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John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*: A Case for the Practicality of Utilitarianism in Democratic Republics

Democratic republics replace the threat to Liberty once posed by the tyranny of political rulers with the threat of the "tyranny of the majority," since "the people… *may* desire to oppress a part of their number" (76, 75). The "majority" is a powerful force, and in order to prevent the abuse of this power, there are necessary precautions to be taken. *On Liberty* is John Stuart Mill's political extension of the ethical arguments outlined in his *Utilitarianism*, and can thus be understood as an argument for utilitarianism's potential to provide a necessary protection of rights within this novel system of democratic governance.

Mill defines this "precaution" we must take in order to avoid the tyranny of the majority in his statement that *"there is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence"* (76). Importantly, Mill rejects the notion that we should draw this line according to *"the likings and dislikings of society, or of some powerful portion of it"* – people tend to hold strong beliefs on a subject "as a consequence of the sympathies and antipathies which gr[ow] out of them," ignoring the crucial question of whether their "likings or dislikings should be a law to individuals" (78). Because of this, society *itself* can tyrannize by squelching nonconformity and silencing the minority. Thus, the practice of democracy necessitates that we impose a limit on state interference and coercion. The answer to the question of where to draw this limit, however, requires a discussion of Mill's *Utilitarianism* and the "liberties" that should be afforded to all "rational beings" under the The Greatest Happiness Principle.

In this 1861 Essay, Mill chiefly argues (1) that all actions have some end, and (2) that the "ultimate end" of all actions is the promotion of utility, which is defined as "pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain" (Mill, 1861, p. 9). A core aspect of Mill's moral theory is the idea that "superior quality" forms of pleasure, required for the achievement of happiness, are only possible for beings for whom rationality is relevant. Consequently, in *On Liberty*, Mill argues that it is only

when people are capable of learning from "free and equal" discussion that liberty holds (81). Further, he asserts that liberty is intrinsically tied to utility: "utility [is] the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be… grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" (81). These "interests" of the progressive being, including the "liberty of thought itself… tastes and pursuits… [and] combination among individuals," are the "Social Liberties" which man has a natural claim to by virtue of being able to experience pleasure and pain by exercising his faculties for rational thought (82-83).

Mill states that "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," where *harm* is defined as an action that is injurious to the interests of man – namely, the privation of the previously mentioned "Social Liberties" that are required to live the life of higher pleasures (80). State coercion is *only* permissible inasmuch as it prevents this distinct kind of harm to others. Interference with "Social Liberty" is, therefore, Mill's limit to the power that can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual. Without these freedoms, the achievement of higher pleasure would not be possible and utility could never be maximized. In light of this analysis, Mill has emerged as a champion for individuality and social freedom. Indeed, he insists that "over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign" (81).

Works Cited

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