

JOHN STUART MILL AND THE POLITICAL THEORY OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY



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Abstract

Political theory attempts to explore the intellectual content of the processes of resolving the conflicts that arise among human beings in their effort to live together within a political and economic arrangement in order that a certain minimum of justice for each member of the social group is assured. This involves a discovery of the classificatory principles, values concepts, and the underpinning philosophical foundation of the theorist. Here in this paper, we present to you J.S. Mill, one of the greatest political theorists of the politics of Liberal Democracy in the context of the Western intellectual tradition. We examined his profile and analyzed the contending issues and socio-economic conditions of his time and thus argued that his political theory and ideas on utilitarianism, on Liberty and Representative Government despite its pitfalls was an improvement on the liberal democratic ideas and its central problem of freedom and social justice of the individuals in society.

Keywords: political theory, liberalism, democracy.

Introduction

Political theory attempts to explore the intellectual content of the processes of resolving the conflicts that arise among human beings in their effort to live together within a political and economic arrangement in order that a certain minimum of justice for each member of the social group is assured. This involves a discovery of the classificatory principles, values concepts, and the underpinning philosophical foundation of the theorist. Here in this paper, we present to you J.S. Mill, one of the greatest political theorists of the politics of Liberal Democracy in the context of the western intellectual tradition. We examined his profile and analyzed the contending issues and socio-economic conditions of his time and thus argued that his political theory and ideas on utilitarianism, on Liberty and Representative Government despite its pitfalls was an improvement on the liberal democratic ideas and its central problem of freedom and social justice of the individual in society.

Mill lived in the 19th century Europe. He was born precisely in 1806 and died in 1873. He was the son of a Scottish intellectual called James Mill. James Mill himself was a disciple and follower of Jeremy Bentham. It was Jeremy Bentham who first introduced the idea of utility or what later became known as utilitarianism in Modern Political Theory. Infact, Jeremy Bentham represented, one of the new theorists who provided a new rationalization and justification for modern day capitalism through idealism and utilitarianism after the collapse of the natural rights theory of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Robert Filmer in the period of classical liberalism and its economic correlate of laissez faire (i.e no economic intervention by the State) as propounded by Adam Smith and David Ricardo.

Mill had a traumatic educational experience in the hands of his father whose house was regarded as the “house of intellect” because, it was where the known writers of the time, journalists and other practical politicians met to exchange ideas over the prevailing issues of the time.

Between the age three and twelve, Mill was introduced to works in Greek, the main object of which was the aids and appliances of thought later, he was introduced to works which were thoughts themselves enmeshed in logic. As a result of this kind of education which his father imposed on him with strict discipline, and in which he was exposed to knowledge and what Greek poet Lucretius, called the Nature of Things – all of which he was not meant to know, given his age, Mill suffered severely from mental crisis and depression.

Mill also had some educational instruction from John Austin, an English legal theorist who founded the Analytical School of Jurisprudence. Mill’s sharpness of analysis and discipline of mind in later life was attributed to him. Mill also had a lifelong collaborator in Mrs. Taylor whom he later married. All through his life, Mill had a major critic in the person of Thomas Carlyle. Infact in one of his criticisms against Mill’s utilitarianism, Carlyle argued that:

Man can live without happiness by learning the lesson of entsagen or Renunciation – a necessary condition for all virtue. (Cited in Lerner, 1986; p.199).

The Issues and Conditions of His Time

The 19th century Europe in which Mill lived and died was a century of great hope, of dream of the perfectibility of man, of new religions of science and humanity, when men were eager to reform the world in order to solve the problem of poverty. But it was also a violent and volatile century, characterized by strong feelings of nationalism and revolutions in Italy, France and England. It was a period when capitalism had emerged as the dominant mode of production and prevailing economic order, following the breakdown of Feudalism and its Absolutist Monarchy; and thus had created new wealth and power all over Europe as a result of the Industrial Revolution.

Capitalism itself is simply a system of economic organization which recognized private ownership of the major means of production and propelled by profit motive, competition, self-interest and in a word, individualism. In the 19th century capitalist Europe, the socio-economic conditions were such that there was social differentiation among the people in terms of social inequalities in status, wealth, power, privileges and opportunities, and more importantly, in the control of economic, political and social resources. It was a time when the European Society had already been bifurcated into two classes namely – the working class and the capitalist class. The working class served basically as elements of manipulation and exploitation in the process of capital accumulation while the emergent middle class (i.e. the capitalist class) enjoyed its glorious moments in wealth and power, and thus, wanted to consolidate its position in both economic and political scheme of things, by rationalizing with come principles and ideas be it that of liberty, reason or material progress (Rodee et al, 1972).

Already, there was in existence, an ideology called liberalism and its economic correlate capitalism which had developed in the 17th and 18th century by the efforts of the enlightenment thinkers and classical economists of that Age – respectively. Liberalism identified the individual rather than the society as a whole as the unit of analysis upon which social justice, virtues and capabilities could be judged. Social justice was determined by the extent to which freedom was allowed the individual in order to demonstrate his own virtues and capabilities. At the economic level, this expressed itself in economic enterprise and business acumen which are themselves determined by the ingenuity of the individual, which are unequally distributed by nature among men, resulting in inequalities in wealth, status and political power (Sabine & Thorson, 1973, p.608).

At the level of the political, the ideals of classical liberalism included:

- (i) Civil liberties – i.e. freedom of thought, expression and association
- (ii) The security of property
- (iii) The control of political institutions by an informed public opinion
- (iv) Adoption of forms of constitutional government
- (v) Acceptance of rules of government set by law
- (vi) The centre of political authority being by representative legislature
- (vii) All forms of government to be responsible to the electorate

From the above it can be seen that the combination of economic success and the holding of political power was a function of property ownership. Earlier before this period, Aristotle had argued that the best practicable state (the polity) was that based on property ownership with the middle classes of society dominating the political system. This in itself was in opposition to Plato's own views that political leaders should have no economic stake in their political decisions and public policies, and thus should not acquire any property. But in spite of this John Calvin in the 16th century anchored political authority and justified it on the economic success of God's elect. Thus, Protestantism, and classical liberalism were fused into one in defense and protection of property rights and political power and authority.

Classical liberalism as a system of ideas concerned with the reconciliation of power and authority and the individual in a democratic setting, devoted itself to the protection of private property rights. But by the 19th century, the Natural right theory had become inadequate for rationalization and justification of property rights under capitalism, and the general atmosphere of violence therefore called the need for the production of new ideas that would be concerned with finding a non-violent and relatively non-exploitative way of carrying along the capitalist system of economic production, and winning back the obedience of the populace. It was to this need that Jeremy Bentham and his utilitarian followers responded to, with the principle of utility or the principle of the greatest happiness to the greatest number. We have gone thus far in our analysis of classical liberalism because like Sabine had argued, "Mill stood curiously in both sides of the line dividing classical liberalism and liberal democracy." (p.612). We now proceed with Mill's utilitarianism.

On Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham had argued that private property rights and the rights of government are based on the principle of utility. Pain and Bentham saw happiness as pleasure associated with noble life and moral perfection. But despite the contributions of Benthamism to the utilitarian idea of social justice it failed to explain what constitutes pleasure and morality. It was at this point that Mill came to improve on the liberal utilitarian tradition.

Mill argued that utilitarianism means the principle of social utility which is welfare or happiness for all; and that the foundation of morality was this social utility or the Greatest Happiness Principle.

This means that all right actions are reducible to pleasure and all wrong actions are reducible to pain. He distinguished between quality and quantity of pleasure unlike Bentham and argued that the difference lies in the sense of dignity which all human beings possess in proportions to their higher faculties; and that these faculties do not regard anything as happiness, unless that thing is gratified. In his words:

The test of quality, and the rule measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who in their opportunities of experience...are best furnished with the means of comparison (Mill, 1986, p.199).

By this, he means that only those with higher faculties have a higher sense of dignity, be it in terms of what men call pride; or in terms of love of power, or love of liberty and personal independence and are the people most suitably equipped and capable of comparing it (i.e. the sense of dignity) with a small or larger amount of it. The implication of this is that a man of higher qualities requires more sense of dignity to make him happy; while a man of lesser qualities has less sense of dignity to make him happy, hence his unsatisfied life. And according to Mill, this is the end of human action and the standard of morality which defined human conduct.

Mill argued that an unsatisfied life was one without happiness and that the causes were mainly due to selfishness and lack of mental cultivation. He observed that the main constituents of a satisfied life were those of tranquillity and excitement. Tranquillity was to be used to bring about contentment with little pleasure while excitement is used to reconcile and adapt the individual to considerable quantity of pain.

He further argued that the sources of physical and mental suffering were indigence, disease, unkindness, worthlessness and premature loss of objects of affection and thus suggested that the way out was by proper control of noxious influence, good physical and moral education.

According to him, virtue is desired because of its “conduciveness to pleasure, and especially to protection from pain and that there is in reality nothing desired except happiness.” Mill thus concluded that the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality is to be found in the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth:

To do as you would be done by and to love your neighbour as yourself (Mill, 1986, p.204).

And for him, this was only possible in a society that was humane and generous with the individuals having the greatest freedom for competition of ideas and diversity of life styles. This leads us to his next essential work, that is, on liberty.

On Liberty

Although Benthamite utilitarianism argued the case of individual liberty, the problem of freedom remained unresolved, hence Mill J.S. devoted his Essay on Liberty to the analysis of freedom. Mill argued that human nature is characterized by conflict and competition essentially because of natural differences in taste, natural endowment of skills and talents and intelligence; in a word – power.

And that this is only realizable in a situation of diversity of opinion. Which means that it is only when there are diverse opinions in a particular issue or any issue at all in the practical concerns of life can a chance of fair play be said to have been given to all sides of the truth, given the existing state of human intellect. Here, Mill was quoting Wilhelm Von Humboldt in his book *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. Von Humboldt had argued that firstly, power is what every human being ceaselessly covert for and secondly that freedom and variety of situations create individual vigour and originality of ideas.

Mill, argued for the independence in opinion and feeling of the individual as the basis for the production of original ideas on which the progress of society depends. Individual liberty was to be the means of achieving progress in the society, and for Mills, freedom means making choices. According to him:

The human faculties of perception, judgment discriminative feeling, mental activity and even moral preference are exercised only in making a choice (*Ibid*, p.72).

By this, Mill means freedom. The implication of this is that it is only in freedom (i.e. liberty) that the faculties of man, especially his higher faculties, are actually activated, exercised and his potentialities and propensities towards, power, acquisition of property, love, beneficence and other human qualities that make for the self-dignity of man are realized.

On Government

Mill however argued that this freedom should not be absolute but rather relative (one may say) essentially because of the imperfection of human society and the fallibility of man in respect of perception, judgment and preferences inherent in making choices. This called the need for the social control of freedom which Mill recommended in the institution of a government representing the whole people. But this raises a number of questions as to what a representative government actually means, who are the whole people, and what criteria are used in delineating the people to be represented and the representatives themselves; and in what manner or form should the representative government assume – i.e whether it should be monarchical, constitutional, or democratic. In this Mill explained that:

The meaning of representative government is, that the whole people, or some numerous portion of them, exercise through deputies periodically (*Ibid*, p.211).

This implies that the government although is for the whole people, the process of acquiring its power is for some or a majority of the people. It also implies the necessity of election, and the completeness in the possession of political power by the elected political authorities. This according to Mill is absolutely necessary to be able to maintain law and order and the progress of society and government since “a balanced constitution is impossible. the political ideals of liberalism as early on enumerated in this essay, with a mission to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves in a democratic setting.

The democracy which Mill recommended is the majoritarian democracy in which proportional representation and plural voting assumed a central place. This was to enable the virtues of the few in society secure their influence against the tyranny, selfishness and mediocrity of the majority of people; and also to ensure that the widest spectrum of opinion was expressed in a parliamentary assembly. This is what is referred to as the Hare System in the literature. According to Mill:

It secures a representation in proportion to numbers, of every division of the electoral body; not two great parties alone, with perhaps a few sectional minorities (*Ibid*, p.256).

This is particularly necessary according to Mill in order to ensure a balance of the individual in a society given the constraints imposed on him by human nature which is naturally inclined to individualism, and the necessity of the individual to express and actualise himself in a social setting (i.e society). According to Mill:

In all states of human improvement ever yetthe condition of command and obedience, are the most powerful influence, except their religious belief, which make them what they are and enable them to become what they can be (*Ibid*, p.173).

But the institution of representative government as an instrument of social control on freedom has raised questions as to its limit on liberty of thought and discussion on which Mill anchored his theory of individual liberty and which was used, to determine the boundary between the individual and society. This question becomes particularly important when considered against the background of the relationship between law and morality.

Mill had argued that:

But on application of this to real life situations Mill realized that it was really difficult to draw the boundary as to what is strictly that of the individual's interests and what is strictly society's. He therefore argued:

But if either from idleness or from any other avoidable cause, a man fails to perform his legal duties to others, as for instance to

support his children, it is no tyranny to force him to fulfil that obligation, by compulsory labour, if no other means are available.

This principle which Mill used to determine the boundary between the individual and society is often referred to as the “Harm Principle” in Political Theory. But unfortunately, this did not solve the problem of conflict between utility and social justice as critics point to the elitist elements in his account of liberty.

Conclusion

In spite of criticisms and the faults which may be found in his political philosophy, our contention in this paper is that: to the extent that Mill recognized the differences in the intellect of men, the imperfectability of human society, leading to differences in social status, wealth and well-being; to the extent that he recognized the necessity of social control in human affairs (i.e. government), and the need for it to guarantee for subsistence through welfarist policies for all the members of society inspite of their differences; to all these extents, we recognize and appreciate his humanitarian liberalism.

It is on this note that we conclude with the words of C.B. Macpherson – a major contemporary critic of liberal theorists:

Whatever one may say about J.S. Mill’s elitism, he did have a more humanistic and democratic idea of the essence of man than any of his utilitarian predecessors, and it was his attempt to square this with their purely bourgeois view of man as a maximizer of utilities that led him to confront the central problem of modern theory.

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