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Individual Freedom vs. Authority

22 February 2024

## **Individualistic tendencies, equality of conditions, and societal management**

### **Introduction**

How does a good society manage individualistic tendencies? This disputed question and its consideration influences all elements of human society. To better understand individualistic tendencies, this paper will contrast two leading models. First, John Mill's *On Liberty* and its description of individuality as an attribute-based force for good. Secondly, Alexis De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and its cynical, behavior-based interpretation of individualism. After establishing their respective claims, this paper will compare Mill and Tocqueville's assessments of the connection between individualistic tendencies and the dangers of equal conditions. Acknowledging the complexity of human affairs, we will weigh each author's solutions to the issues of equality of conditions against each other. We claim that Tocqueville's assessment is more perceptive and a more authoritative position on individualistic tendencies.

### **Individualistic tendencies: Mill's individuality and Tocqueville's individualism**

Mill examines individuality as an intellectual and social force that betters society. Mill describes individuality with terms like "conduct and character" (66) as well as "eccentricity" of opinions and customs (56). Identity and opinions compose individuality. These aspects are particularly significant when they are at odds with "the modern régime of public opinion" (Mill 60). Speaking of the value of individuality, it is "the principal ingredient of human happiness,

and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress” (Mill 47). All that is “wise or noble...comes and must come from individuals” (Mill 55). Therefore, Mill defines individualistic tendencies (or, in his terms, individualism) as personal attributes like opinions and dispositions, which are invaluable to society.

Tocqueville describes individualistic tendencies as a libertarian inclination to shrink from the social order into selfishness. Individualism is a “sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him” and associate only with family and friends, “creat[ing] a little society for his own use” (Tocqueville 482). Consequently, individualism “at first dries up the only the source of public virtues, but in the long term...attacks and destroys all the others and will finally be absorbed in selfishness” (Tocqueville 483). Tocqueville reinforces the corrosive influence of individuality through his definition of selfishness: “a passionate and exaggerated love of the self that brings man to relate everything to himself alone and prefer himself to everything” (482). Tocqueville considers individualistic tendencies to be a derivative of “selfishness” that causes citizens to “withdraw” (242), thereby undermining society.

### **The issues of equality**

Both authors tend to agree on the dangers of an unfettered majority in times of equality but explore its causes in varying depths. Mill refers to this force by many names, like the “Despotism of Custom” (58), a force that leaves people “in outward conformity to rule without any strength either of will or of reason” (58). Referencing Tocqueville’s work on the matter (Mill 60), Mill establishes “the ascendancy of public opinion in the State” as conditions equalize, which eliminates “any social support for non-conformity” (61). Crediting much of Europe’s advancement to a “plurality of paths” (Mill 60), it is clear the unrestricted force of equality seriously threatens social progress.

Tocqueville concurs but attributes tyrannical majorities to equal conditions more unequivocally. He claims the majority has a “moral empire” (Tocqueville 236) and is the “single element of force and success” in society (Tocqueville 244). Its power partially comes from “the idea that there is more enlightenment and wisdom in many men united than in one alone” (Tocqueville 247). Particularly in “centuries of equality,” “common opinion [becomes] the sole guide...for individual reason” (Tocqueville 409).

Speaking to the harmful effects of a tyrannical majority, Tocqueville emphasizes that it “draws a formidable circle around thought” (244) that leaves disruptors to a fate “worse than death” (245) and vulnerable to the whims of the crowd (409). Beyond this, equal conditions set the stage for tyranny. People in democratic societies prefer “slavery” to freedom if it means having equality (Tocqueville 482). Thus, equality’s tendency to put people “beside one another without a common bond” and despotism’s “public virtue of indifference” “complement and aid each other in a fatal manner” (Tocqueville 485). In the busy life of an equal and democratic society, people are inclined to “abandon the care of [common affairs] to the sole visible and permanent representative of collective interests, the state” (Tocqueville 643), which creates the opportunity for tyrannical social and government forces.

Each author agrees that equal conditions contribute to a domineering majority that reigns over ideas, virtues, and individual thought. However, Tocqueville focuses more heavily on the equality of conditions as a catalyst for tyrannical circumstances.

### **Individualistic tendencies as a solution**

Mill offers individualistic tendencies as a counterweight to the tyranny of the majority. Accordingly, he advocates for its protection. Although democracies can rarely “rise above mediocrity” (Mill 55), “genius can only breathe freely in an *atmosphere* of freedom” (Mill 54).

By providing “the freest scope possible to uncouth things” and a “diversity in modes of life” (Mill 56-57), people can “cultivate...[their] higher nature” (Mill 56). Though fundamental limits exist to a democratic society’s advancement, protecting individualistic tendencies counters the enervating impacts of a tyrannical majority.

Tocqueville has a more intricate plan for countering the despotic reign of the majority and mitigating the corrosive effects of individualism. Among other solutions, he offers political participation and associations to harness self-interest for good and suppress selfishness. In the case of local politics, citizens work together to solve communal problems. Consequently, “by dint of working for the good of one’s fellow citizens, one finally picks up the habit and taste of serving them” (Tocqueville 488). By their membership and collaborative nature, political associations become “a power that speaks, and to which one listens” (Tocqueville 492). Thus, political involvement pulls citizens out of the depths of selfishness and creates powerful bodies that can resist popular demands.

Tocqueville offers specific prescriptions to use individualistic tendencies to mitigate the dangers of equality. He advises the only “efficacious remedy” to the evils of equality is “political freedom” (Tocqueville 488). Mill simply advocates for preserving individualistic tendencies whenever possible.

### **Tocqueville’s more applicable analysis**

Mill’s work deals in generalities. Although his observations about a tyrannical majority align with Tocqueville’s, his assessments about individualistic tendencies lack the specificity and focus that Tocqueville’s do.

Tocqueville’s observations are more reasoned. For instance, he emphasizes the importance of some “ready-made beliefs” that provide a “salutary servitude” of the mind

(407-408). While Mill acknowledges the existence of a “general stock of common facts and sentiments” (61), he considers it part of “a mass of influences hostile to individuality” (61). Though Mill accepts society’s “absolute power” over the youth and intervention in situations that risk damage to others (69), Tocqueville’s more specific conditions are superior. They acknowledge that most do not have the bandwidth to inquire into every matter of life. This depth of thought occurs throughout Tocqueville’s analysis, making his work a stronger analysis of individualistic tendencies.

## **Conclusion**

Tocqueville and Mill view individualistic tendencies in different lights. Mill views them as the unique attributes of human beings and a powerful driver of change, while Tocqueville views them as a tendency towards selfishness that erodes society. Both authors agree on the dangers of a tyrannical majority. Tocqueville attributes its reign solely to conditions of equality, while Mill does not specify a sole cause, though he does acknowledge that equality of conditions is involved. To leverage individualistic tendencies against the dangers of equality, Mill advocates preserving individuality as much as possible. Tocqueville encourages institutions and systems that carefully manage self-interest to channel it into productive means, namely through political freedom. Tocqueville’s rigorous analysis makes it a superior guide for anyone looking to understand and manage individualistic tendencies.

## Works Cited

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. Dover Publications, 2002.

Tocqueville, Alexis De. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and  
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