



Conformity in Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–1858)

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Harriet Taylor wrote a group of draft essays beginning in the early 1830s considering the roles of conformity, conscience, tolerance, and self-dependence in living the good life. The term “nonconformist” is historically significant since it was the term imposed since 1662 on non-Anglican religious groups—including H own Unitarians—who were excluded from universities and many legal and legislative rights. Taylor sees conformity as the source of immorality. Conformity, or acting according to conscience, amounts to being a slave of someone else’s principles. Religious, political, moral and social conformity are all the opposite of acting on principle, i.e., self-formed opinion. Ten years before Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”, Taylor argued for self-dependence—that we should “think and act for oneself”—or at least not resent those who do. Conscience is allowing oneself to be guided by platitudes whereas genuine morality requires self-exploration. Further, proverbs, the result of “mental listlessness & unfounded assumption,” were often the means by which those in power controlled those without, e.g., men’s use of proverbs that extol endurance as a virtue for women.

Morality is not a science based on rules, but an art. Like Aristotle’s insistence that moral virtue requires a perception that is fine-tuned through experience, Taylor argues that “each mind guide[s] itself by the light of as much knowledge as it can acquire for itself by means of unbiased experience.” Children should not be taught to emulate others, but to struggle to find their own sense of right. As adults, eccentricity is *prima facie* evidence of acting on principle. Those who are conformists are often intolerant whereas nonconformists approach others with non-critical tolerance and “abstain from unjust interference.”

These statements about eccentricity and unjust interference in others’ lives were written before or shortly after meeting her future husband John Stuart Mill. They clearly are echoed in *On Liberty*, written twenty years later.

Primary Sources:

Jacobs, Jo Ellen (ed.) 1998. *The Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 135–155.

Secondary Sources:

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Jacobs, Jo Ellen 2002. *The Voice of Harriet Taylor Mill*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 33–37, 245–254.

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