

THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY IN THE POLITICAL THEORY OF JOHN STUART MILL: A PHILOSOPHICAL EVALUATION

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Abstract

The purpose of philosophy is to attain the Good. The attainment of the good can be done through a well ordered form of life, and this well ordered form of life can be acquired through a well ordered form of government in the state. This well ordered form of government in the state is what Mill refers as democracy in his moral and political theory. This research delves into detail of the main thesis of John Stuart Mill on democracy. It examines the concept of democracy in the philosophical theory of John Stuart Mill, by portraying it as acceptable democratic system and principles for social change, reformation and transformation towards enhanced societal good and development. Unlike purely procedural conceptions of democracy, Mill conceives democratic governance as both a moral and political enterprise that focuses on promoting the ethical, intellectual and civic development of the citizens in the state. Mill argues that political participation possesses an inherent educative function, public responsibility, civic virtue and fostering rational deliberations among citizens in the society. The study employs the philosophical method of hermeneutics to examine and evaluate Mill's concept of democracy in order to show what constitutes better democratic government in the state. His defense of freedom of expression and individual liberty further reflects his belief that social progress and the common good are best achieved in an environment where diverse opinions and individuality are protected. A closer look at Mill's concept of democracy reveals some of the enduring challenges facing democratic societies in the world today and the challenges are very much evident in most countries of the world when a strictly close examination is given to their democratic systems of governance. The research discovery shows that Mill's concept of democracy in practice has a remedy to contemporary political challenges and instabilities in the contemporary human world and can actually remedy huge political quagmires in the world of politics today, thereby maintaining reasonable peace for social cohesion and human capital development for the growth, good, progress and betterment of all and sundry in the society.

Keywords: Democracy, Representative Government, Liberty, Political Leadership, Proportional Representation, Utilitarianism, Political Participation, Equality, Freedom

Introduction

Man by nature is a social animal. And apart from being a social animal according to Aristotle, man is also a political animal and a rational being.¹ He has the inherent tendency to live together with his fellow human beings in a close, contact group, known as society. Following the above quote therefore, we can deduce the fact of man's urgent necessity to maintain peace, order, control and stability in the society where he lives, in order that he would enjoy life, liberty and happiness which are the ultimate ends of his brief earthly existence. But then, the proper means to this his ultimate earthly end (happiness) is where the problem lies.

Also, it has been often asserted that man's principal preoccupation lies in the efforts put in to produce and reproduce his material existence. There is the need for food, shelter, medicine etc. Thus, in the course of this endeavour to survive, man naturally enters into social relations in the process of making out a living. Nevertheless, man believes that he can only live his life fully in a well ordered and peacefully organized society. How well and best he can organize his society in order to meet his targeted goal in life is what brings us to the problem under discussion which is democracy.

Democracy is one of the most heated topics of debate since long time in political science as well as political philosophy, and a generally accepted view of democracy is yet to be realized or obtained, though it exists in virtually all types of states and in almost every region of the world. *From [history](#), an individual or a group of individuals may take and maintain power by the use of coercive force and we can see that this is the usual way by which power is gained, and maintained. However, it has long been understood that people might come together and explicitly agree to put someone in power. The best of the thinkers saw a process and call it democracy - by which groups might bloodlessly choose a leader. That each of the governed should have a say, or at least an opportunity to have a say, is a high flying ideal and very applaudable. Hence, any system by which the peace is kept and reasonable progress is visibly achieved is an admirable system and democracy, such as it has evolved, has proven, in many cases, to be just such a system.*

Notably, democracy etymologically is derived from the Greek words 'kratos,' meaning strength or power and 'demos,' meaning people. It is a rule by the people. It goes beyond the periodic act of voting called elections. It is characterized by participation in government through involving members of the community in governmental decisions and allowing them to take part in anything at all which amounts to a public demonstration of popular opinion. The first democracy, of which we have record, is that which was practiced in ancient Athens. Democracy's re-flowering in the world, in respect to the rights of the people, first appeared in England with the [Glorious Revolution](#) of 1688. A study of an era known as The Enlightenment (Age of Reason) is the study of the beginnings of modern democracy.

Consequently, the enlightenment was fully established and growing vigorously by the eighteenth century. As the shackles of oppression, so firmly clamped on during the Middle Ages, became loose, men sought immediately to apply reason to everything including religion, politics, morality, and social life etc. With the coming of the enlightenment men began to express their minds and no longer were most men cowed by the great mystery of the universe, and their minds, through ignorance, ruled by fears as in the dogmatic era earlier. Everything automatically faded away simultaneously and positivity alongside free minded humanity was birthed accordingly. The Enlightenment was a time when human beings pulled themselves out of the medieval pits of Mysticism and somewhat Dogmatism.

Moreover, by the middle of the 20th century, every independent country in the world, with only a few exceptions, had a government that, in form if not in practice, embodied some of the principles of democracy. Although the ideals of democracy have been widely professed, the practice and fulfillment have been different and clearly relative in many countries. The resulting confusion and effects of this has also led different scholars and philosophers to conceptualize democracy based on their own individual respective perceptions. Hence, Mill in his own view sees democracy as representative government by stating thus, that the ideally best form of government is representative government. Representative government is the best form because it combines

liberty, accountability, public participation, and national progress.² According to him; democracy will help new national states and help to protect the interests of ethnic and linguistic minorities that were then seriously threatened by the domination of the majority. Proportional representation system permits the representation of groups normally excluded by majority politics, such as blacks, socialists and communists etc.

John Stuart Mill while still a utilitarian, somewhat modified the narrow principles of the original Benthamite utilitarianism. Bentham and James Mill, for instance, believed that pleasures were different in quantity, not in quality, but Mill saw both Qualitative and Quantitative differences in pleasures. Mill brought about a greater identification between individual happiness and general happiness than did Bentham. The utilitarian standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether. Unlike Bentham, Mill held that there were internal as well as external sanctions for happiness. Also, unlike Bentham and James Mill, John Stuart Mill held liberty to be a personal right. His conception of liberty was not based on the principle of Benthamite utility. His assertion that the whole world was not justified in suppressing one individual's freedom of thought and expression was not in accord with the Benthamite principle of the greatest good of the greatest number. Mill believes concretely that society is not founded on a contract and should not be seen as such.

John Stuart Mill's Concept of Democracy

John Stuart Mill started with his criticism of the British aristocracy based on its follies in its own country and in Ireland and views such as game laws and medieval privileges and somehow their subjugative means. He pointed on the folly of this system with the example of France and the fall of its regime. He pointed out different system of governments such as; aristocracy which he said was outdated although with inherent values such as not allowing much freedom. He pointed out that it stifles the individual thereby, sacrificing him or her on the altar of the empire. He also talked about despotic form of government which he argues could be necessary under certain conditions, if it assures stability.

However, Mill would yet argue that individuality and eccentricity is far better than massive social uniformity, which is the objective of tyranny in most cases, and which is highly occasioned by fear and not orderliness in the real sense. In line with this, Mill opined that individuality, diversity of character, and experiments in living are essential for personal and social progress.³ Hence, based on his perceived failure of other systems of government he advocated democracy which he viewed as representative government. He argued that democracy was the best form of government. It is an exercise of the will by the individuals who make up the state, hence, his popular adage that 'the individual was sovereign.' This, in his own opinion does not only assure the happiness of all. He goes further to enunciate that democracy goes beyond mere well-being of the individual, but that it fosters self development and individuality. Nadia Urbinati as Mill's strong proponent supported him on his theory of representative government by arguing that Mill's representative democracy promotes continuous public discussion rather than periodic elections alone. Democracy, for Mill, depends upon free debate, political accountability, and active citizenship rather than direct majority rule.⁴

The form of democracy Mill defended is the representative government; he states that the representative government is the best form of government because it best encourages individuality. It also produces people who are more active and intelligent participants in the society. Mill made a further defence with the reasoning that a society set up on democratic

institutions and principles would be better and will foster human developments. He opposed Hobbes view that man is not merely greedy but that human go beyond mere personal motive to higher values. This is based on his principle of qualitative utility. In this sense, Mill would argue that people should acquire the sense that they have moral institutions superior to mere self-interest. Furthermore, human beings collectively develop rules to aid them in their efforts to maximize their happiness, for each of us want goods beyond material needs, because materials are scarce and unsatisfactory. Therefore, the end goes beyond mere material satisfaction but to utility. Hence, all comes together to form norms of justice. These norms with sanction attached functions as means to utility. This argument then gives credence that the norms formed, aid man coming together; a need for democratic setting, hence, leading to a need for representation as all cannot govern at the same time, but can have their voices taken note of, through their representatives. Hence, we have cleared the ground not just for a democratic setting, but also for a build on representative government.

Representative Government, Liberty and Freedom of the Individual

Representative government for John Stuart Mill is the ideal form of government based on his work titled *Considerations on Representative Government* written in 1861 and republished in 2010. He refused that there are any 'a priori' laid down criterion of good or the ideal, stating that all is built merely on progress and permanence. Consequent upon this, a government for him must first secure order of getting itself obeyed, and for Mill government exists to promote the common good by improving citizens intellectual and moral, not merely maintaining order.⁵ This order means 'the preservation of peace by cessation of private violence by all means possible.' Hence, the first element of a good government is the virtue and intelligence of the human beings composed in the community. He mentioned the tyrannical system, the despotic, the aristocratic and the monarchical systems rejecting them because they fell short of the criterion as they are not centered on the individual who must be intelligent and the virtue of the individual. The only government that meets this criterion for Mill is the representative government. This is in line with Gary Browning argument is support of Mill. Browning argues that Mill's representative democracy remains applicable today because it combines liberty, public morality, and democratic representation.⁶ For Browning, Mill should simply be understood and interpreted as a practical democrat whose ideas and political concepts still address contemporary democratic issues till date.

Mill holds that the best form of government is not that which is the most efficient but that which best promotes the virtue and intelligence of the people i.e. one which best promotes the moral and intellectual qualities of the people of the state. This is best done through the association of the people in public affairs. Therefore, to Mill, there is no difficulty in showing that the ideally best form of government is that in which the sovereignty or supreme controlling power is vested in the entire citizens of the community. Every citizen not only having a voice in the exercise of the ultimate sovereignty of the state, but being at least occasionally as the case may be called upon to take an actual part in the government in one way or the other by the personal discharge of some public functions, local or general, hence, actual representative democracy. But, since, except in a very small community, all cannot directly and/or personally participate in public affairs, it follows that the best form of government accordingly must be a representative government to foster progress and inclusivity.

Nevertheless, Mill went on to enumerate that although the representative government is the best form, it is still not universally applicable. For him, representative government is closely connected with advancement of the society. He listed the conditions for representative government thus: That the people should be willing to receive it: That they should be willing and able to do what is necessary for its preservation: That they should be willing to fulfill the duties and discharge the

functions which are imposed on them. With the above, he argued that backward nations like those of Africa and India are not yet ready for such government. This is because of the then perceived image that these societies need guidance. He then defined representative government as the whole people or some numerous portions of them exercising through deputies periodically elected by themselves, the ultimate controlling power; which, in every constitution, must reside somewhere. This ultimate power, they must possess in all its completeness.⁷ Hence, this power must be built in the constitution and properly adhered to. Following the above, it is obvious that Mill was in favour of a representative democracy, though as a radical, he was very alive to the dangers and weaknesses of democracy. He feared democratic despotism as something worse than monarchical despotism. He looks at it that extreme democracy would kill individuality. Democracy generally means the rule of the majority and somehow the tyranny of the majority exercised over the minorities. It leads to sectional legislation and promotion of class interests in the state.

Generally, representative democracy though better than other forms of government, suffers from two dangers i.e. general ignorance and incapacity in the controlling body in the state and in the average member in the parliament and secondly the danger of the democratic machinery being in the controlling hands of a section of population whose interests are not identical with the general welfare of the whole community. Representative democracy gives undue prominence and power to sheer numerical majority. It tends towards 'collective mediocrity.' It leads to under-representation of the minorities in the parliament and hence, the suppression of their interests. Mill's idea on liberty emanated from his experience at a time he lived when the policy of *laissez faire* was being abandoned in favour of greater regulation by the state of the actions of the individual. Besides due to the growth of democracy, the individual was getting lost in the society. To Mill, this increasing regulation and elimination of the individual was a wrong and harmful development. He believed that the progress of society depended largely on the originality and energy of the individual. He, therefore, became a great advocate of individualism i.e. of the supreme necessity and importance of the individual developing on his own lines, as far as possible to the supreme perfection of his personality for his own good and that of the society. If, unhindered by society, the individual reached the perfection of his personality; his services to the society would be great and rich. The society would be enriched also by the 'variety' of characters in it. Instead of the society or the state regulating the individuals and producing individuals of the same pattern, the society should leave the individuals the widest possible margin for free development. He lays down as a general principle that governmental interference in the activity of the individual should be reduced to the minimum. On the basis of utility, he advocates a complete system of individualism.

John Stuart Mill in his idea stated that liberty is the fundamental human right, the sole end, for which mankind are warranted individually or collectively... in interfering with the liberty of the action of any of their number, is self protection.⁸ Hence, he refused any law that stifles the liberty of the individual in any way. The best person is one who is responsible for himself and his actions. Therefore, he justified the liberty of the individual in opposition to unlimited state control. Gregory Claeys followed the same line with Mill by contending that Mill defended democratic institutions because they foster moral and intellectual development. For him, democracy educates citizens and gradually produces a more just and equal society through political participation.⁹

Consequently, Mill proposed the harm principle. This principle holds that each individual has the right to act as he wants, so long as these actions do not harm others. If the action is self regarding that is, if it only directly affects the person undertaking the action, then the society has no right to

intervene. But even this statement has a clause for Mill, however, that individuals are prevented from doing lasting serious harm to themselves or their property. It is because no one exists in isolation in strict sense. Harm done to oneself may harm others in the long run, or even other's properties, such as suicide or burning one's property. He excluded children or those living in backward society from this principle stating that they need guidance. He equally argued that liberty is a natural right on the ground of utility. It is here that he defended freedom of expression as a necessary condition for intellectual development. He contends that a silenced opinion does not contain any element, not even of truth.

Mill believed that an individual had two aspects to his life i.e. the individual aspect which concerned himself alone and secondly the social aspect because every individual was also an integral part of the society. The actions of the individual may similarly be divided into two categories i.e. self-regarding, and other-regarding. With regard to actions in which he alone is concerned his liberty of action is complete and should not be regulated by the state. However, in actions of the individual which affect the society, his actions can justifiably be regulated by the state or society. Consequently, the sole end for which mankind is warranted individually or collectively in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which, merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute over himself, over his own body or mind, and the individual remains always sovereign in matters that concerns himself with carefulness to others' sovereignty as well.

Eliminating the Tyranny of the Majority: Proportional Representation

In Mill's opinion, the basic defect of representative government is the 'tyranny of the majority.' He contended that although representative government is the best, the inherent as in every system is the tyranny of the majority. He states that when it degenerates, ... it will encroach on the will and freedom of the individual who elected them. Withhold support from those minorities who endeavor to fulfill their trust conscientiously, it will countenance or impose, a selfish, a capricious and impulsive ignorant and prejudiced general policy.¹⁰ Here, Mill argues that the individual is trampled upon and consequently the minority is a slave. Hence, he advocated seriously that the liberty of the individual is paramount and should come before any other law in the constitution.

Ordinarily, in a representative democracy, the majority party succeeds in securing a larger number of seats in the parliament than its proportionate number of votes would justify. In the General Election of 1906 in Britain, the government party polled about two lacs of votes and secured thirty seats, while the minority party polled about a lac of votes but secured not a single seat. In this case, a strong minority of one lac voters went unrepresented in the parliament. As a rule, minorities suffer from under-representation in the parliament. To safeguard against this injustice to minorities and to make sure that majorities and minorities get their due share of representation in the parliament, Mill supported the system of proportional representation which he regarded as necessary for representative democracy. It is a system of transferable vote, first proposed by Mr. Hare. Alan Ryan explained that Mill's democracy aims to balance majority rule with constitutional liberty. He continued that Mill's democratic government could succeed only when individual rights and political education were protected.¹¹

Mill, therefore, thought it necessary for democracy that the legislators should be wise, educated and enlightened. They should be men of culture, integrity and of independent views who could rise above selfish considerations and interests. They should be men and women who would make a special study of politics and of legislation. For this, two things were necessary and one of these was weighted suffrage. Mill would grant universal suffrage to all men and women. But he would give weighted suffrage i.e. plural votes to higher educated citizens. This would give proportionate weight to men and women of superior intelligence. Mill continued by drawing up a list of those classes whose superior intelligence entitled them to plural votes. In order to prevent the rich higher educated men practicing class legislation, he was in favour of the poor getting plural votes by proving their superior intelligence through voluntary examinations. Another thing he advocated was the non-payment of members of parliament. This he did on the basis of purity and efficiency of parliamentary work so that only those with passion, compassion and willing capacity for the good and betterment of the society can truly and honestly aspire to be part of the people's parliament. But, at the same time, he recommended that the expenses incurred at an election should not be charged to the candidates alone. Ben Sanders argues in this vein that Mill justified political participation because voting educates citizens morally and intellectually. Democracy is valuable not merely because it chooses governments but because it improves the character of those who participate.¹²

Barbara Baldi opined in her own argument that Mill genuinely supported representative democracy but believed democracy required educated citizens, minority protection, and responsible representatives. She further argues that Mill sought to prevent majority tyranny while preserving democratic legitimacy.¹³ Hence, in her idea, democracy should not only be for majority voting but should be a political system designed to foster and cultivate responsible citizens while at the same time trying to protect minority rights and liberty of all. Mill believed that voting was not a right but a trust, demanding a due sense of responsibility and regard for general good instead of personal advantage. Sven Ove Hansson also added voice to Mill's democracy argument by stating that Mill's democratic philosophy rests on a broad egalitarian commitment. Equality, public participation, and equal moral standing are presented as essential foundations of Mill's representative democracy rather than secondary principles.¹⁴ Gordon Arlen as well contending to Mill's theory argues that:

Mill was a genuine democrat whose principal concern was preventing oligarchic domination. He demonstrates from Mill's speeches, essays, and *Consideration on Representative Government* that democracy succeeds only when politically organized citizens, especially workers, actively participate in public life. Mill's democracy is therefore participatory rather than merely electoral.¹⁵

Arlen's final submission remains that Mill's democratic theory continues to be highly relevant for contemporary democracies in the world that is saddled with high level of elite capture, inequality, and the total decline of public trust. From Arlen's point of view, democracy requires not only normal periodic elections but also active and adequate civic participation and engagement as well as democratic institutions that checkmate oligarchy and their excessive power and influence.

More so, as it concerns voting, both Bentham and James Mill were ardent supporters of voting by ballot i.e. secret voting. J. S. Mill was against voting by ballot as being wrong in principle. For him, voting by ballot converted a vote into a right, something that a voter could deal with as he or she chooses without any regard to the interests of others. However, it must be noted that the experience of mankind has supported Bentham rather than Mill on the question of voting by ballot. Secret

voting does minimize, if it does not eliminate, bribery, corruption and intimidation. Mill did not express his opinion and position adequately and clearly in the real sense about monarchy, but considered the House of Lords in Britain as a useful body for drafting bills because of its superior legal ability.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Mill's democratic theory on the liberty of the individual pleads for certain freedoms for the individual without which he cannot develop his personality properly and adequately. These are: freedom of conscience: liberty of thought and of its expression: liberty of pursuits and tastes: liberty of association: liberty to pursue his own vocation in life, and liberty of religion and morals etc. Mill laid great stress on liberty of thought and expression. The society must allow the individual freedom of thought and opinion and must not suppress his opinion on the plea that his opinion is contrary to commonly-held opinion and views. It may be that his opinion is correct. Custom and tradition are no guarantee of the correctness of an opinion.

Freedom of expression is very useful because it leads to discussion and the discovery of truth. It leads to clear, full and consistent thinking. It improves ideas and strengthens convictions and thereby renders action more positive and effective. Truth has various aspects which come out in a discussion when there is freedom of expression. Freedom of thought and expression leads to the development of personality on individual lines and, therefore, to a 'variety' of characters which enriches society. Other freedoms are similarly necessary for proper development of personality. Any state action which reduces his freedoms reduces the spontaneity of choice and action of the individual and hinders the growth of his personality. Besides the purely individual or private aspect, there is also the social aspect to a man's personality. Here the society, agrees Mill has the right of interference, but this interference must be reduced to the minimum. Any increase in state interference and action is prejudicial to the liberty of the individual and to the development of his personality. State action can mean collective tyranny in one way or the other.

Though Mill is against excessive state interference, he concedes to the state the right of regulating the actions of the individuals which affect the society on the plea of self-protection. In the actions of the individual which concerns himself alone, the state should not interfere. He should be allowed to carry his opinions into practice at his own cost. Similarly, the state should not interfere in the private affairs of the associations or corporations which affect their members only. But where a man's conduct is prejudicial to the rights and interests of others, society or state may legitimately step in. The society can also compel a man to perform his duties and obligations as a member of the society. Mill's doctrine of the liberty of the individual is based on three essential elements i.e. strong advocacy of the importance of impulse and desire in the individual and letting the individual follow his own impulses in actions which concern him alone. He insisted on the view that spontaneity and individuality are essential elements in individual and social welfare and revolt against the tyranny of custom, tradition or public opinion which might hinder the expression and development of individuality and the society as well.

There is much which is admirable in Mill's advocacy of representative government and individual liberty. But he overstates his case thereby heading towards somewhat confusion on individual eccentricity with originality and genius, and never realizes that eccentricity does not always denote strength of character. Mill does not put into consideration that impulses and desires of the individual may be unhealthy and are not always a sure guide to proper development of personality or proper social action. Unless impulses and desires of the individual are properly canalized, they may ruin him and do so much harm to the society in general. For Mill, the government generally

comes into existence for social well-being and political institutions find their basis in human will and interest. A government owes its authority and obeisance to the consent and cooperation of the people. The end of the government is to promote social welfare by promoting the qualities of life, virtue and intelligence in a number of concrete human beings for the betterment of all and the human society at large.

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