Liberalism, Individuality, and Identity

Kwame Anthony Appiah

Do you wish to know the great drama of my life? I have given my genius to my life, to my work only my talent.

—OSCAR WILDE

We have to create ourselves as a work of art.

—MICHEL FOUCAULT

I first heard of Liberalism in discussions of British politics, where it meant the views of the party that was neither Conservative (that is Tory) nor Socialist (that is Labour). Liberalism in that sense began with an upper

This essay began in response to challenges from Tom Nagel, Ronnie Dworkin, and Richard Bernstein to say more about various aspects of the ethics of identity. I am grateful to them. I also owe a debt to the editors of this journal and to Jorge Garcia, whose written comments helped me revise this essay. I had the opportunity to discuss this essay at Vanderbilt University (where it started out as the Harry Howard Jr. Lecture in the Humanities), Rutgers University, University College, London, Harvard Law School’s Legal Theory Seminar, the National Humanities Center, and the New York Humanities Institute. I wish I had been able to integrate more of the many insights I gained from these discussions, especially since I learned in all these places how many of my claims invite debate.


Critical Inquiry 27 (Winter 2001)
© 2001 by The University of Chicago. 0009-1896/01/2702-001$02.00. All rights reserved.
case $L$, in the way in which Republican and Democrat begin with a big $R$
and a big $D$ when they refer to the parties. But in philosophy we have
come to use the word liberalism with a lower-case $L$ to refer to a particular
tradition in politics and the philosophy of politics whose central ideas
would probably be endorsed by most people in the four political parties
in Britain and the United States that I have just mentioned. In the sense
in which I am discussing the term, just as American electoral politicians
are all small-$r$ republicans and small-$d$ democrats, British politicians are
all small-$l$ liberals. Indeed, if there were a word for the consensus within
which electoral politics are debated in the industrialized world today, it
might as well be liberalism, even if there are some who reject the term
because it has associations they do not care for.

If you are a philosopher, consensus doesn’t always make you happy.
Nietzsche once made a remark to the effect that the consensus sapientium—
the agreement of the wise—might be evidence of untruth.³ As usual, he
was exaggerating. But the fact that everybody seems to agree about some-
thing isn’t always proof that we’re right. And even if we are right, it may
do us good to think about the principles, the values and ideals, that un-
derlie our agreement, not just to make the consensus more intellectually
secure, but also to explore consequences we haven’t noticed. To start such
an exploration of consensus, however, we first need to say something
about the liberal tradition.

It seems to me there are two obvious ways of going about saying what
you mean by liberalism. One is historical. It is to point to the development
over the last few centuries, but especially since the American and French
Revolutions, of a new form of political life. This form of life finds expres-
sion in certain political institutions: among them, on the one hand, re-
publicanism, or at least constitutional rather than absolute monarchy,
elected rather than hereditary rulers, and, more generally, some sort of
appeal to the consent of the governed; and, on the other hand, a legal
system that respects certain fundamental rights, limiting the power of
those who govern. These civil or political rights carve out for citizens a
corresponding sphere of freedoms including those of political speech, the
press, and religion. Each of these elements can come on its own. There
were republics in Europe as far back as Athens; the first German emper-

pp. 29–50.
ors were elected; and freedom of the press and religious toleration developed in England within a monarchical scheme. What characterizes the beginnings of liberalism is, then, a combination of political institutions: constitutions, rights, elections, and protections for private property. In the twentieth century, in both Europe and North America, there was added to the recognition of these political rights a concern to guarantee certain minimum conditions of welfare for every citizen, what we call—even if the extension of the term rights in this way is a little controversial—economic and social rights. And it is that combination of civil rights and welfare provision that is identified in the United States as the liberal and in Europe as the social democratic tradition.

But the liberal form of life was characterized not only by institutions but also by a rhetoric, a body of ideas and arguments, which received their most familiar expression for us here in these United States in these, the most familiar words of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of those ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it.

The signatories of the Declaration were not, of course, the first people to have had any of these ideas. Talk of liberty and the consent of the people, for example, was already well established in Puritan colonial rhetoric. But the American founders were surely the first people to try to put such ideas into practice, and their language (and Thomas Jefferson himself, as ambassador to Paris at the time the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was being drafted) had a profound effect on the rhetoric of the French Revolution as well. Indeed, the central ideas in this

4. These elections were, of course, by a small "electorate" of rulers of towns, states and other units of the Reich. But the first American elections were on a decidedly limited franchise, too. If democracy means an electoral system with basically full adult franchise, then democracy is a latecomer in liberal practice. So I haven't put democracy in there as part of the institutional tradition of liberalism. Indeed, it seems to me that key liberals were skeptical of democracy: Mill was worried about the tyranny of the majority and, as I say, the U.S. Constitution isn't democratic, for it doesn't give the franchise to all adult citizens. I do not mean to express skepticism about democracy in this sense or to suggest that it does not follow from core liberal ideas. Respect for others as free and equal, of the sort that I talk about later, requires a means of expressing everyone's political equality by providing everyone with equal roles in selecting the government, however. In the end, something like democracy will probably come out of the liberal tradition. But I think the connection between liberalism and democracy needs to be argued.
passage are captured quite succinctly in the rallying cry of the French revolutionaries: liberté, égalité, fraternité.

Liberty and equality are there in the American Declaration, on its face, so to speak. But fraternity is there too, for fraternity is what binds together the people, the people who may alter or abolish forms of government. The Declaration takes for granted that there is already an American people to exercise this right. The American Revolution assumes, with an assurance that is surely bold in a multireligious immigrant country in the New World, that there is a nation here that can construct an American government. This is particularly striking since there were important assumptions made by the country's founders about who the we of "we, the people" were. John Jay in the second of the Federalist Papers blithely ignores most of the difficulties when he tells us that he has

often taken notice that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established their general liberty and independence.\(^5\)

This passage puts aside the fact of the Indian, African, Jewish, and Catholic presence in the American colonies. Indeed, it might seem to exclude from the people (given the limited role of women in the actual fighting during the War of Independence) most, if not all, women. After all, it was only in the mid-nineteenth century that "we, the people" came to include African Americans; and, if suffrage is an expression of our fraternity, then women were not fully joined to the nation until this century. Only when fraternity is linked to sorority is the process complete.

Many people nowadays will still find most of the ideas in these early sentences of the Declaration something close to self-evident (even those who doubt that it was a Creator who endowed us with our rights). Clearly, these sentiments were far from uncontroversial when they were first pronounced. Edmund Burke, who was as profound a student of constitutional history as England produced in this age of revolutions, made some of the obvious objections at the start.

First of all, he asked, doesn't the value of liberty depend on what you do with it? Or, as he put it in the Reflections on the Revolution in France:

I should suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France, until I was informed how it had been combined with government, with public force, with the discipline and obedience of armies, with

---

the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue, with morality and religion, with solidity and property, with peace and order, with civil and social manners. All these (in their way) are good things, too; and without them, liberty is not a benefit whilst it lasts, and is not likely to continue long. The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do what they please: we ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations, which may soon be turned into complaints.\(^6\)

The challenge here is an important one. Liberty cannot be the only thing that matters. Burke renders liberty a second-order value, a matter of being free from the constraint of others—and especially of governments—to "do what [you may] please." But doesn't its value then come from what we please to do with it? To speak of liberty as an inalienable right is to suggest that no one may stop us from doing what we please, \textit{whatever we please}. But why? For Burke, at least, this was far from "self-evident."

Burke was equally skeptical of the idea of equality. It is a familiar philosophers' observation that when somebody calls for equality, we should ask, \textit{Equality of what?} But Burke saw at once that the revolutionary notion of equality meant, at least, that everyone was entitled to equal respect. These revolutions, in at least some of their rhetoric, were committed to the idea that everyone had what we would now call human dignity.

This affinity between talk of equality and questions of dignity and respect is articulated in the American colonies a good deal before the Revolution. John Wise, who graduated from Harvard more than a hundred years before the Declaration of Independence, made the connection clearly in his 1717 \textit{Vindication of the Government of New England Churches}:

\begin{quote}
The word "Man" . . . is thought to carry somewhat of dignity in its sound; and we commonly make use of this as the most proper and prevailing argument against a rude insulter, \textit{viz.} "I am not a beast or a dog, but am a man as well as yourself." Since then human nature agrees equally with all persons, and since no one can live a sociable life with another that does not own or respect him as a man, it follows . . . that every man esteem and treat another as one who is naturally his equal, or who is a man as well as he.\(^7\)
\end{quote}

Burke uses the word \textit{honor}—rather than \textit{dignity, esteem, or respect}—in his response to this notion of equality; in his day it was obvious that honor,

like dignity, was something that only some people had. (Even radical old Wise thought that in civil society there must be "just distinctions among men of honor." [14, p. 128]) So that, once again, Burke makes what was, in the context, the obvious objection:

The Chancellor of France, at the opening of the States, said, in a tone of oratorical flourish, that all occupations were honourable. If he meant only that no honest employment was disgraceful, he would not have gone beyond the truth. But in asserting that anything is honorable, we imply some distinction in its favor. The occupation of a hair-dresser, or of a working tallow-chandler, cannot be a matter of honor to any person,—to say nothing of a number of other servile employments. Such descriptions of men ought not to suffer oppression from the state; but the state suffers oppression, if such as they, either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule. In this you think you are combating prejudice, but you are at war with Nature.9

Questions such as, How can everyone have dignity? and Why is liberty a good thing? arose, then, in the course of the development of the political institutions of liberalism. They suggest the second way into an understanding of liberalism, which is to explore its philosophical foundations. Such inquiry seeks to answer Burke's challenges by developing a general picture of human life that includes government and politics but also, perhaps, other forms of association.

Burke's answer to questions about the justification of political institutions was what came to be called conservative, as, in the first half of the nineteenth century, conservative and liberal became standard ways of dividing up the world of political opinion.10 (Eventually, these positions were codified as Right and Left according to where the proponents of the two

8. John Locke, who is accounted one of the fathers of the spirit of the American Revolution, used the word dignity in the same way Burke would have, to mean the special privileges of people of standing.

9. Burke has a lovely little footnote here, in which he cites the Old Testament: "Ecclesiasticus 38: 24, 25. 'The wisdom of a learned man cometh by opportunity of leisure: and he that hath little business shall become wise. How can he get wisdom that holdeth the plough, and the glorieth in the goad; that driveth oxen, and is occupied in their labors, and whose talk is of bullocks?' " (Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, 3:296).

10. Identifying the institutional and intellectual antecedents of modern liberalism is a separate task from exploring the history of the word liberal and its cognates in various other European languages. Modern liberalism draws on ideas such as those enumerated by Kant and Locke and practices such as the provision of constitutional rights that were developed well before the word liberal ever became associated with them. Reputedly, the first political group that called themselves "liberals" was in Spain in the early nineteenth century; Constant began to refer to his political ideas as liberal in the late eighteenth century. (I owe these historical observations to the conversation after my talk at University College, London.)
positions sat in the French National Assembly.) Political conservatives tended to be skeptical of philosophical argument, skeptical of equality, and skeptical of democracy. But above all they shared Burke’s skepticism about the dignity and the honor of the ordinary man—that hairdresser and his colleague the tallow-chandler. What could possibly justify deferring to the judgment of these people who lacked the distinction that deserves honor, accounting them equal, requiring their collective consent?

I am going to spend some time exploring answers to this fundamental question. My aim is not so much to reflect on liberal political institutions as to explore a picture of human life that is a starting point for a defense of those institutions. That picture, as we shall see, is not itself a political one. Instead, it bears on ethical questions that fall well outside the range of those that are raised by our collective life within the state. However, I shall return to its broader significance for politics at the end.

Burke asked why we should think all people were entitled to equal respect: the working tallow-chandler, his wife, the King of England, all of them. Many answers have been offered to that question. John Wise, the radical Protestant divine whom I quoted earlier, answered “that we all derive our being from one stock, the same common father of [the] human race,” and that we all come into and go out of the world in much the same way: “Death observes no ceremony, but knocks as loud at the barriers of the Court as at the door of the cottage” (I, p. 129). Immanuel Kant famously argued that our equality was grounded in our shared human capacity for reason. In proposing his story, which was a view not just about politics but about the whole of moral life, he developed the idea of autonomy: the idea of a person’s being self-governing, ruling him- or herself, rather than being ruled from outside, heteronomously, by other forces or other people.

But I am going to start my exploration of the liberal vision with John Stuart Mill, who argued some decades after Burke in his still brazen essay On Liberty (1859) that it is our capacity to use all our faculties in individual ways that gives us the right to freedom. In the third chapter “On Individuality, as One of the Elements of Wellbeing,” he writes, near the start:

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 coordinate element with all that is designated by the terms civilization, 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.11

And he goes on a little later:

He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need for 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. . . . 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 . . . according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing. [OL, pp. 67–68]

Mill’s arguments in *On Liberty* come in two stripes. First, there are arguments that liberty will have good effects. Such defenses vindicate liberty by virtue of its consequences. His most famous arguments for freedom of expression assume that we will find the truth more often and more easily if we allow our opinions to be tested in public debate, in what we all now call the marketplace of ideas.

But a second kind of argument appears in passages like this one. This claim suggests that the cultivation of one’s individuality is itself a part of well-being, something good in itself. This freedom is not a means to an end but part of the end, for individuality means, among other things, choosing for myself instead of shaping myself under the constraint of government sanction or social pressure. This is why he contrasts free people with “ape-like” imitators; individuals invent themselves rather than ape models, and that, Mill thinks, is in itself a good thing. It was part of Mill’s view, in other words, that freedom mattered not just because it enabled other things—such as the discovery of truth—but because without it people could not develop the individuality that is an essential element of human good.12

Mill does not distinguish consistently in chapter three of *On Liberty* between two notions of individuality. One is the idea that it is good to be different from other people and the other that it is good to be self-created, to “choose”—as he says—one’s own “plan of life.” Nor is he always clear that he is defending the position that it is good in itself for us to have played a central role in shaping our selves, in developing our

12. There are those who believe that Mill was always a consistent utilitarian and who think, therefore, that he must, at bottom, be arguing for some connection between individuality and utility. But there is no general argument in *On Liberty* for such a connection and Mill speaks here and elsewhere for individuality in ways that are plausible without such a connection.
individualities. But I think it is best to read Mill as arguing not just for
diversity—being different—but in fact for self-creation, as claiming that
such an enterprise is, in itself, a good. For I might choose a plan of life
that was, as it happened, very like somebody else’s and still be merely
aping them, following them blindly as a model. I wouldn’t, then, be con-
tributing to diversity (so, in one sense, I wouldn’t be very individual), but
I would still be constructing my own—in another sense, individual—plan
of life. On Liberty defends freedom from government because only free
people can take full command of their own lives.

More generally, I don’t think Mill is very clear in On Liberty about
how what he calls individuality might relate to other kinds of goods. But
reading Mill can lead you to think that sometimes something matters be-
cause someone has chosen to make a life in which it matters and that it
would not matter if they had not chosen to make such a life. If this formu-
lation seems abstract, it is because Mill speaks abstractly; it will help to
imagine a more concrete example.

Consider, then, Mr. Stevens, the butler in Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel The
Remains of the Day (played by Anthony Hopkins’s in the book’s film ver-
sion).13 Mr. Stevens has spent a whole life in service in a “great house,”
and his aim has been to perform his task to the very best of his ability.
He sees himself as fitting into the world as part of the machinery that
made the life of his master, Lord Darlington, possible. Since his master
has acted on the stage of public history, he sees Lord Darlington’s public
acts as part of what gives meaning to his own life. As he puts it:

Let us establish this quite clearly: a butler’s duty is to provide good
service. It is not to meddle in the great affairs of the nation. The fact
is, such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of
those such as you and I, and those of us who wish to make our mark
must realize that we best do so by concentrating on what is within
our realm. [R, p. 199]

Mr. Stevens takes what is “within [his] realm” extremely seriously; for
example, he feels, as he says, “uplifted” by a “sense of triumph” when he
manages to pursue his duties unflustered on the evening that the woman
he loves has announced to him that she is going to marry somebody else
(R, p. 228). By the time (well into the book) he tells us about this fateful
day, we know him well enough to understand how such a sentiment is
possible.

At the end of the book, Mr. Stevens is returning to Darlington House
from the holiday in which he has reviewed his life with us, and he tells us


Copyright © 2001. All rights reserved.
he is going back to work on what he calls his "bantering skills" in order to satisfy his new American master.

I have of course already devoted much time to developing my bantering skills, but it is possible I have never previously approached the task with the commitment I might have done. Perhaps, then, when I return to Darlington Hall tomorrow . . . I will begin practising with renewed effort. I should hope, then, by the time of my employer's return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him. [R, p. 245]¹⁴

Now I am sure no one who reads this essay will have the ambition to be a butler, certainly not the sort of butler that Mr. Stevens aimed to be. And there is, indeed, something mildly ridiculous in the thought of an elderly man working on his skills at light conversation in order to entertain his young "master." Readers are likely to feel when they come to these last words a tremendous sadness at what is missing from Mr. Stevens's life. Nevertheless, Mr. Stevens is continuing to live out the life he has chosen. It does seem to me that we can understand part of what Mill is suggesting by saying that bantering is something of value to Mr. Stevens because he has chosen to be the best butler he can be. This is not a life we would have chosen, but for someone who has chosen it, it is intelligible that improving one's bantering skills is a good.

To say that bantering is of value to Mr. Stevens is not just to say that he wants to be able to do it well, as he might want to be good at bowling or chess. It is to say that, given his aims, given what Mill calls his "plan of life," bantering matters to him; we, for whom bantering does not matter, or to whom it does not matter in this way, can still see that it is a value for him within the life he has chosen.

You may think that this is not a life that anyone who had other reasonable options should have chosen and that even someone who was forced into it should not have taken to it with the enthusiasm and commitment that Mr. Stevens manifests. You might even explain this by saying that the life of the perfect servant is not one of great dignity. But Mr. Stevens knows a good deal about dignity, and he even offers a definition of it in response to the questioning of a doctor he meets on his travels.

'What do you think dignity's all about?'

The directness of the inquiry did, I admit, take me rather by surprise. 'It's rather a hard thing to explain in a few words, sir,' I said. 'But I suspect it comes down to not removing one's clothing in public.' [R, p. 210]

¹⁴. It is part of the brilliance of Ishiguro's characterization of Stevens that the butler ends his account of himself with a split infinitive. Stevens, after all, is proud that he is taken for a "gentleman," but a gentleman would have been taught to fuss about split infinitives at school.
This is more than a joke. Mr. Stevens believes in decorum, good manners, formality. These compose the world that he has chosen to inhabit and make it the world it is. Once again, these may not be values for us, but they are values for him, given his plan of life. When he is serious, when he is explaining to a room full of villagers what makes the difference between a gentleman and someone who is not, he says, "one would suspect that the quality... might be most usefully termed 'dignity.'" And this is a quality that he, like Burke, believes to be far from equally distributed. "Dignity's not just something for gentlemen," says a character called Harry Smith. And Mr. Stevens observes in his narrative voice: "I perceived, of course, that Mr Harry Smith and I were rather at cross purposes on this matter" (R, p. 186).

I like Mr. Stevens as an illustration of self-creation and individuality as a value; to cite him as such is to read The Remains of the Day against the grain. Ishiguro is like you and me, a modern person, and his novel is deeply sad because Mr. Stevens's life is, in so many ways, a failure. It is a failure, in part, because he is and intends to be servile. It is important here that servility entails not acting as a servant—which is what Burke plainly thought—but rather behaving like a slave. Servility isn't just happily earning your living by working for another; it's acting as an unfree person, a person whose will is somehow subjected to another's. Unexceptionally, I have very little enthusiasm for such a disposition (though there are some who think it appropriate where the other in question is God.)

But in my opinion the novel cheats in its argument against this form of servility. Ishiguro's depiction of Stevens obscures the relationship between dignity and individuality by conflating servant and slave; he prevents us from seeing that it is servility, not service, that is undignified.

Lord Darlington turns out to be a weak man, an easy mark for the National Socialist Ribbentrop, Germany's prewar ambassador to London. The result is that Mr. Stevens's life is a failure because his master's has proved one, not because service is, in fact, bound to lead to failure. After all, if Mr. Stevens had been working for Winston Churchill, he at least could have denied that he had failed; he could have claimed to have been the faithful servant of a great man, just as he set out to be. Instead, Mr. Stevens's vocation robs him of both his dignity and his love life, since the only woman he might have married works in the same household, and he believes a relationship with her would likely have compromised their professional lives. Though Mr. Stevens makes a mess of this, there is no reason to think that these losses are the fault of his vocation. In the end, Mr. Stevens serves as a good example of the moral power of individuality.

15. These observations on servility were prompted by comments from editors of this journal. The reminder that "Thy way, not mine, Oh Lord" is a possible religious sentiment I owe to Jorge Garcia (though it was not made in response to my comments about servility, but as a protest against one reading of Frank Sinatra's lyric, which I discuss below).
because he exemplifies it even though he doesn't himself believe in liberty, equality, and fraternity. Even someone as illiberal as Mr. Stevens, that is, demonstrates the power of individuality as an ideal.

How are we to account for the thought that I have been using Mr. Stevens to help us explore, the idea that, as I put it just now, sometimes something matters because someone has chosen to make a life in which it matters? This is more than the thought that what is good for people depends on what they want. Mill was a sort of utilitarian and believed, in general, that pleasure was good and pain bad (and also, unlike some other utilitarians, that there were objectively higher kinds of pleasure that mattered more than lower ones). So he certainly thought that because the satisfaction of desire brings pleasure (and its obstruction, pain) what is good depends on what people desire.

But, as I say, the claim here is something more than that, and, in any case, Mill commends it to us not as a utilitarian idea but as one that we will recognize as correct without deriving it from a more general picture. It is the claim that, having chosen a plan of life, certain aims internal to that plan come to have value just because they follow from a plan we ourselves have chosen. And it is a thought that applies to Mr. Stevens even though he has chosen a life that makes sense only if dignity is not (as he wrongly believes) something everyone shares equally. That, I think, is one of the core thoughts in Mill's articulation of individuality as a value.

You can find Mill's view more explicitly stated in a later passage in chapter three: "If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode" (OL, pp. 77–78) It is easy to miss this point because Mill goes on, almost immediately, to introduce a different idea.

If it were only that people have diversities of taste that is reason enough for 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 variety of plants can exist 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. . . . 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, not grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic statures of which their nature is capable. [OL, pp. 77–78]

Here, the idea is that freedom allows people to make the best of themselves, to cultivate their higher natures, and attain their full moral and
aesthetic stature. This is a defense of liberty as a means to these other ends. In this passage it looks as though making the best of oneself entails becoming a kind of person that it is objectively valuable to be (a person of high mental or moral or aesthetic stature) whatever one's chosen plan of life. What Mill is saying here is not particularly distinctive (even if it is important and true); it is the view that Matthew Arnold enunciated in *Culture and Anarchy* when he quoted Epictetus's view that "the formation of the spirit and character must be our real concern."\(^\text{16}\)

So here, again, there is some slippage between liberty as a means to an end (the achievement of the best of which one is capable) and liberty as part of the end (the idea that what makes the way I have chosen best for me is just the fact that I chose it). A man's own way, Mill says, is "best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own." We all know this sentiment very well in the form that Frank Sinatra made famous. In a song in which the character reviews his life towards its end ("And now, the end is near . . . ") Mr. Sinatra sings:

I've lived a life that's full,  
I've traveled each and ev'ry highway;  
But more, much more than this,  
I did it my way.\(^\text{17}\)

This life was good—the singer has "too few" regrets "to mention"—not just because it was full but because it was lived his way. If my choosing it is part of what makes my life plan good, then imposing on me a plan of life—even one that is, in other respects, a good one—is depriving me of a certain kind of good. Once you concede this premise, the argument for liberty from government, from society, and even from family and friends is pretty direct. We can answer Burke by saying that liberty allows more than doing what one pleases; it allows one to shape a plan of life that is an expression of one's own creativity and to live, then, according not only to general values—truthfulness, kindness, and the rest, which should be part of every life—but also in the light of values that flow from one's own plan. And we can say, with Mill, that it is intrinsically good, other things being equal, when people live according to their own plan.

The popularity of "My Way" suggests that many people nowadays share Mill's conviction. And so I want to underline how different this view is from the view that Burke caricatures as the project of doing as one pleases. A plan of life here serves as a way of integrating one's purposes over time, of fitting together the different things one values. That is part


Copyright © 2001. All rights reserved.
of why a goal that flows from such a plan has more value than the mere satisfaction of a fleeting desire. It isn't just any desire but one that matters because it fits into a wider picture. But Mill says that it matters also because, in effect, the life plan is an expression of my individuality, of who I am. And in this sense, a desire that flows from a value that itself derives from a life plan is more important than a desire (such as an appetite) that I just happen to have; for it flows from my reflective choices, not just passing fancy.

I want to raise and respond to two problems associated with this defense of self-chosen individuality. First, it is harder to accept the idea that certain values derive from my choices if those choices themselves are just arbitrary. (That may be why, immediately after proposing this view, Mill introduces the more conventional idea—Arnold's idea—of cultivating one's higher nature.) Why should the fact that I have laid out my existence mean that it is the best, especially if it is not the best in itself?

Suppose, for example, I adopt a life as a solitary traveler around the world, free of obligations to family and community, settling for a few months here and there, making what little money I need by giving English lessons to businessmen and -women. My parents tell me that I am wasting my life, that I have a good education, talent as a musician, and a great gift for friendship, all of which are being put to no use. Is it a satisfactory response to say only that this is the way I have chosen? Don't I need to say something about what this way makes possible for me and for those I meet? Or about what other talents of mine it makes use of? It is one thing to say that the government or society or your parents ought not to stop you from wasting your life if you choose to; it is another to say that wasting your life in your own way is good just because it is your way, just because you have chosen to waste your life.

As I say, I think this is why Mill seesaws between arguing that I am in the best position to decide what plan of life makes most sense for me, given "the mental, moral, and aesthetic stature" of which I am capable, and the more radical view that the mere fact that I have chosen a plan of life recommends it. For on the first and less radical view, my choice is not arbitrary. It reflects the facts of my capacities and, given that I have enough "common sense and experience," I am likely to do a better job than anybody else of making a life that fits those capacities. On this view, I discover a life for myself, based in the facts of my nature and my place in the world. But, on the second, my role is as originator of value, not as discoverer of it.

I am going to call this the problem of the arbitrariness of basic choices. I will return to it in a while, but let me put it aside for a moment in order to raise a second problem with Mill's formulation.

Mill's way of talking can seem to lead to a particularly unattractive form of individualism in which the aim is to make a life in which you
yourself matter most. Yet a plan of life for Mill was likely to include family and friends and might include (as his did) public service. Mill is not arguing for self-cultivation at the expense of sociability. He is arguing for self-cultivation, for a view of one's self as a project, in a way that seems to suggest, perhaps, that self-cultivation and sociability are competing values, though each has its place. This can lead us to think that the good of individuality is reined in by or traded-off against the goods of sociability so that there is an intrinsic opposition between the self and society. This matters for political theory because it can lead to the view that political institutions, which develop and reflect the value of sociability, are always sources of constraint on our individuality. Let me dub this the problem of the unsociability of individualism.

These two concerns strike me as both plausible and important. A credible defense of the value of individuality or self-creation requires that we respond to them; to do so it is helpful, I think, to reframe Mill's understanding.

Mr. Stevens's individuality shows why both unsociability and arbitrariness need not be involved in self-creation. His individuality is far from unsociable because what he has chosen to be is a butler, which is something you can only be if there are other people to play other roles in the social world; a butler needs a master or mistress, cooks, housekeepers, maids. It is an intrinsically social identity. And Mr. Stevens's individuality is far from arbitrary because it is an identity that has developed within a tradition and that makes sense within a certain social world—a social world that no longer exists, as it happens, which is one of many reasons why none of us wants to be a butler in the way Mr. Stevens is. We don't want to be butlers in that way because one can't be a butler in that way without a social world of "great houses," house parties, and the rest. You can no more be the kind of butler Mr. Stevens was than a contemporary Japanese man, whatever his ancestry, can be a Samurai warrior. Mr. Stevens is an individual, and he has made his own plan of life, but he hasn't made it arbitrarily. The butler elements in his plan, for example, make sense (to give but two reasons) because there is, first, a career available with that role, a way of making a living; and, second, because his father was a butler before him. (Once again, I don't expect you to find these reasons attractive, merely that you should find them intelligible.)

Mr. Stevens can help us to understand something else about a plan of life, namely, that it is not like an architect's plan. It doesn't map out all the important (and many unimportant) features of our life in advance. It is not like the plans of those ambitious young men in Horatio Alger stories who want to have a wife and fortune by the time they are thirty-five. A plan of life is more like a set of distinctive organizing aims, aims within which you can fit your daily choices and your long-term vision. In fact, Mill's very use of the term plan of life leads us away from something impor-
tant that we can see in Mr. Stevens's individual existence, which is that what structures his sense of his life is less like a blueprint and more like what we nowadays call an identity.

Mr. Stevens has constructed for himself an identity as a butler: more specifically as the butler to Lord Darlington and of the Darlington House, and as his father's son. It is an identity in which his gender plays a role (butlers must be men) and in which his nationality is important, too, because in the late 1930s Lord Darlington meddles (rather incompetently, it turns out) in the "great affairs of the" British "nation," and it is his service to a man who is serving that nation that gives Mr. Stevens part of his satisfaction (R, p. 199).

But Ishiguro's character has put these more generic identities—butler, son, man, Englishman—together with other skills and capacities that are more particular, and, in so doing, he has fashioned a self.

There remains a certain lack of clarity to Mr. Stevens's plan of life. What, precisely, is his plan? Forced to speak in that way, we should say that his plan is to be the best butler he can be, to follow in his father's footsteps, to be a man. But it is, I think, more natural to say that he plans to live as a butler, his father's son, a man, and a loyal Englishman. To speak of living as is to speak of identities. So we might as well ask directly what his identity is; then, it seems to me, we have more to work with. For, as we shall see, the idea of identity already has built into it a recognition of the complex interdependence of self-creation and sociability.

The contemporary use of the concept of identity to refer to such features of people as their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, or sexuality first achieved prominence (and perhaps had its origin) in the work of Erik Erikson. This use of the term identity reflects the conviction that each person's identity—in the older sense of who he or she truly is—is deeply inflected by such social features. And it is an undeniable fact of modern life that people have increasingly come to believe that this is so.

In political and moral thinking nowadays it has become commonplace to suppose that a person's projects can reasonably be expected to be shaped by such features of their identity and that this is, if not morally required, then, at least morally permissible. We understand the woman who organizes her life and her affiliations around her gender, or the gay man who sees his sexuality as shaping the meaning of his life.

It seems likely that any adequate theory of identity will proceed by noting that each person's identity has at least two dimensions. There is a collective dimension, the intersection of the identities we have been discussing; but there is also what one might call a personal dimension, consisting of other socially important features of the person—intelligence, charm, wit, greed—that are not themselves the basis of forms of collective identity. Not every aspect of the collective dimension will have the general power of sex or gender, sexuality or nationality, ethnicity or
religion. What the collective dimensions have in common is that they are what the philosopher Ian Hacking has dubbed *kinds of person*: men, gays, Americans, Catholics, but also butlers, hairdressers, and philosophers.¹⁸

Hacking's key insight about "kinds of persons" is that they are brought into being by the creation of names for them. So he defends what he calls a "dynamic nominalism," arguing "that numerous kinds of human beings and human acts come into being hand in hand with our invention of the categories labeling them" ("M," p. 87).

Hacking begins from the philosophical truism, whose most influential formulation is in Elizabeth Anscombe's work on intention, that, in intentional action, people act "under descriptions"; in other words, their actions are conceptually shaped.¹⁹ (What I do is dependent on what I think I am doing. To use a simple example, I have to have a wide range of concepts for my writing my name in a certain way to count as "signing a contract.") It follows that what I can do depends on what concepts I have available to me; among the concepts that may shape my action is the concept of a certain kind of person and the behavior appropriate to a person of that kind. Mr. Stevens is driven, in thinking about whether he should develop his bantering skills, by the thought that he is a butler and that banter is a butler's sort of skill.

Hacking offers as an example Sartre's brilliant evocation in *Being and Nothingness* of another kind of service professional, the Parisian *garçon de café*:

His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes towards the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly, his eyes express an interest too solicitous for the order of the customer. ["M," p. 81]

Hacking comments:

Sartre's antihero chose to be a waiter. Evidently that was not a possible choice in other places, other times. There are servile people in most societies, and servants in many, but a waiter is something specific, and a *garçon de café* more specific. . . .

As with almost every way in which it is possible to be a person, it is possible to be a *garçon de café* only at a certain time, in a certain place, in a certain social setting. The feudal serf putting food on my lady's table can no more choose to be a *garçon de café* than he can


choose to be lord of the manor. But the impossibility is evidently different in kind. ["M," p. 82]

The idea of the garçon de café lacks the sort of theoretical commitments that are trailed by many of our social identities: black and white, gay and straight, man and woman. So it makes no sense to ask of someone who is employed as a garçon de café whether that is what he really is. Because we have expectations of the garçon de café, it is a recognizable identity. But those expectations are about the performance of the role; they depend on our assumption of intentional conformity to the expectations.

With other identities, however—and here the familiar collectives of race, ethnicity, gender, and the rest come back into view—the expectations we have are not based simply on the idea that those who have these identities are playing out a role. Rightly or wrongly, we do not normally think of the expectations we have of men or women as being simply the result of the fact that there are conventions about how men and women behave.

Once labels are applied to people, ideas about people who fit the label come to have social and psychological effects. In particular, these ideas shape the ways people conceive of themselves and their projects. So the labels operate to mold what we may call identification, the process through which individuals intentionally shape their projects—including their plans for their own lives and their conceptions of the good life—by reference to available labels, available identities. In identification, I shape my life by the thought that something is an appropriate aim or an appropriate way of acting for an American, a black man, a philosopher. It seems right to call this identification because the label plays a role in shaping the way the agent makes decisions about how to conduct a life, in the process of the construction of one's identity.

Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, every collective identity seems to have the following sort of structure: there is a label, $L$, associated with descriptive criteria—ascriptions—that lead to expectations (which may be grounded in norms) about how $L$s will behave; there are identifications by $L$s, so that they sometimes act as $L$s; and, finally, there are consequences in the way that people treat $L$s (so that sometimes they are treated as $L$s).\(^{20}\) These "as $L$s"—acting as an $L$, being treated as an $L$—connect identities to conceptions of what $L$s are or should be like.

In the case of the garçon de café, conventions of behavior associated with a role are explicitly central. The ascriptions are based on the simple idea that someone who works in cafés of a certain sort will conform to

certain expectations; the expectations are based on the conventions that govern the role of the *garçon de café*; because of those conventions, acting as a *garçon de café* means constructing the performance Sartre evokes; and people treat *garçons de café* better (they give them bigger tips, for example) if they perform the role well. But for some other identities—as a gay man, for example—there is more than convention.

For being a gay man is, in part, a matter of having certain desires, and those desires are not something that the gay man has himself chosen. You can choose whether or not to play a certain conventional role, and, if all there is to an identity is a conventional set of behaviors, and you are capable of them, then you can choose whether to adopt the identity. But if the criteria for ascribing a certain identity include things over which you have no control—as is the case with gender, race, and sexual orientation—then whether you identify with that identity, whether, for example, you think of yourself as gay and act sometimes as a gay person, is not only up to you.

Here is one place, then, for a kind of answer to the concern about the arbitrariness of basic choices. While someone who adopts a gay identity is doing more than simply acknowledging the fact that he has homosexual desires, and someone who adopts an identity as a black person, identifying with his or her African American identity, is doing more than simply acknowledging an African ancestry, it is nevertheless true that they are both responding to a fact (about desire or ancestry) that is independent of their choices, a fact that comes, so to speak, from outside the self. Even the *garçon de café* takes up an identity that has a function outside himself: he is taking up a profession that provides a service; he is finding, as Mr. Stevens did as Darlington's butler, a way of making a living.

To see what is going on here, it may be helpful to consider two different pictures of what is involved in shaping one's individuality. One, a picture that comes from romanticism, is the idea of finding one's self, of discovering in reflection or in a careful attention to the world, a meaning for one's life that is already there, waiting to be found. This is the vision we can call authenticity; it is a matter of being true to who you already really are. The other picture, the existentialist picture, is one in which, as the doctrine goes, existence precedes essence. This is just a fancy way of saying that you exist first and then have to decide what to exist as, who to be, afterwards. On an extreme version of this view, we have to make a self up, as it were out of nothing, like God at the Creation, and individuality is valuable because only a person who has made a self has a life worth living. But neither of these pictures is right.

The authenticity picture is wrong because it suggests that there is no role for creativity in making a self, that the self already and in its totality is fixed by our natures. And the existentialist picture is wrong because it suggests that there is only creativity, that there is nothing for us to re-
spond to, nothing out of which to construct. The reasonable middle view is that constructing an identity is a good but that the identity must make some kind of sense. And for it to make sense, as both Mr. Stevens and the examples of race or gay identity suggest, it must be an identity constructed in response to facts outside oneself, things that are beyond one's own choices. Some philosophers—Sartre among them—have tried to combine both the romantic and the existentialist views. Michel Foucault suggested as much some years ago:

I think that from the theoretical point of view, Sartre avoids the idea of the self as something that is given to us, but through the moral notion of authenticity, he turns back to the idea that we have to be ourselves—to be truly our true self. I think the only acceptable practical consequence of what Sartre has said is to link his theoretical insight to the practice of creativity—and not to that of authenticity. From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art. In his analyses of Baudelaire, Flaubert and so on, it is interesting to see that Sartre refers the work of creation to a certain relation to oneself—the author to himself—which has the form of authenticity or inauthenticity. I would like to say exactly the contrary: we should not have to refer the creative activity of somebody to the kind of relation he has to himself, but should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity.21

Now Foucault in this passage speaks of creativity without, perhaps, sufficiently recognizing the role of the materials on which our creativity is exercised. Faced with authenticity and existentialism he opts for the latter. Foucault resorts to the rhetoric of the self's free choice of oneself that I have been trying to complicate. So perhaps it will be worthwhile to carry out an experiment in imagination that might persuade some of those who speak of choice as the only value that they cannot mean what they say. Suppose, in the far future, it were possible, by way of a kind of science-fiction genetic engineering, to change any aspect of one's nature so that you could have any combination of capacities that has ever been within the range of human possibility: you could have Michael Jordan's fade-away shot, Mozart's musicality, Groucho Marx's comic gifts, or Proust's delicate way with language. You could put these together with any desires you wanted—homo- or hetero-, a taste for Wagner or Eminem. Suppose, further, that there were no careers or professions in this world because all material needs were met by intelligent machines and all services were provided by androids. Far from being a utopia, so it seems to me, this would be a kind of hell. There would be no reason to choose any of these options because there would be no achievement in putting

together a life. This would not be a world of creativity but a flat and boring dystopia. Nietzsche articulated the view that explains why this life would be meaningless:

One thing is needful.—To "give style" to one's character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime.22

To create a life is to create a life out of the materials that history has given you. I suggested earlier that Mill mentions both the value of individuality and the idea of achieving our capacities in the same paragraphs because the former can seem arbitrary, but once it is tied to something out of our control, once our self-construction is seen as a creative response to our capacities and our circumstances, then the accusation of arbitrariness loses its power.

Thinking about what history has, in fact, given each of us, as materials for our identities, will also allow us to speak to the supposed unsociality of the liberal self. The language of identity allows us to remind ourselves how much it is true that we are, in Charles Taylor's elegant formulation, "dialogically" constituted. Beginning in infancy, it is in dialogue with other people's understandings of who I am that I develop a conception of my own identity. We come into the world "mewling and puking in our mother's arms" (as Shakespeare so genially put it) capable of human individuality, but only if we have the chance to develop it in interaction with others. An identity is always articulated through concepts (and practices) made available to you by religion, society, school, and state, mediated by family, peers, friends. Dialogue shapes the identities we develop as we grow up, but the very material out of which we make it is provided, in part, by our society, by what Taylor has called our language in "a broad sense." It "cover[s] not only the words we speak, but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the 'languages' of art, of gesture, of love, and the like."23 It follows that the self whose choices liberalism celebrates is not a presocial thing—not some authentic inner essence independent of the human world into

which we have grown—but rather the product of our interaction from our earliest years with others. 24

As a result, individuality presupposes sociability, not just a grudging respect for the individuality of others. A free self is a human self, and we are, as Aristotle long ago insisted, creatures of the polis, social beings. We are social in many ways and for many reasons: because we desire company, because we depend on one another for survival, because so much that we care about is collectively created.

To have individuality as a value is not, therefore, to refuse to acknowledge the dependence of the good for each of us on relationships with others. Indeed, as I have suggested, without these bonds we could not come to be free selves, not least because we could not come to be selves at all. But a free self isn’t just dependent on others at the start. Throughout our lives part of the material that we are responding to in shaping our selves is not within us but outside us, out there in the social world. Many people—most, in fact—shape their identities as partners of lovers who become spouses and fellow parents. And, as we shall now see, there is more to respond to than our own capacities and the people we meet.

I have been arguing that collective identities (that is, the collective dimensions of our individual identities) are responses to something outside ourselves. They are the products of histories, and our engagement with them invokes capacities that are not under our control. But they are also social, not just in the sense that they involve others, but also because they are constituted in part by socially transmitted conceptions of how a proper person of that identity behaves. In constructing an identity one draws, among other things, on the kinds of person available in one’s society. Of course, there is not just one way that gay or straight people or blacks or whites or men or women are to behave, but there are ideas around (contested, many of them, but all sides in these contests shape our options) about how gay, straight, black, white, masculine, or feminine people ought to behave. These notions provide loose norms or models, which play a role in shaping the plans of life of those who make these collective identities central to their individual identities. Collective identities, in short, provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories.

It is important to acknowledge how much our personal histories, the stories we tell of where we have been and where we are going, are constructed, like novels and movies, short stories and folk tales, within narrative conventions. Indeed, one of the things that film or literature does for us is to provide models for telling our lives. But part of the function of our collective identities—of the whole repertory of them that a society

makes available to its members—is also to structure possible narratives of the individual self.

Thus, for example, the rites of passage many cultures associate with the identities male and female provide shape to the transition to adulthood; the gay identity organizes lives around the narrative of coming out; Pentecostalists are born again; and black identity in America engages narratives of self-construction in the face of racism. One thing that matters to people across many societies is a certain narrative unity, the ability to tell a story of one’s life that makes sense. The story—my story—should cohere in the way appropriate to a person in my society. In telling that story, how it fits into the wider story of various collectivities is, for most of us, important. It is not just that, say, gender identities, give shape to one’s life; it is also that ethnic and national identities fit that story into a larger narrative. For modern people, fitting the narrative form entails seeing one’s life as having a certain arc, as making sense through a life story that expresses who one is through one’s own project of self-making. That narrative arc is yet another way in which an individual’s life depends deeply on something socially created and transmitted.

I made a distinction earlier between a personal and a collective dimension of identity. Both can play a role in these stories of the self. But only the collective identities have scripts, and only they count as what Hacking meant by kinds of person. There is a logical category but no social category of the witty, or the clever, or the charming or the greedy. People who share these properties do not constitute a social group. In the relevant sense, they are not a kind of person. In our society (though not, perhaps, in the England of Addison and Steele) being witty does not, for example, suggest the life script of the wit. And the main reason why the personal dimensions are different is that they are not dependent on labeling. While intelligence, in our society, is of the first social importance and that importance is socially created, people could be intelligent even if no one had the concept. To say that race is socially constructed, that an African American is, in Hacking’s sense, a “kind of person,” is in part to say that there are no races independent of social practices of response to the racial label; by contrast, there could certainly be clever people even if we did not have the concept of cleverness.25

I hope I have persuaded you that you already think that identity—as I have been explaining it—matters. But how does identity fit into our broader moral projects?

One view is this: There are many things of value in the world. Their value is objective; they are important whether or not anybody recognizes

25. This isn’t to say that cleverness isn’t a social product; it obviously is. You couldn’t be clever if you grew up like Kaspar Hauser. Nor is it to say that the social significance of cleverness isn’t the result of social practices, attitudes, and shared beliefs.
their importance. But there is no way of ranking these many goods or trading them off against one another, so there is not always, all things considered, a best thing to do. As a result, there are many morally permissible options. One thing identity provides is another source of value, one which helps us make our way among those options. To adopt an identity, to make it mine, is to see it as structuring my way through life. That is, my identity has patterns built into it (so Mill is wrong to imply that it is always better to be different from others), patterns that help me think about my life; one such simple pattern, for example, is the pattern of a career, which ends, if we live long enough, with retirement. But identities also create forms of solidarity: if I think of myself as an X, where X might be “woman,” “black,” or “American,” then, sometimes, the mere fact that somebody else is an X too may incline me to do something with or for them. Now, solidarity with those who share your identity might be thought of as, other things being equal, always a good thing. As such there is a universal value of solidarity but it works out in different ways for different people because different people have different identities. Or it might be thought to be a good thing because we enjoy it and, other things being equal, it is good for people to have and to do what they enjoy having and doing.

However, as we have seen, there are also values that are internal to an identity, that make sense for someone who has it, and that, for someone who has that identity, are among the values they must take into account, but are not values for people who do not have that identity. If they did not have that identity, that thing would not be a value for them. Take the value of ritual purity, for example, as conceived of by some orthodox Jews. They think they should keep kosher because they are Jewish; they don’t expect anyone who is not a Jew to do so, and they may not even think it would be a good thing if he or she did. It is a good thing only for those who are or those who become Jewish, and they do not think that it would be a better world if everybody did become Jewish. The covenant, after all, is only with the children of Israel.

Similarly, we might think that the identity of being a nationalist in a struggle against colonial domination made it valuable for you to risk your life for the liberation of your country, as Nathan Hale did, regretting that he had only one life to give. If you were not a nationalist, you might still die advancing your country’s cause; and then, while some good came of it, that good would not be, so to speak, a good for you. We might regard your life as wasted, just because you did not identify with the nation you had died for.

There are thus different ways that identity might be a source of value, rather than being something that realizes other values.26 First, if

26. I am grateful to Garcia for pointing out to me that my initial formulation of this point relied on a notion of intrinsic value that was, at best, unhelpful.
an identity is yours, it may determine certain acts of solidarity as valuable, or it may be an internal part of the specification of your satisfactions and enjoyments. It is good for me (or, at any rate, I find it good) to help you deal with your HIV infection as a fellow American, or as another gay person. There are reasons to help people deal with HIV whether or not you share a social identity with them, of course. But that you share an identity can be a further reason. Similarly, the presence of an identity concept in the specification of my aim—as helping a fellow bearer of some identity—may be part of what explains why I have the aim at all. I may gain satisfaction from giving money to the Red Cross after a hurricane in Florida as an act of solidarity with other Cuban Americans. Here, the fact of the shared identity is part of why I have the aim.

Second, it may make certain acts or achievements have a value for me they would not otherwise have had, had I had not had that identity. When a Ghanaian team wins the African Cup of Nations in soccer, that is of value to me by virtue of my identity as a Ghanaian. If I am Catholic, a wedding in a Catholic church is of value to me because I am a Catholic. While it might be of worth to me if I were not a Catholic, it would have to matter to me in a different way.

This picture of self-creation places identity at the heart of human life. Liberalism, I am suggesting, takes this picture seriously and tries to construct a state and society within which it is possible. But that alone doesn't settle much in the way of politics, which is why Jesse Helms and Barney Frank can agree on it. Still, I believe it is a picture that we can develop and explore in trying to negotiate the political world we share. Even the little I have said can allow us to draw some conclusions.

First, if your liberalism is grounded in this picture, there is no reason to think as libertarians do that government is always the enemy of freedom or, more precisely, that government can only give us freedom by keeping out of our way. What Isaiah Berlin called "negative liberty"—legal protection from government intervention in certain areas of our lives—can obviously be an aid in the development of a life of one's own. But if the view of individuality I have been articulating is right, then we may need not only liberty from the state and society but also help from state and society to achieve our selves. Berlin taught us to call this "positive liberty," and he was deeply (and thoughtfully) skeptical about it: skeptical because, among other things, he thought that in the name of positive liberty, governments had been and would continue to be tempted to set out to shape people in the name of the better selves they might become.\(^\text{27}\)

It is hard to deny that terrible things have been done in the name of freedom and that some bad arguments have led people from the idea of

---

freedom down the path to the Gulag. But there are simple cases that should remind us that enabling people to construct and live out an identity does not have to go awry.

Governments do, for example, provide public education in many countries that helps children who do not yet know what their identity is or what projects, hopes, and dreams they have for their lives. This is more than negative liberty, more than government's getting out of the way. You may say that parents could do this; in principle, they could. But suppose they won't or can't? Shouldn't society step in, in the name of individuality and identity, to insist that children be prepared for life as free adults? And, in our society, won't that require them to be able to read? To know the language or languages of their community? To be able to assess arguments, interpret traditions? And even if the parents are trying to provide all these things, isn't there a case for society, through the state, offering them positive support?

Or take welfare provision, which I mentioned at the start. I have argued that individuality is a matter of developing a life in response to the materials provided by your capacities and your social world (and, more particularly, the social identities embedded in it). Liberalism says we should create a politics that allows people to do this. But there can be obstacles to the realization of our individuality other than the limitations of law. Can people really construct dignified individual lives in a modern world where there is no frontier to conquer, no empty land to cultivate, unless they have certain material resources? Can people be said to be free to develop their individuality if they are sick and unable to afford treatment that will free them from it?

What holds together the desire to educate children, provide welfare for the poor, and give physical assistance to the handicapped who need it is the idea that education, welfare, and assistance of these sorts frees people to develop lives worth living. Berlin was skeptical about this because he wondered who would decide what a life worth living was. But, as we have seen, Mill already had an answer to that question: "If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is best."

There are hard questions here about fairness (my dreams may be expensive, taxation may be burdensome). People are coerced into providing resources for governments to spend and may thereby be limited in their capacity to make the lives they have chosen. That I do not deny. But hard questions can be questions worth a hard look. And to refuse any notion of positive liberty is to escape these questions only by refusing to face them.

I have been suggesting one reason for the liberal faith in allowing people to make their own lives. That argument is only one of the many
that need to be assembled for a serious defense of liberalism. But I want, in closing, to suggest that there is something that holds together our liberal ideals. That is the idea of a dignified human life. I have been arguing that individuality is part of any such life and that that is one reason why we should have liberal political institutions and a liberal society. Our capacity for individuality is part of what gives us our dignity, our distinctive human worth.

Can we say more about how we should understand talk of human dignity? J. L. Austin once observed apropos of freedom (in the sense, as it happens, not of political liberty, but of freedom of the will) that

while it has been the tradition to present [freedom] as the “positive” term requiring elucidation, there is little doubt that to say we acted “freely” ... is to say only that we acted not unfreely, in one of the many heterogeneous ways of so acting.28

I think Austin’s strategy for understanding freedom of the will can turn out to be helpful in thinking about human dignity. For just as it is harder to say what makes an act free than to list things that make it unfree, so, while we cannot easily give a positive account of dignity, we can point to cases where it is lacking. We know these cases because we have learned about them over history and in our individual lives; a slave, we learned over too long and bloody a struggle, cannot lead a dignified existence. Mr. Stevens troubles us because he is in some ways like a slave. He is servile; his servility reflects false beliefs and leaves him unable to (or dissuades him from trying to) understand Lord Darlington’s attempts to reconcile the English government to Hitler.

But slavery is not the only obstacle to dignity. In the modern world a life with neither job nor money cannot be a life of dignity. We have also learned that a life of handouts is not dignified either, and we are struggling to find a reasonable middle way between demeaning handouts and forced labor. People with severe physical disabilities have taught us in recent years that we need to reshape public space if they are to enter it with the dignity they deserve. Feminism has taught us for over more than a century that dignity for women requires both that we respect the identities of individual women and that we do not bar them from a public sphere. Gay and lesbian movements have taught us, building on the black power movement, that dignity cannot come to those who are forced to leave what matters most to them about themselves locked away in a private realm. In many of these cases, identity matters. But at the end of an essay that has focused on identity, it is right to insist that for liberalism it is not the only thing that matters.

Ultimately, liberalism is the articulation of the value of a life of dignity: a life as free and equal people, sharing a social world. And that involves learning from history, from literature, from religion, from the whole gamut of human experience, about what free lives can look like and what they enable.