have liberty are better able to develop their talents than those who are told what to do or who follow others or drift through life (Wall 1998, 152). However, the exceptions are important since the more of them there are, the weaker the defence of liberty, in the sense that the defence will be a qualified one. The exceptions are also important in another way. If self-development provides a justification for liberty in cases other than these exceptions, then it provides a justification for not respecting liberty in the exception cases. That is,

if people should have freedom for reasons that derive from the value of self-development, then for those same reasons people should be restricted in the exception cases. If we find it implausible that such intervention would be justified in those cases, then we should be suspicious of the claim that self-development justifies independence in the other cases. Of course there could be other reasons why freedom should not be restricted in the exception cases, reasons which override those supporting intervention. But if those reasons are sufficient to justify not interfering with liberty, overriding the reasons for interference that derive from the value of self-development, then those reasons would also be sufficient to justify freedom in the non-exception cases. It then seems difficult to see what work if any the argument from self-development is doing.

## **II. Choice-Abilities**

In light of these exceptions, an alternative strategy for showing a tighter connection between self-development and freedom is to emphasise the development of those abilities that are particularly connected to freedom. Mill argues that in contrast to uncritically following (or being made to follow) custom, individuality requires critical choice, which exercises ‘perception, judgement, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference.’ (Mill 1975, 55.) A little further on he says that when a person chooses for himself, he uses ‘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 1975, 56).

A similar argument is made by Thomas Hurka. On Hurka's view, rational deliberation is a central element of the good life and it is closely connected with freedom: 'Someone with many life options can reflect upon these options and in so doing exercise his rational powers. He can weigh their respective merits and defects and reach a reasoned judgement about them.' (Hurka, 1993, 150.) This, Hurka admits, is not enough to establish liberty since rational deliberation does not require that options actually be open to one. A slave may evaluate possibilities as much as he wants without ever having the opportunity to bring about any of those possibilities. But since people rarely deliberate about options they cannot choose, having freedom 'encourages reasoning that would have no practical point if options were closed.' (Hurka 1993, 150) Self-development supports freedom, according to Mill and Hurka, because without freedom, abilities such as rational deliberation would not get exercised and developed.

There are two main problems with this argument. First, we may ask what is so special about rational deliberation and the other choice-abilities. People possess other abilities not so closely connected with choice, and the argument seems to assume that the choice-abilities are more valuable. Consider a person, call him Bob, who chooses lifestyle A that calls for rational deliberation and the other choice-abilities that Mill lists. But imagine however that it calls upon hardly any other abilities. Alternative lifestyles Bob could have chosen have the opposite nature – they develop his other abilities but not the choice ones so much. It is not clear which lifestyle would involve

more self-development; not clear, that is, that allowing Bob to freely choose A is what is most conducive to his self-development. Imagine that some of the alternatives develop the non-choice-abilities to a high degree and that choosing lifestyle A exercises the choice-abilities somewhat but not hugely. Now it seems plausible that forcing Bob into one of the alternatives would better serve his self-development than letting him choose A.

One way around this problem is to hold that the choice-abilities, such as rational deliberation, are of more value than the non-choice-abilities. If they are valuable enough, then it would be better to let Bob choose A. But on what basis can some abilities be thought better than others? It cannot be because those abilities better support freedom, for that would make the self-development argument for freedom question-begging. And even if there is some independent basis, the argument is still problematic. Here I come to the second concern with the overall argument, namely that even considering the ability of rational deliberation and the other choice-abilities alone, the argument provides only qualified support for freedom. Imagine that lifestyle A which Bob favours is the lifestyle of a couch potato. It involves lying on the sofa all day every day drinking beer and watching soap operas and game shows on television. It is conceivable that couch potatoes may rationally deliberate about which television soaps and game shows to watch and which type of beer to drink. However most do not do this. They watch whichever ones are on without giving any careful thought to the matter and drink whichever beer is available in the shops without ever becoming beer connoisseurs. Imagine that this is the case with Bob. If so, the degree

of development of choice-abilities if Bob were free to choose A would be minimal. More would occur if he was guided into an alternative lifestyle that involved the exercise of rational deliberation and other choice-abilities. So even considering just these abilities, the self-development argument supports only a qualified form of freedom, since while intervention might in one way lessen the exercise of those abilities, in another way it may make their exercise more likely. The overall result could be a net gain in the development of choice-related abilities.

### **III. Range of Options**

Another line of argument from self-development to freedom focuses on the idea that restrictions of liberty constrain the range of options a person faces, and in doing so, may restrict options that are more conducive to self-development. Having access to a wide range of options facilitates self-development, according to Steven Wall, because additional options may better suit the development of one's talents and abilities (Wall 1998, 155-6). Any restriction may block an option that would have resulted in a higher degree of self-development.

However, this will be the case only if the extra options are conducive to the development of people's talents and abilities. Self-development will be less likely if the additional options are ones that involve less development of abilities since there would be a greater chance that people would choose one of these options. This would be true so long as people are not perfect judges of what is best for self-development, for if they were then adding options that involve less self-development would simply

result in those options being ignored. If people are less than perfect then they sometimes get it wrong and may mistakenly choose one of the additional options. If so, then by limiting freedom to choose options that are not conducive to the development of abilities, the achievement of self-development would be more likely. Hence extra options may be just as likely to hinder as to further self-development.

There may be a way around this objection. As noted previously, people differ in their talents, dispositions and preferences to a high degree. So perhaps any restriction of options limits options that are conducive to someone's self-development. Individual diversity requires that there be a wide range of options involving different ways of achieving self-development, open to all (Wall 1998, 156). However, even if individual diversity means that the same options are not equally conducive to the self-development of different people, it does not follow that *all* the different options should be open to *everyone*. Careful restrictions could block options *a*, *b*, and *c* (the options less conducive to their self-development) for people of type X, while leaving those options open to people of type Y (where those options are conducive to Y's self-development) but block the set of options *d*, *e*, and *f* from Y (because those options are not conducive to Y's self-development) while leaving *d*, *e*, and *f* open to X. In this way, different options could be blocked for different people, so that each face only options that will further his or her self-development. These remaining options need not be a wide range. On the contrary, they could be intentionally narrow in order to ensure self-development. Thus the fact of diversity alone does not support the wide-range-of-options aspect of freedom.

Moreover, the argument assumes that people are motivated to choose options that lead to self-development and that people are generally the best judge of what is most likely to result in self-development. These assumptions may not always hold. Giving those people for whom the assumptions do not hold access to a wider range of options would not facilitate self-development and may make it less likely. Someone who wants to do activities that do not develop her talents and abilities will find that difficult if her range of activities is narrowed so that it is dominated by those options that encourage self-development. And someone who is a poor judge of what is best for self-development is more likely to achieve it when his range of options is similarly narrowed.

To summarise, the ideal of self-development gives qualified support to liberty. Sometimes people are not motivated to pursue self-development, and there are exceptions to when people are the best judges of what would develop their abilities. Hence there are exceptions to liberty being conducive to self-development. Two strategies which aim to reduce these exceptions, emphasising the development of abilities especially connected with freedom and emphasising that restrictions of liberty may reduce options for self-development, are unconvincing.

### **5. Two Conceptions of Self-Development**

The arguments in the section above cast doubt on the claim that freedom facilitates self-development. They show that self-development could sometimes be furthered by

restricting freedom. This may not worry defenders of the self-development argument since, as has already been noted, they admit the possibility of achieving self-development without freedom (Mill 1975, 66; Wall 1998, 130, 150, 152-3). However there is a deeper problem with the argument which stems from an ambiguity with the concept of self-development. There are two different ways of interpreting this concept. On the one hand, self-development may refer to the development of talents and capacities that one has. On the other, it may be stressed that the notion involved is that of *self*-development, so that the development of talents and capacities must be brought about by oneself and not others or circumstances in general. Hence on this second interpretation, given two options  $x$  and  $y$ , where  $x$  will lead to a greater development of talents and capacities than  $y$ , a person may nevertheless achieve more self-development if he freely chooses  $y$  than if he is forced to choose  $x$ . There is less development but more *self*-development (Elster 1986, 101). Of course even more self-development would be achieved if he freely chooses  $x$ , but we can assume that this is not going to happen. I shall refer to the first interpretation, the one that focuses on development *of* the self as the *self-as-object* view; and the second interpretation, which focuses on development *by* the self, as the *self-as-source* view.

The object view allows more exceptions to the general claim that autonomy facilitates self-development. As discussed above, some people are not motivated to achieve self-development, and some are not the best judges of what is conducive to it, either generally or on specific occasions. Hence there would be cases where freedom could be restricted in order to promote self-development. Thus on the object view, self-

development provides relatively qualified support for liberty. The source view provides relatively unqualified support. In cases where the development of a person's talents and capacities could be furthered by forcing him into some activity, doing so would not further his *self*-development. For that to happen the person must freely choose the activity himself. Thus this interpretation of self-development does a better job in supporting liberty. But the source view also gives the argument a question-begging nature. If we ask the further question of what is important about self-development in the source sense, we want to know not what is important about having talents and abilities that are developed, for that would only support self-development according to the object view, which as we have seen does less to justify freedom. We want to know, rather, what is important about developing one's talents and abilities *oneself* and not have it done for you by others or by circumstances. This question is so similar (although perhaps not identical) to the question of what is valuable about liberty that answering it (the former question) will do most of the work in answering the latter. Saying that freedom facilitates self-development (in the source sense) amounts to saying that choosing-for-oneself facilitates choosing-for-oneself-that-which-develops-one's-abilities. Maintaining that the former is valuable because of the latter does not explain much. So the dilemma faced by the self-development argument is that it can interpret self-development according to the object view, in which case the support for liberty is qualified, or it can take the source view, which provides more support for liberty but at the cost of seeming to simply assert rather than argue for the value of liberty.

One way out of the dilemma is to adhere to the source view and then provide a sound argument for thinking that ideal valuable. Four possible arguments for this will be examined here. One is that by achieving self-development a person can lead a life that contains pursuits that give it depth. By developing one's talents a person can accomplish valuable things (Wall 1998, 157). An example of this, as I understand the argument, could be that by developing one's ability for playing the piano, one could play Chopin concertos which is a valuable accomplishment. However, the argument supports the object interpretation of self-development rather than the source view. It makes no difference how the developed talents come about. I will be able to accomplish if my talents are developed not by me but by others or circumstances. Whether developed by me or by others perhaps forcibly, developed talents allow me to accomplish valuable things. Accomplishing these valuable things may be more likely when one is forced to develop one's abilities than when one is free to decide whether to do so.

A second reason for why self-development is valuable is that people are constituted so as to derive enjoyment and satisfaction from the development of their talents (Wall 1998, 157; Rawls 1971, 426). The same reply applies here. The claim is that people derive enjoyment from having their talents developed, not that they enjoy developing them themselves. Thus the argument supports the object view of self-development rather than the source. If it were amended to say that people enjoy developing their talents themselves then this would support the second interpretation. But this empirical claim seems less true generally than the first claim. Some people do enjoy

developing their own talents themselves, but some find it a frustrating experience. As was argued earlier (section 4.I), people sometimes find it difficult to choose developmental activities.

A third reason is that everyone benefits when people develop their talents and capacities: ‘When an artist creates a beautiful painting, a scientist discovers a new truth about the physical world, an entrepreneur invents a new product or an athlete develops his or her prowess, all can share in their accomplishments.’ (Wall 1998, 158.) Even if this is true, however, it again also supports only the object view. For these external benefits to occur, all that is needed is that people create, invent, discover, etc. with their talents. Whether they develop their talents themselves or are forced to develop them by others or by circumstances makes no difference. More of these public goods will occur when everyone has their talents and abilities developed to the highest degree. This may be more likely to occur when people are forced into such development when they are not inclined to choose it themselves.

A fourth argument connects the ideal of self-development to the value of democracy: what is valuable about people developing their abilities themselves is that doing this helps ensure the healthy functioning of democracy. To bring out this connection, first consider an argument made with regard to freedom of speech specifically rather than freedom generally. One of the traditional arguments for freedom of speech has been that it is necessary for a well-functioning democracy. Freedom to criticise government, and to question policies and politicians, helps to spread information,

holds the political system accountable, and helps keep politicians honest (without, unfortunately, guaranteeing this). Free robust political debate contributes to good democratic government. On the surface, such an argument seems to be limited in the range of speech it protects.<sup>9</sup> It provides grounds for freedom to discuss political matters but does not seem to extend to non-political speech. However, the argument can be extended once we realise that non-political speech such as art that does not express an opinion serves an important function ‘in challenging conventions by picturing the lives of others and helping us to experience them.’ (Fiss 2003, 191) In other words, people ‘need novels and dramas and paintings and poems “because they will be called upon to vote.”’ (Fiss 2003, 192, quoting Harry Kalven, Jr .) The protection of broad free speech facilitates a well-functioning democracy because with such freedom, people develop their intellectual, communicative, and other abilities.

To complete the argument it remains to be shown that democracy is served not only by the abilities that broad freedom of speech helps develop but also by the self-development that would occur under freedom more generally. The connection between democracy and self-development was explored by Mill in chapter 3 of *Considerations on Representative Government*. There he argued that democracy is more likely, compared to other forms of government, to result in the development of intellectual, practical, and moral abilities. Intellectual abilities involving abstract speculation would be developed by people thinking about possible solutions to national problems, with the prospect of putting into effect. Practical abilities, the abilities involved in applying abstract speculations to practical matters, would be

developed by the participation in politics that democracy encourages. Moral abilities, involving concern for the interests of others, are furthered by having the ability to make decisions which will affect those interests. In a democracy, people have to think about how political decisions will affect everyone.

In Mill's view these developmental effects were a justification for democracy over other forms of government, but it is possible to reverse the argument and think of these effects as valuable because they serve democracy. The more that intellectual, moral, and practical abilities are developed, the better will be the decisions made and the more efficiently and effectively they will be implemented. Circularity can be avoided so long as there are independent grounds for democracy. Assuming there are such grounds, self-development is valuable because of its contribution to democracy.

Unlike the previous three arguments, this one has the potential to support the source rather than the object view of self-development. Democracy might be served by people having abilities even if they have not developed those abilities themselves, but would be served even better by people having developed their abilities themselves. The very nature of democracy, being collective self-rule, requires that people decide for themselves rather than having decisions made for them:

healthy functioning of the democratic system depends on an independent-minded, critical, and imaginative citizenry. In a word, a vibrant democracy requires the kind of individuality Mill sought to protect.... Democracy is a form of self-government and thus requires citizens capable of governing themselves (Fiss 2003, 192).

Hence self-development is valuable because of the way it serves democracy, and it is self-development in the source sense that does this better than self-development in the object sense.

However, this argument is not as successful as it first seems. For while democracy is better served by self-development in the source sense, that must be weighed against the fact that democracy is also served by self-development in the object sense. Recall the example that was used to illustrate the difference between the two views: option *x* will develop a person's talents and capacities more greatly than *y* but if (1) this person freely chooses *y* there is more self-development in the source sense than if (2) he is forced to choose *x*. Democracy, so the argument went, is served by 1 in a way that it is not by 2 since 1 involves self-governing. But democracy is also served by 2 in a way that it is not by 1 since 2 involves a greater degree of developed abilities. The more developed people's abilities are, according to Mill's argument above, the better for the workings of democratic government. Hence 2 would be in one way better for democracy than 1 even though in another way worse. The competing considerations pull in opposite directions and it is not clear that the greatest benefits to democracy would always occur with 1. Democracy might sometimes be better served by 2 rather than 1. So the argument supports self-development in the source sense but at the same time also in the object sense.

There are further problems with the argument. It faces similar difficulties as the argument considered in section 4.II that emphasised choice-connected abilities,

namely the question of why these abilities should be ranked of greater importance than non-choice-abilities. The present argument tries to avoid a parallel objection by holding that all abilities, not just those more obviously connected with democracy, are useful for democracy. But even if the range of abilities covered is extensive, it still seems likely that some are of greater use for democracy than others – debating would rank higher than running, even if running somehow contributes to good democracy. If so, the argument would support restrictions on freedom to guide people towards the more relevant abilities.

A final difficulty returns us to a problem that was briefly explored in the second section, namely that self-development is only one component of well-being to be weighed against others. Even if it supports freedom, that support only goes as far as self-development goes in making up overall well-being. Although the argument has now moved beyond well-being, the same difficulty applies here, for the value of democracy must be weighed against other considerations. In particular, furthering self-development in a way that serves democracy may conflict with non-self-development components of well-being. If paternalism interferes with self-development which facilitates democracy, then that is a reason against paternalism but not a conclusive one. It may be the case that the gains in well-being that paternalism could produce through furthering aspects of well-being other than self-development outweigh the costs to democracy.

Hence none of the four arguments for the source view succeed, so the dilemma remains: the self-development argument either provides only qualified support for liberty or it has a question-begging nature.

### **Conclusion**

The idea that development of one's abilities is central to living a good life has a long tradition. The strongest case for showing that self-development supports freedom would have to hold that: a wide rather than narrow range of abilities are valuable ones to develop; that self-development is more important than other possible aspects of a good life such as happiness; and that people always desire self-development and are the best judges of what activities will develop their abilities. But this article has suggested that self-development is only one component of well-being and that there are exceptions to the best-judge view. The argument could try to pick out certain abilities, those centrally connected with choice-making, as of superior value, but such a strategy is problematic, for there seems to be no reason why those abilities should be thought of as having superior value. Finally, we have seen that self-development could be understood in two ways – the source or the object view. The source view gives the argument a question-begging nature, leaving the object view which offers only qualified support for freedom. Hence, the argument that freedom is good for people because it allows them to achieve self-development provides only qualified support for freedom. It supports freedom unless other components of well-being outweigh self-development, unless people are not motivated to pursue their own development, and unless they are not the best judges of what is conducive to their

development. For a more robust case for individual freedom, defenders of liberty will have to look beyond the ideal of self-development.

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NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Although Feinberg uses the label ‘self-fulfillment’, the idea is at least roughly the same as, if not identical to, self-development.

<sup>2</sup> Discussions about how Mill’s liberty principle can be reconciled with his utilitarianism have failed, I believe, to grasp that Mill holds a conception of utility as self-development. I hope to develop this more fully elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> It is possible that self-development might be brought under the mental state or desire-satisfaction accounts. John Rawls, for example, claims that people generally want and enjoy exercising their abilities (Rawls 1971, 426). So while in the text I argue that self-development is best understood as an objectivist account, another possible line of argument is that whichever of the three is correct, self-development could contribute to well-being.

<sup>4</sup> A similar thought-experiment can be made about abilities for torture in order to similarly support the broad view with abilities that are positively bad.

<sup>5</sup> The objection to mental-state accounts of well-being in the previous section was that these states cannot be the only things that matter.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton goes on to complicate the view by arguing that perfection and happiness coincide and constitute a single end.

<sup>7</sup> Best understood not as an actual description of scientists’ motivations but as a claim about what is desirable.

<sup>8</sup> A similar argument can be found in Leibniz and Marx; see Elster 1986, 103.

<sup>9</sup> It also seems to limit the argument to democracies, but it may be possible to extend the argument so that self-development is valuable for the good functioning of any society, democratic or not. However, I do not have space here to explore that possibility.

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