

Liberalism is the true path of humanity

I want to argue that whilst liberal values are threatened on a societal front today, it is still a valid path to pursue to save humanity. To support my argument, I want to deploy the principles laid down in the essay of John Stuart Mill: *On Liberty*.

He commences his essay declaring his aim is to explore the nature and limits of power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual. He argues that the protection of individual freedom is not just about dealing with the tyranny of despots, but also the tyranny of the majority over the minority. He refers to it as social tyranny, [...] *the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them* [...]. (1) So a prime concern of Liberalism is how to ensure there are fair rules dealing with social conduct. This means there is a need to have laws in place to protect individuals from injustice, and of course give them access to justice. *People are accustomed to believe, and have been encouraged in the belief by some who aspire to the character of philosophers, their feelings on subjects of this nature are better than reasons and render reasons unnecessary.* (2) So Mill summarises his approach:

The object of this essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control [...]. (3)

The individual is sovereign over their mind and body except when it concerns others.

Mill asserts: *Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind has become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion.* (4)

A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but also his inaction [...] (5). So he is dealing with our social responsibility, not just individual protection.

He considered the liberty of an individual expressing themselves or publishing their ideas to be fine and that it could even lead to a combination of opinions, which would be valuable liberalism, provided the ideas do not lead to harm for others.

The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs. Of course, a state under threat from an outside enemy might feel that internal free expression of all its citizens would open it up to a threat from outside.

In his Chapter "*On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion*" he posits:

Let us suppose, therefore, that the government is entirely at one with the people, and never thinks of exerting any power of coercion unless in agreement with what it conceives to be their voice. (6) If the people's view is an intolerable one, say with regard to a smaller element of the community, then the government's exertion

of power will undermine liberty, even if the majority of the public agree with the action of the government.

All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility. (7) This leads to illiberalism because it falsely imagines that there is an unchallengeable truth, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error. He was arguing for the exploration of a false opinion rather than simply stifling it.

He devolves upon his own world the responsibility of being in the right against the dissentient worlds of other people; and it never troubles him that mere accident has decided which of these numerous worlds is the object of his reliance [...] (8)

Mill is indicating that there is a fundamental problem for free thinking that thinkers all over the world lean on a particular take of the truth from which they push away all other counterpositions. Liberalism requires us to always explore the arguments and facts of posed issues. This is the method of freedom of thought.

There is no greater assumption of infallibility in forbidding the propagation of error than in any other thing which is done by public authority on its own judgement and responsibility. (9)

Judgement is given to men so they may use it. [...] If we were never to act on our opinions, because those opinions may be wrong, we should leave all our interests uncared for, and all our duties unperformed. (10)

I would argue that we can have an intuition or notion that motivates us in a particular direction, but the essential facts have to be thoroughly explored all along the way. We need to always act to the best of our ability.

There must be discussion to show how experience is to be interpreted. Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument; but facts and arguments, to produce any effect on the mind, must be brought before it. Very few facts are able tell their own story, without comments to bring out meaning. (11) It is important that we share on any subject all possible opinions.

It will be said that we do not now put to death the introducers of new opinions: we are not like our fathers who slew the prophets [...] (12)

Looking across the modern world it is clear people are still oppressed or even murdered because they doubt beliefs.

There is also what Mill refers to as "*intellectual pacification*": *A state of things in which a large portion of the most active and inquiring intellects find it advisable to keep the general principles and grounds of their convictions within their own breasts [...] (13)*

He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that (the truth) (14). [...] to do justice to the arguments [...] He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them, who defend them in earnest and do their very utmost for them. He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form [...] (15)

Mill cites the struggle creeds have in fighting for assertion. *We often hear the teachers of all creeds lamenting the difficulty of keeping up in the minds of believers a lively apprehension of the truth [...] No such difficulty is complained of while the creed is still fighting for its existence; even the weaker combatants then know and feel what they are fighting for, and the differences between it and other doctrines [...]* (16) So, the creation of a creed leans on a liberalist position, but once it is socially established, it closes down liberal values.

There is an inherent responsibility for all thinkers not to be passive about questioning beliefs.

Popular opinions, on subjects not palpable to sense, are often true, but seldom or never the whole truth. They are a part of the truth, sometimes a greater, sometimes a smaller part [...] (17)

Here Mill is referring to the natural complexity of truth which means we need to test contention with known facts. This of course will conflict with many ideological or religious beliefs. This is the value of empiricism. Beliefs should as far as possible be tested, or considered from different angles.

Every opinion which embodies somewhat of the portion of truth which the common opinion omits ought to be considered precious, with whatever amount of error and confusion that truth may be blended. (18)

Of individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being (19)

Mill declares that human beings should be free to express their opinions, provided these opinions are not a nuisance to other people.

The Liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people. But if he refrains from molesting others in what concerns them, and merely acts according to his own inclination and judgement in things which concern himself, the same reasons that show that opinion should be free [...] (20)

So, all of us have the need for freedom to think and express opinions, even if those opinions are imperfect. This of course raises a special problem today because of online access. People should be free to express their opinions, but if that leads to the projection of hate online, then I would argue that freedom must be curbed for the safety of others.

As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character short of injury to others [...] (21)

Mill is drawing a distinction between two different forms of social development: *But the evil is that individual spontaneity is hardly recognised by the common modes of thinking as having any intrinsic worth [...]* (22). Individual freedom is more critical than custom for human development.

The human faculties of perception, judgement, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference are exercised only in making a choice. (23)

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 and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing. (24)

He focuses on the individual and finding the correct social behaviour: *Yet desires and impulses are as much a part of a perfect human beings as beliefs and restraints; and strong impulses are only perilous when not properly balanced [...]* (25). So, he essentially sees individuality as not something to be suppressed but fairly managed with fairly applied laws. This he contrasts with the Calvinistic theory: *According to that, the one great offence of man is self-will.* (26) But regardless of social or religious dominance, he sees individuality as the essence of Liberty and we all should be able to prevail ourselves of it. This will lead to the search to discover new truths.

H sees the problem as follows: *the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind.* (27)

Individuality requires the possibility of a person being able to break free. *There is no reason that all human existence should be constructed on some one or some small number of patterns. If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode.* (28) He is arguing that diversity of taste is essential to developing liberalism: *The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement [...]* (29)

There is a fundamental question regarding liberty. Who should have priority, the individual or society? He explores this in the chapter: *Of the Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual* (30).

Mill asks the question: *What, then, is the rightful limit to the sovereignty of the individual over himself? [...] How much of human life should be assigned to individuality, and how much to society?* (31)

He is clear that the individual has priority over society. The interference of society to overrule his judgement and purposes in what only regards himself is inevitably grounded in general presumptions which may be altogether wrong and, even if right, are as likely as not to be misapplied to individual cases: *Considerations to aid his judgement, exhortations to strengthen his will, may be offered to him, even obtruded on him, by others; but he himself is the final judge.* (32)

Contrast this with Rousseau in his Social Contract, who believed that the general will was the perfect authority to which we all as individuals should naturally cohere. (33)

For Mill, social rights are there to protect individuals from the violation of their rights by other individuals. There must be protection from illegitimate interference.

Mill has two maxims: [...] *first, that the individual is not accountable to society for his actions in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself. [...] Secondly, that for such actions as are prejudicial to the interests of others, the individual is accountable and may be subjected either to social or to legal punishment if society is of opinion that the one or other is requisite for its protection.* (34)

I would argue that in practical terms there is little difference between what Mill was seeking for the individual and what Rousseau was seeking for the social whole. If we have laws that define good moral principles, then this can deliver in the interests of the individual and society.

Whilst Mill is most often (ab)used in the context of economics to justify a particular view of free markets, I do not believe that this reduction does him justice; nor does it apply his useful concepts to other areas. If we think of employment rights for example, there should be legal protection against unfair dismissal for all individual employees. How is this established? Applying legal rules defining fairness and then putting it to the test in individual cases and compensating individuals who have suffered unfairness.

There is one important reality which may undermine liberalism, and that is economic inequality. If most of a nation's wealth is in the hands of the few, and the many have no hope of accessing it, then true liberal rights are undermined. Free representation and access to justice without the path being painfully expensive is an important route for liberalism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This paper focuses on the principle argued by John Stuart Mill in his essay "*On Liberty*". The pages referred to here are taken from the Penguin classics version, with the exception of quote 33 which comes from Rousseau's *The Social Contract*

(1) Page 63 introduction

(2) Page 64

(3) Page 68

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(27) Pages 130 / 131

(28) Pages 132 / 133

(29) Page 136

(30) to (31) Page 141

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(33) *Each of us puts his person and all his power in common with the supreme direction of the general will, and in our corporate identity, we receive each member as an individual part of the whole.* (From *The Social Contract* by J.J. Rousseau)

(34) Page 163 (Chapter V : Applications)

