

The Great Ideas Seminar

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Preface for Teachers

What is the Great Ideas Seminar?

As one of the founders of Cair Paravel School in 1980, my overriding purpose was to educate a generation of students who could think through the sophistry of modern culture. Much of what we read, and almost all of what we hear, is more or less baloney. This need not be so; but the solution demands an education which is rigorously academic (see E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, for a lucid analysis of the problem), progresses through the "trivium" (described so wonderfully by Dorothy Sayers in her essay, "The Lost Tools of Learning"), and finally which sets as its goal the education of the generalist (see Mortimer Adler's outline, "Everybody's Business"). Most "higher" education has been so corrupted by the elective system that a core of academic knowledge, once expected of every college graduate, is virtually extinct. Therefore it falls to high school educators to assure that their students leave for college or university with a sound understanding of what it means to be a human being: black, white, yellow, or red, richer or poorer, religious or not. We should not expect much of juniors and seniors in high school, but they should at least understand that they are woefully ignorant, that there are two sides to every issue, that an argument is equally useful when one is persuaded as when one persuades, that logic must ultimately rule over emotion, that listening is a fundamental skill for growth in wisdom and peaceful cohabitation, that until one can express an opinion clearly in writing and speech that opinion does not exist, and finally, as Hippocrates once observed, "Life is short and the Art is long." If our students realize that formal education is nothing more than a preparation for a lifetime of learning, and if they have been inspired by the example of a teacher filled with the joy of learning himself, we will be stunning successes.

The Great Ideas Seminar is a two year sequence of readings, 36 per year, drawn mostly from *The Great Books of the Western World*. One year is political philosophy, and the other moral philosophy. Mortimer Adler's *Six Great Ideas* provides a philosophical overview of each subject, providing definitions, clarification, and cohesion. Liberty, Justice, and Equality correspond to politics; Truth, Goodness, and Beauty to ethics. A classroom set of this paperback book is required in addition to the readings which I have edited.

The selections average eight pages of ten-point type. My choices are not intended to be canonical. What I *can* guarantee, from six years of classroom experience, is that each is accessible to average and above-average students and important to their emerging understanding of life in a fallen world. They will discover, as Solomon warned us, that there is nothing new under the sun. Communism was not discovered by Marx; that distinction goes to Plato. And it was not Ronald Reagan who mounted the first successful assault against the utopians; that distinction goes to Aristotle. The point is that we more often need to be reminded than instructed, and Aristotle's crushing refutation of Plato reminds us that no lesson is ever learned permanently. The old errors will be resurrected.

I can also guarantee that the selections will contain a disproportionately large number of concepts and quotations which intellectuals will find referenced again and again in influential journals and magazines. How many times have I seen Thomas Hobbes' description of life in the anarchic state of nature ("solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short") cited, often without attribution or explanation? Students of this seminar will know what Hobbes was getting at, and why the lesson is of enduring importance.

How is it different from the usual philosophy course?

The typical introductory course in philosophy is taught from a textbook, which is the quintessentially poll-parrot mode of instruction (see Sayers). Students dutifully read the author's summary of Machiavelli's *realpolitik*, and are dutifully tested on their memorization skills. But they are not *doing* philosophy; they are being spoon-fed facts for subsequent regurgitation. Machiavelli was not a political scientist writing in jargon to other political scientists; he was an unemployed civil servant sucking up to Lorenzo de' Medici. As such, he is eminently readable by ordinary people. Footnotes are not required. And when students *read* Machiavelli, and attempt to relate his advice to the behavior of modern politicians as revealed by the daily newspaper, they are *doing* philosophy. At this moment they have leapfrogged the poll-parrot stage to the pert or poetic, which is a whole lot more interesting--and, therefore, memorable. At this point Machiavelli becomes useful, rather than ornamental; we are joining him in the great dialogue which has been going on since the dawn of man.

Why is it uniquely important in a Christian or religious school?

Christian schools are necessarily, and unapologetically, dogmatic. So are Moslem schools, or Mormon schools. Why have a school dedicated to nurturing a particular point of view if that point of view is not rigorously promoted? I will speak for a moment as an evangelical Christian because I know the problems of evangelical Christianity, but my point must necessarily have relevance to other sectarian institutions. The danger of Christian education lies in its shallowness and vapidness. We must master the dogma, but then we must carry the dogma into everyday life. As we watch Christians take their rightful place at the table of democratic political action, do we not often cringe at the simplicity or ignorance of their pronouncements? Is listening to Christian radio as painfully embarrassing to you as it is to me? The solution does not lie in a siege mentality, or conspiracy theories, or end-times speculation of

the sort which would be ridiculed by Jesus or the apostle Paul--but rather in deeper, wider, education and genuine intellectual engagement with the world.

Why is it uniquely important in a public or private secular school?

G.K. Chesterton commented long ago that the man who disbelieves in God does not believe in nothing; rather, he believes in anything. This observation has proven prophetic. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so does morality. If religionists sometimes prove the danger of a mind closed like a trap, secularists sometimes prove the danger of ideas which flow in one ear and out the other, never sticking in the mind or heart. This course provides abundant evidence that human beings from different ages and cultures struggle with the same questions and come up with the same range of answers--which is ultimately an optimistic conclusion. It offers the hope that, for all our fits and starts, civilization can make progress. That progress will depend upon how well we learn the lessons of history and apply them to our present situation. This is in marked contrast to the anarchic view of the more determined multiculturalists, who often imply that Africans and Europeans are as different as salamanders and puppy dogs, or the consistent materialists, who essentially deny the possibility of human decision-making. Students in secular schools, lacking a consistent world-view, desperately need to be reminded of our common humanity.

Is the course usable in a home school?

It would be usable in a group sponsored by a home-school association. Much of the effect would be lost in a tutorial setting, and still more in a correspondence school. To really learn to *think* requires give-and-take with other students.

What is the method of the seminar?

The weekly reading is assigned for Monday morning. Upon arrival in class, students take a five-question test to assess their grasp of the concepts. No other tests are given until the semester final. Only the most dedicated students will average above 80% on these quizzes, because the material, though accessible, is challenging and unfamiliar. The unprepared student will do very poorly. The remainder of the class period is divided between a photocopied in-class reading from a current periodical and discussion of the assigned selection. Daily readings are chosen to reflect some aspect of the assignment, or, failing that, the scope of the course as a whole.

What are the qualifications for teachers?

It takes a special gift to teach this class. Foremost, the teacher must be a voracious, eclectic, and analytical reader to provide adequate material for interesting discussions. Second, the teacher must be smitten by genuine curiosity and a sense of wonder to inspire students to take on the demanding task of thinking, rather than parroting. Third, the teacher must be humble and secure enough to make mistakes and receive public correction from a class of arrogant teenagers, thereby modeling exactly the dedication to truth which the course seeks to produce. Finally, the teacher must be articulate and capable of impromptu synthesis of new ideas. The best candidates will not necessarily be found in the teaching profession; in fact, the real-life nature of the subject matter may tilt the balance toward other well-educated professionals or executives.

A close friend once made an observation about my teaching style which opened my eyes to another important characteristic. Commenting on the problems of modern education in *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis pointed out that the challenge is to irrigate deserts, not prune gardens. Critical thinkers often forget that the young mind will easily pick up a cynical or skeptical attitude. Our task is to awaken them to the wonder of learning. They should learn first to look for what is true and good in a reading, and only then what falls short of the mark. I think a teacher who wades into Aristotle (or Marx) with guns blazing does a profound disservice to his students, and what he will cultivate is arrogance and priggishness, not wisdom. Wisdom is born of broad experience and deep humility, and teachers should be models of both.

What are the qualifications for students?

The modern secondary curriculum, which is high on self-esteem and low on content, does not provide much grist for the mill. Under the best of circumstances, teenagers do not have enough life experience to participate deeply in discussions about the great ideas. The situation becomes well-nigh impossible if they lack the rudiments of American and world history and literature. For Christian schools, a basal knowledge of the Bible is also fundamental. The prescribed curriculum for member schools of the Association of Classical and Christian Schools, which includes Latin and logic, is an excellent foundation. Students will naturally tend to enjoy a freewheeling course like this, because their opinions are openly sought, and argument is encouraged. However, productive use of class time presupposes a normal (but no longer common) degree of maturity for high school juniors and seniors, and the self-discipline which comes from not having wasted the preceding years on stuff and nonsense.

What if I want to choose other readings?

Help yourself, and please let me know what works. I am interested in selections of a length and importance to fit the syllabus, but not the last great book you read. I have plenty of those already, thanks.

How are grades determined?

I have tried several systems, none of them perfect. The final evolution produces a semester grade averaged from the two quarter grades (one-third each), the semester exam (one-sixth), and the semester paper (one-sixth). The quarter grades are the average of the oral participation grade, the weekly papers, and the weekly quizzes. Oral participation is graded from 60% (present and awake) to 100% at 10% intervals based upon total number of meaningful contributions to class discussion. The net effect of this policy is that "A's" are rare and "C's" are common, even at a school like Cair Paravel where the average ACT is 26+. The reason is that very few students at this age have the whole package of skills necessary to achieve 90%: verbal fluency, careful reading, and concise, logical writing. Even very good students tend to fall apart in one area or another. A kid with an average of 93% on papers and 90% in class will score 68% on the quizzes, and there goes the grade. On the other hand, I don't know of a better predictor of success in college than an A or B grade in this class.

This sounds great, but I'm overwhelmed--can you help me?

I'm going to do everything possible to enable teachers of this course to concentrate on the important stuff. The presentation of the readings is a big help--the introduction sets the historical and biographical context, and important concepts are **boldfaced** to guide students their first time through the material. **Underlined** passages are important enough that a student should recognize them by author on a final examination. These passages have been extracted and printed separately in the teachers' manual. Self-study questions at the end of most readings cover the key points. In future years, if enough interest develops, I'll make weekly quizzes and paper topics available via e-mail, and may eventually conduct on-line discussions among teachers. Articles from my personal reading will also be put on-line if I think they would be helpful and they come from a downloadable source. Your job should be to drink deeply from these wells of wisdom, read widely from a variety of sources (my current favorites are the local newspaper, *US News and World Report*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker*, and *Forbes*. As long as I keep up with those, I don't miss much. Because I am a political conservative, and a Christian, *The New Yorker* is particularly important. It reminds me that truth is more complex than I suspected, and that pigeonholes are better for pigeons than people. A liberal, of course, would need another choice to assure appreciation for the conservative viewpoint.

Schedule of Readings

The 33 chapters of this book, plus the half of Mortimer Adler's *Six Great Ideas* which covers Liberty, Justice, and Equality, will more than fill two semesters. Adler's reading can be handled comfortably in three weeks. Each of the chapters is designed to fill one week of discussion, although some may be compressed or skipped if time constraints develop. The *Magna Carta*, Davy Crockett, and G.K. Chesterton chapters are shorter, and two could be combined in one week, or read in short weeks. Aquinas could also be compressed into one week.

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CHAPTER 30

John Stuart Mill (1806-1863): *On Liberty*

John Stuart Mill was home-educated by his father, an author, philosopher, and official with the East India Company, until he was 13. They began with Greek and arithmetic at age 3; by 8 he had read all of Herodotus, six dialogues of Plato, and considerable history (James Mill authored *History of India*); and by 12 he studied Euclid and algebra; Greek, Latin, and English poetry; and started on logic through the study of Aristotle's *Organon*. At 17 he joined his father's employer, and later served for 20 years as the British official in charge of relations with the Indian states. This gave him wide practical experience in political matters. In 1851 he married Mrs. Harriet Taylor, a friend for two decades, and in seven years of marriage outlined and/or partially wrote *On Liberty*, *Representative Government*, and *Utilitarianism*. He gave her full credit for humanising his philosophical bent, stating after her death, "Her memory is to me a religion, and her approbation the standard by which, summing up as it does all worthiness, I endeavour to regulate my life." In his years as a widower he co-founded the first women's suffrage society, and served as a member of Parliament.

As you read this passionate and provocative chapter, consider carefully how Mill's thesis applies to the modern American Christian. Is he saying that everyone who considers himself a "slave to Christ", and is humbly submissive to the instructions in the Bible, is therefore a weakling? Or that being the Lord's true servant must be a positive, voluntary conviction--rather than a force of habit or environment? Is he claiming that punk-rockers are to be commended for their originality? Or condemned for their mindless conformity to a stupid ideal? Is Mill merely paraphrasing the apostle when Paul writes, "Don't let the world press you into its mold" (Romans 12:2)? Or Frank Sinatra when he sang "I did it my way"? Is he unfair to John Calvin? Or justly critical of some Christians who are called by his name? Would he commend the modern worship of "diversity"? Or despise it for spotlighting groups rather than individuals? Will the prescriptions of the religious Right call us back to our core values? Or guarantee still another generation of Laodiceans, who "because you are lukewarm, I am going to spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:16)? What would Mill predict would be the effect of Islamic fundamentalists on the societies which they govern? Do you think Hollywood is wonderful because it is always challenging societal norms, or awful because it is stuck interminably in the same dumb ruts? Is this a message we need to heed today in America, or was it better suited to 19th-century England? What would Mill say to us?

With regard to the previous readings, how does Mill's opinion regarding the legislation against vice compare with Aquinas? Mill is an Englishman; do you find his attitude more indicative of the American or European spirit, as described by Tocqueville? Who would find his opinions more congenial- Plato or Aristotle? What would Luther have to say about the theory which Mill ascribes to Calvin?

These questions are so critically important, and this reading so accessible, that I would like you to invite your parents to read it and discuss it with you around the dinner table. Their signature below certifies that they were at least issued an invitation:

Chapter 3: Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being

SUCH BEING the reasons which make it imperative that human beings should be free to form opinions, and to express their opinions without reserve; and such the baneful consequences to the intellectual, and through that to the moral nature of man, unless this liberty is either conceded, or asserted in spite of prohibition; let us next examine whether the same reasons do not require that men should be free to act upon their opinions--to carry these out in their lives, without hindrance, either physical or moral, from their fellow-men, so long as it is at their own risk and peril.

This last proviso is of course indispensable. No one pretends that actions should be as free as opinions. On the contrary, even opinions lose their immunity when the circumstances in which they are expressed are such as to constitute in their expression a positive instigation to some mischievous act. An opinion that corn-dealers are starvers of the poor, or that private property is robbery, ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited

mob assembled before the house of a corn-dealer, or when handed about among the same mob in the form of a placard. Acts, of whatever kind, which, without justifiable cause, do harm to others, may be, and in the more important cases absolutely require to be, controlled by the unfavourable sentiments, and, when needful, by the active interference of mankind. The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people. But if he refrains from molesting others in what concerns them, and merely acts according to his own inclination and judgment in things which concern himself, the same reasons which show that opinion should be free, prove also that he should be allowed, without molestation, to carry his opinions into practice at his own cost. **That mankind are not infallible; that their truths, for the most part, are only half-truths; that unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good, until mankind are much more capable than at present of recognising all sides of the truth, are principles applicable to men's modes of action, not less than to their opinions.** As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them. It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself. Where, not the person's own character, but the traditions or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress.

In maintaining this principle, the greatest difficulty to be encountered does not lie in the appreciation of means towards an acknowledged end, but in the indifference of persons in general to the end itself. **If it were felt that the free development of individuality is one of the leading essentials of well-being; that it is not only a co-ordinate element with all that is designated by the terms civilisation, instruction, education, culture, but is itself a necessary part and condition of all those things, there would be no danger that liberty should be undervalued, and the adjustment of the boundaries between it and social control would present no extraordinary difficulty. But the evil is, that individual spontaneity is hardly recognised by the common modes of thinking as having any intrinsic worth, or deserving any regard on its own account.** The majority, being satisfied with the ways of mankind as they now are (for it is they who make them what they are), cannot comprehend why those ways should not be good enough for everybody; and what is more spontaneity forms no part of the ideal of the majority of moral and social reformers, but is rather looked on with jealousy, as a troublesome and perhaps rebellious obstruction to the general acceptance of what these reformers, in their own judgment, think would be best for mankind. Few persons, out of Germany, even comprehend the meaning of the doctrine which Wilhelm von Humboldt, so eminent both as a savant and as a politician, made the text of a treatise- that "the end of man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal or immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole"; that, therefore, the object "towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially those who design to influence their fellow-men must ever keep their eyes, is the individuality of power and development"; that for this there are two requisites, "freedom, and variety of situations"; and that from the union of these arise "individual vigour and manifold diversity," which combine themselves in "originality."

Little, however, as people are accustomed to a doctrine like that of Von Humboldt, and surprising as it may be to them to find so high a value attached to individuality, the question, one must nevertheless think, can only be one of degree. **No one's idea of excellence in conduct is that people should do absolutely nothing but copy one another.** No one would assert that people ought not to put into their mode of life, and into the conduct of their concerns, any impress whatever of their own judgment, or of their own individual character. **On the other hand, it would be absurd to pretend that people ought to live as if nothing whatever had been known in the world before they came into it; as if experience had as yet done nothing towards showing that one mode of existence, or of conduct, is preferable to another. Nobody denies that people should be so taught and trained in youth as to know and benefit by the ascertained results of human experience. But it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way. It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character.** The traditions and customs of other people are, to a certain extent, evidence of what their experience has taught them; presumptive evidence, and as such, have a claim to his deference: but, in the first place, their experience may be too narrow; or they may not have interpreted it rightly. Secondly, their interpretation of experience may be correct, but unsuitable to him. **Customs are made for customary circumstances and customary characters; and his circumstances or his character may be uncouth.** Thirdly, though the customs be both good as customs, and suitable to him, yet to conform to custom, merely as custom, does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being. **The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular powers, are improved only by being used. The faculties are called into no exercise by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing only because others believe it.** If the grounds of an opinion are not conclusive to the person's own reason, his reason cannot be strengthened, but is likely to be weakened, by his adopting it: and if the inducements to an act are not such as are consentaneous to his own feelings and character (where affection, or the rights of others, are not concerned) it is so much done towards rendering his feelings and character inert and torpid, instead of active and energetic.

He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning

and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision. And these qualities he requires and exercises exactly in proportion as the part of his conduct which he determines according to his own judgment and feelings is a large one. It is possible that he might be guided in some good path, and kept out of harm's way, without any of these things. But what will be his comparative worth as a human being? **It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it.** 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--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 civilised parts of the world, and who assuredly are but starved specimens of what nature can and will produce. **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.**

It will probably be conceded that it is desirable people should exercise their understandings, and that an intelligent following of custom, or even occasionally an intelligent deviation from custom, is better than a blind and simply mechanical adhesion to it. To a certain extent it is admitted that our understanding should be our own: but there is not the same willingness to admit that our desires and impulses should be our own likewise; or that to possess impulses of our own, and of any strength, is anything but a peril and a snare. Yet desires and impulses are as much a part of a perfect human being as beliefs and restraints: and strong impulses are only perilous when not properly balanced; when one set of aims and inclinations is developed into strength, while others, which ought to co-exist with them, remain weak and inactive. **It is not because men's desires are strong that they act ill; it is because their consciences are weak. There is no natural connection between strong impulses and a weak conscience. The natural connection is the other way. To say that one person's desires and feelings are stronger and more various than those of another, is merely to say that he has more of the raw material of human nature, and is therefore capable, perhaps of more evil, but certainly of more good.** Strong impulses are but another name for energy. Energy may be turned to bad uses; but more good may always be made of an energetic nature, than of an indolent and impassive one. Those who have most natural feeling, are always those whose cultivated feelings may be made the strongest. The same strong susceptibilities which make the personal impulses vivid and powerful, are also the source from whence are generated the most passionate love of virtue, and the sternest self-control. **It is through the cultivation of these that society both does its duty and protects its interests: not by rejecting the stuff of which heroes are made, because it knows not how to make them.** A person whose desires and impulses are his own--are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture--is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character. If, in addition to being his own, his impulses are strong, and are under the government of a strong will, he has an energetic character. Whoever thinks that individuality of desires and impulses should not be encouraged to unfold itself, must maintain that society has no need of strong natures--is not the better for containing many persons who have much character--and that a high general average of energy is not desirable.

In some early states of society, these forces might be, and were, too much ahead of the power which society then possessed of disciplining and controlling them. There has been a time when the element of spontaneity and individuality was in excess, and the social principle had a hard struggle with it. The difficulty then was to induce men of strong bodies or minds to pay obedience to any rules which required them to control their impulses. To overcome this difficulty, law and discipline, like the Popes struggling against the Emperors, asserted a power over the whole man, claiming to control all his life in order to control his character--which society had not found any other sufficient means of binding. **But society has now fairly got the better of individuality; and the danger which threatens human nature is not the excess, but the deficiency, of personal impulses and preferences.** Things are vastly changed since the passions of those who were strong by station or by personal endowment were in the state of habitual rebellion against laws and ordinances, and required to be rigorously chained up to enable the persons within their reach to enjoy any particle of security. In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, every one lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves--what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition? or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive? They ask themselves what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstances superior to mine? I do not mean that they choose what is customary in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination, except for what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conforming is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done: peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes: until by dint of not following their own nature they have no nature to follow: 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. Now is this, or is it not, the desirable condition of human nature?

It is so, on the Calvinistic theory. According to that, the one great offence of man is self-will. All the good of which humanity is capable is comprised in obedience. You have no choice; thus you must do, and no otherwise: "whatever is not a duty, is a sin." Human nature being radically corrupt, there is no redemption for any one until human nature is killed within him. To one holding this theory of life, crushing out any of the human faculties, capacities, and susceptibilities is no evil: man needs

no capacity, but that of surrendering himself to the will of God: and if he uses any of his faculties for any other purpose but to do that supposed will more effectually, he is better without them. This is the theory of Calvinism; and it is held, in a mitigated form, by many who do not consider themselves Calvinists; the mitigation consisting in giving a less ascetic interpretation to the alleged will of God; asserting it to be his will that mankind should gratify some of their inclinations; of course not in the manner they themselves prefer, but in the way of obedience, that is, in a way prescribed to them by authority; and, therefore, by the necessary condition of the case, the same for all.

In some such insidious form there is at present a strong tendency to this narrow theory of life, and to the pinched and hidebound type of human character which it patronises. Many persons, no doubt, sincerely think that human beings thus cramped and dwarfed are as their Maker designed them to be; just as many have thought that trees are a much finer thing then clipped into pollards, or cut out into figures of animals, than as nature made them. But if 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. There is a different type of human excellence from the Calvinistic: a conception of humanity as having its nature bestowed on it for other purposes than merely to be abnegated. **"Pagan self-assertion" is one of the elements of human worth, as well as "Christian self-denial."** There is a Greek ideal of self-development, which the Platonic and Christian ideal of self-government blends with, but does not supersede. It may be better to be a John Knox than an Alcibiades, but it is better to be a Pericles than either; nor would a Pericles, if we had one in these days, be without anything good which belonged to John Knox. It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it, and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation; and as the works partake the character of those who do them, by the same process human life also becomes rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings, and strengthening the tie which binds every individual to the race, by making the race infinitely better worth belonging to. In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefor capable of being more valuable to others. There is a greater fulness of life about his own existence, and when there is more life in the units there is more in the mass which is composed of them. As much compression as is necessary to prevent the stronger specimens of human nature from encroaching on the rights of others cannot be dispensed with; but for this there is ample compensation even in the point of view of human development. The means of development which the individual loses by being prevented from gratifying his inclinations to the injury of others, are chiefly obtained at the expense of the development of other people. And even to himself there is a full equivalent in the better development of the social part of his nature, rendered possible by the restraint put upon the selfish part. **To be held to rigid rules of Justice for the sake of others, develops the feelings and capacities which have the good of others for their object. But to be restrained in things not affecting their good, by their mere displeasure, develops nothing valuable, except such force of character as may unfold itself in resisting the restraint. If acquiesced in, it dulls and blunts the whole nature.** To give any fair play to the nature of each, it is essential that different persons should be allowed to lead different lives. In proportion as this latitude has been exercised in any age, has that age been noteworthy to posterity. Even despotism does not produce its worst effects, so long as individuality exists under it; and whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called, and whether it professes to be enforcing the will of God or the injunctions of men.

Having said that the individuality is the same thing with development, and that it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings, I might here close the argument: for what more or better can be said of any condition of human affairs than that it brings human beings themselves nearer to the best thing they can be? or what worse can be said of any obstruction to good than that it prevents this? Doubtless, however, these considerations will not suffice to convince those who most need convincing; and it is necessary further to show, that these developed human beings are of some use to the undeveloped- to point out to those who do not desire liberty, and would not avail themselves of it, that they may be in some intelligible manner rewarded for allowing other people to make use of it without hindrance. In the first place, then, I would suggest that they might possibly learn something from them. It will not be denied by anybody, that originality is a valuable element in human affairs. **There is always need of persons not only to discover new truths, and point out when what were once truths are true no longer, but also to commence new practices, and set the example of more enlightened conduct, and better taste and sense in human life.** This cannot well be gainsaid by anybody who does not believe that the world has already attained perfection in all its ways and practices. It is true that this benefit is not capable of being rendered by everybody alike: there are but few persons, in comparison with the whole of mankind, whose experiments, if adopted by others, would be likely to be any improvement on established practices. But these few are the salt of the earth; without them, human life would become a stagnant pool. Not only is it they who introduce good things which did not before exist; it is they who keep the life in those which already exist. If there were nothing new to be done, would human intellect cease to be necessary? Would it be a reason why those who do the old things should forget why they are done, and do them like cattle, not like human beings? **There is only too great a tendency in the best beliefs and practices to degenerate into the mechanical; and unless there were a succession of persons whose ever-recurring originality prevents the grounds of those beliefs and practices from becoming merely traditional, such dead matter would not resist the smallest shock from anything really alive, and there would be no reason why civilisation should not die out, as in the Byzantine Empire. 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. Genius can only breathe freely in an atmosphere of freedom. Persons of genius are, *ex vi termini*, more individual than any other people—less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character. If from timidity they consent to be forced into one of these moulds, and to let all that part of themselves which cannot expand under the pressure remain unexpanded, society will be little the better for their genius. If they are of a strong character, and break their fetters, they become a mark for the society which has not succeeded in reducing them to commonplace, to point out with solemn warning, as "wild," "erratic," and the like; much as if one should complain of the Niagara river for not flowing smoothly between its banks like a Dutch canal.

I insist thus emphatically on the importance of genius, and the necessity of allowing it to unfold itself freely both in thought and in practice, being well aware that no one will deny the position in theory, but knowing also that almost every one, in reality, is totally indifferent to it. **People think genius a fine thing if it enables a man to write an exciting poem, or paint a picture. But in its true sense, that of originality in thought and action, though no one says that it is not a thing to be admired, nearly all, at heart, think that they can do very well without it. Unhappily this is too natural to be wondered at. Originality is the one thing which unoriginal minds cannot feel the use of. They cannot see what it is to do for them: nor should they. If they could see what it would do for them, it would not be originality.** The first service which originality has to render them, is that of opening their eyes: to which being once fully done, they would have a chance of being themselves original. Meanwhile, recollecting that nothing was ever yet done which some one was not the first to do, and that all good things which exist are the fruits of originality, let them be modest enough to believe that there is something still left for it to accomplish, and assure themselves that they are more in need of originality, the less they are conscious of the want.

In sober truth, whatever homage may be professed, or even paid, to real or supposed mental superiority, the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind. In ancient history, in the Middle Ages, and in a diminishing degree through the long transition from feudality to the present time, the individual was a power in himself; and if he had either great talents or a high social position, he was a considerable power. At present individuals are lost in the crowd. **In politics it is almost a triviality to say that public opinion now rules the world.** The only power deserving the name is that of masses, and of governments while they make themselves the organ of the tendencies and instincts of masses. This is as true in the moral and social relations of private life as in public transactions. Those whose opinions go by the name of public opinion are not always the same sort of public: in America they are the whole white population: in England chiefly the middle class. But they are always a mass, that is to say, collective mediocrity. And what is a still greater novelty, the mass do not now take their opinions from dignitaries in Church or State, from ostensible leaders, or from books. Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name, on the spur of the moment, through the newspapers.

I am not complaining of all this. I do not assert that anything better is compatible, as a general rule, with the present low state of the human mind. But that does not hinder the government of mediocrity from being mediocre government. **No government by a democracy or a numerous aristocracy, either in its political acts or in the opinions, qualities, and tone of mind which it fosters, ever did or could rise above mediocrity except in so far as the sovereign Many let themselves be guided (which in their best times they always have done) by the counsels and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed One or Few.** The initiation of all wise or noble things comes and must come from individuals; generally, at first from some one individual. The honor and glory of the average man is that he is capable of following that initiative; that he can respond internally to wise and noble things, and be led to them with his eyes open. **I am not countenancing the sort of "hero-worship" which applauds the strong man of genius for forcibly seizing on the government of the world and making it do his bidding in spite of itself.** All he can claim is, freedom to point out the way. The power of compelling others into it is not only inconsistent with the freedom and development of all the rest, but corrupting to the strong man himself. It does seem, however, that when the opinions of masses of merely average men are everywhere become or becoming the dominant power, the counterpoise and corrective to that tendency would be the more and more pronounced individuality of those who stand on the higher eminences of thought. It is in these circumstances most especially, that exceptional individuals, instead of being deterred, should be encouraged in acting differently from the mass. In other times there was no advantage in their doing so, unless they acted not only differently but better. In this age, the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage it contained. **That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time.**

I have said that it is important to give the freest scope possible to uncustomary things, in order that it may in time appear which of these are fit to be converted into customs. But independence of action, and disregard of custom, are not solely deserving of encouragement for the chance they afford that better modes action, and customs more worthy of general adoption, may be struck out; nor is it only persons of decided mental superiority to have a just claim to carry on their lives in their own way. There is no reason that all human existence should be constructed on some one or some small number of patterns. If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode. Human beings are not like sheep; and even sheep are not undistinguishably alike. A man cannot get a coat or a pair of boots to fit him unless they are either made to his measure, or he has a whole warehouseful to choose from: and is it

easier to fit him with a life than with a coat, or are human beings more like one another in their whole physical and spiritual conformation than in the shape of their feet? If it were only that people have not attempting to shape them all after one model.

But 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. **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 burthen, 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. Why then should tolerance, as far as the public sentiment is concerned, extend only to tastes and modes of life which extort acquiescence by the multitude of their adherents? Nowhere (except in some monastic institutions) is diversity of taste entirely unrecognised; a person may, without blame, either like or dislike rowing, or smoking, or music, or athletic exercises, or chess, or cards, or study, because both those who like each of these things, and those who dislike them, are too numerous to be put down. **But the man, and still more the woman, who can be accused either of doing "what nobody does," or of not doing "what everybody does," is the subject of as much depreciatory remark as if he or she had committed some grave moral delinquency.** Persons require to possess a title, or some other badge of rank, or of the consideration of people of rank, to be able to indulge somewhat in the luxury of doing as they like without detriment to their estimation. To indulge somewhat, I repeat: for whoever allow themselves much of that indulgence, incur the risk of something worse than disparaging speeches - they are in peril of a commission *de lunatico*, and of having their property taken from them and given to their relations. There is one characteristic of the present direction of public opinion peculiarly calculated to make it intolerant of any marked demonstration of individuality. **The general average of mankind are not only moderate in intellect, but also moderate in inclinations: they have no tastes or wishes strong enough to incline them to do anything unusual, and they consequently do not understand those who have, and class all such with the wild and intemperate whom they are accustomed to look down upon.** Now, in addition to this fact which is general, we have only to suppose that a **strong movement has set in towards the improvement of morals**, and it is evident what we have to expect. In these days such a movement has set in; much has actually been effected in the way of increased regularity, of conduct and discouragement of excesses; and there is a philanthropic spirit abroad, for the exercise of which there is no more inviting field than the moral and prudential improvement of our fellow creatures. These tendencies of the times cause the public to be more disposed than at most former periods to prescribe general rules of conduct, and endeavour to make every one conform to the approved standard. And that standard, express or tacit, is to desire nothing strongly. Its ideal of character is to be without any marked character; to maim by compression, like a Chinese lady's foot, every part of human nature stands out prominently, and tends to make the person markedly dissimilar in outline to commonplace humanity. As is usually the case with ideals which exclude one-half of what is desirable, the present standard of approbation produces only an inferior imitation of the other half. Instead of great energies guided by vigorous reason, and strong feelings strongly controlled by a conscientious will, its result is weak feelings and weak energies, which therefore can be kept in outward conformity to rule without any strength either of will or of reason. Already, energetic characters on any large scale are becoming merely traditional. There is now scarcely any outlet for energy in this country except business. The energy expended in this may still be regarded as considerable. What little is left from that employment is expended on some hobby; which may be a useful, even a philanthropic hobby, but is always some one thing, and generally a thing of small dimensions. The greatness of England is now all collective; individually small, we only appear capable of anything great by our habit of combining; and with this our moral and religious philanthropists are perfectly contented. But it was men of another stamp than this that made England what it has been; and men of another stamp will be needed to prevent its decline.

The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called, according to circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of progress or improvement. The spirit of improvement is not always a spirit of liberty, for it may aim at forcing improvements on an unwilling people; and the spirit of liberty, in so far as it resists such attempts, may ally itself locally and temporarily with the opponents of improvement; but 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. The progressive principle, however, in either shape, whether as the love of liberty or of improvement, is antagonistic to the sway of Custom, involving at least emancipation from that yoke; and the contest between the two constitutes the chief interest of the history of mankind. **The greater part of the world has, properly speaking, no history, because the despotism of Custom is complete. This is the case over the whole East. Custom is there, in all things, the final appeal; justice and right mean conformity to custom; the argument of custom no one, unless some tyrant intoxicated with power, thinks of resisting.** And we see the result. Those nations must once have had originality; they did not start out of the ground populous, lettered, and versed in many of the arts of life; they made themselves all this, and were then the greatest and most powerful nations of the world. What are they now? The subjects or dependents of tribes whose forefathers wandered in the forests when theirs had magnificent palaces and gorgeous temples, but over whom custom exercised only a divided rule with liberty and progress. A people, it appears, may be progressive for a certain length of time, and then stop: when does it stop? When it ceases to possess individuality. If a similar change should befall the nations of Europe, it will not be in exactly the same shape: the despotism of custom with which these nations are threatened is not precisely stationariness. It proscribes singularity, but it does not preclude change, provided all change together. We have discarded the fixed costumes of our forefathers; every one must still dress like other

people, but the fashion may change once or twice a year. We thus take care that when there is a change, it shall be for change's sake, and not from any idea of beauty or convenience; for the same idea of beauty or convenience would not strike all the world at the same moment, and be simultaneously thrown aside by all at another moment. But we are progressive as well as changeable: we continually make new inventions in mechanical things, and keep them until they are again superseded by better; we are eager for improvement in politics, in education, even in morals, though in this last our idea of improvement chiefly consists in persuading or forcing other people to be as good as ourselves. It is not progress that we object to; on the contrary, we flatter ourselves that we are the most progressive people who ever lived. It is individuality that we war against: we should think we had done wonders if we had made ourselves all alike; forgetting that the unlikeness of one person to another is generally the first thing which draws the attention of either to the imperfection of his own type, and the superiority of another, or the possibility, by combining the advantages of both, of producing something better than either. **We have a warning example in China-** a nation of much talent, and, in some respects, even wisdom, owing to the rare good fortune of having been provided at an early period with a particularly good set of customs, the work, in some measure, of men to whom even the most enlightened European must accord, under certain limitations, the title of sages and philosophers. They are remarkable, too, in the excellence of their apparatus for impressing, as far as possible, the best wisdom they possess upon every mind in the community, and securing that those who have appropriated most of it shall occupy the posts of honour and power. Surely the people who did this have discovered the secret of human progressiveness, and must have kept themselves steadily at the head of the movement of the world. On the contrary, **they have become stationary- have remained so for thousands of years; and if they are ever to be farther improved, it must be by foreigners.** They have succeeded beyond all hope in what English philanthropists are so industriously working at- in making a people all alike, all governing their thoughts and conduct by the same maxims and rules; and these are the fruits. The modern regime of public opinion is, in an unorganised form, what the Chinese educational and political systems are in an organised; and unless individuality shall be able successfully to assert itself against this yoke, Europe, notwithstanding its noble antecedents and its professed Christianity, will tend to become another China.

What is it that has hitherto preserved Europe from this lot? What has made the European family of nations an improving, instead of a stationary portion of mankind? Not any superior excellence in them, which, when it exists, exists as the effect not as the cause; but their remarkable diversity of character and culture. Individuals, classes, nations, have been extremely unlike one another: they have struck out a great variety of paths, each leading to something valuable; and although at every period those who travelled in different paths have been intolerant of one another, and each would have thought it an excellent thing if all the rest could have been compelled to travel his road, their attempts to thwart each other's development have rarely had any permanent success, and each has in time endured to receive the good which the others have offered. Europe is, in my judgment, wholly indebted to this plurality of paths for its progressive and many-sided development. But it already begins to possess this benefit in a considerably less degree. It is decidedly advancing towards the Chinese ideal of making all people alike. **M. de Tocqueville**, in his last important work, remarks how much more the Frenchmen of the present day resemble one another than did those even of the last generation. The same remark might be made of Englishmen in a far greater degree.

In a passage already quoted from Wilhelm von Humboldt, he points out two things as necessary conditions of human development, because necessary to render people unlike one another; namely, freedom, and variety of situations. The second of these two conditions is in this country every day diminishing. The circumstances which surround different classes and individuals, and shape their characters, are daily becoming more assimilated. Formerly, different ranks, different neighbourhoods, different trades and professions, lived in what might be called different worlds; at present to a great degree in the same. Comparatively speaking, they now read the same things, listen to the same things, see the same things, go to the same places, have their hopes and fears directed to the same objects, have the same rights and liberties, and the same means of asserting them. Great as are the differences of position which remain, they are nothing to those which have ceased. And the assimilation is still proceeding. All the political changes of the age promote it, since they all tend to raise the low and to lower the high. Every extension of education promotes it, because education brings people under common influences, and gives them access to the general stock of facts and sentiments. Improvement in the means of communication promotes it, by bringing the inhabitants of distant places into personal contact, and keeping up a rapid flow of changes of residence between one place and another. The increase of commerce and manufactures promotes it, by diffusing more widely the advantages of easy circumstances, and opening all objects of ambition, even the highest, to general competition, whereby the desire of rising becomes no longer the character of a particular class, but of all classes. A more powerful agency than even all these, in bringing about a general similarity among mankind, is the complete establishment, in this and other free countries, of the ascendancy of public opinion in the State. **As the various social eminences which enabled persons entrenched on them to disregard the opinion of the multitude gradually become levelled; as the very idea of resisting the will of the public, when it is positively known that they have a will, disappears more and more from the minds of practical politicians; there ceases to be any social support for nonconformity- any substantive power in society which, itself opposed to the ascendancy of numbers, is interested in taking under its protection opinions and tendencies at variance with those of the public.**

The combination of all these causes forms so great a mass of influences hostile to Individuality, that it is not easy to see how it can stand its ground. It will do so with increasing difficulty, unless the intelligent part of the public can be made to feel its value- to see that it is good there should be differences, even though not for the better, even though, as it may appear to them, some should be for the worse. If the claims of Individuality are ever to be asserted, the time is now, while much is still, wanting, to complete the enforced assimilation. It is only, in the earlier stages that any stand can be successfully made against the encroachment. The demand that all other people shall resemble ourselves grows by what it feeds on. If resistance waits till life is reduced nearly to one uniform

type, all deviations from that type will come to be considered impious, immoral, even monstrous and contrary to nature. Mankind speedily become unable to conceive diversity, when they have been for some time unaccustomed to see it.

Self-study questions

The questions in the introduction serve as a sufficient guide to Mill's arguments.

