

On liberty of thought and discussion



Thought and Discussion: On Liberty of Thoughts and Discussion By: Pamela Noble For: Professor Brad Bell Ethics and Media, The Arts and Society

Excelsior College August 11, 2013 Thoughts and Discussion: On the Liberty

of Thought and Discussion Abstract In the second chapter of John Stuart

Mill's essay, On Liberty, Mill presents reasons why he believes silencing

people's opinions, even if there is only one person with a particular opinion,

impedes the ability of people to make truly informed decisions. Mill's

argument, however, assumes that the goal is always the search for truth

and, thus, necessitates the need for liberty of thought and discussion.

Consequently, in this second chapter, Mill expounds upon his belief in the

autonomy of the individual in the development of opinion and quest for truth.

Mill also reiterates his belief in the autonomy of government and refutes the

idea that government should adhere to popular opinion. Furthermore, Mill

emphasizes the point that government should never prohibit victimless free

expression, even if popular public opinion deems it necessary. Thus, in the

ongoing search for truth, Mill encourages the notion that liberty in thought

and discussion of all peoples is vital because the majority opinion is not

guaranteed to be correct. Mill (1869), in On Liberty and Discussion, argues

that freedom of thought and speech are essential in keeping the majority

from silencing the minority because " we can never be sure that the opinion

we are endeavoring to stifle is a false opinion. " Consequently, since majority

opinion can be wrong for such has no true authority and no absolute

certainty, Mill further asserts that government should not act at the beckon

call of the majority. In addition, whether the majority opinion is right or

wrong, Mill believes that the public should not have the power of coercion over their elected governing body.

He argues that the government is much more ineffective and even counter-effective when dependent on public opinion. Nevertheless, it seems inescapable that public opinion is the popular sentiment of humankind, yet forming this opinion too often requires the silencing of opposing voices. Mill argues that such silencing of minority opinions is hurtful to the public, whether the opinions are valid or not. For example, if a silenced opinion is valid, obviously the public misses out on the truth. However, if the suppressed opinion is invalid, Mill (1869) asserts that the danger in its loss is often more harmful because reiteration of such opinions can lead to “ the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth.

” Mill, however, also points to a final type of dissenting opinion—one that is not necessarily valid or invalid—but nonetheless helpful. It is the type of opinion that provides part of the truth that is often missing in popular public opinion. It is Mill’s view that both popular and opposing opinions are rarely completely accurate and, therefore, a balance between the two should be reached in order for greater truth to be found. Mill further reiterates, however, that either opinion is usually preferred in its entirety, while the more balanced opinion which likely holds at least part of the truth is too often neglected. Consequently, Mill continues to expound upon the idea that no opinion should be neglected if knowledge of truth is in fact the objective.

This liberalist view adopted by Mill is reflected in his statement that humankind should not even have the authority to silence one opinion, much

less the whole of a minority. Mill supports his argument by pointing out that humans are fallible by nature and, as a result, truth cannot be certain. It follows, therefore, that even a mass majority opinion can be an incorrect one. Based on common knowledge concerning the fallibility of human nature, Mill's argument is indeed a powerful one.

However, this argument based on natural human fallibility seems to be an infinite one. For instance, one may wonder where indecision ends or after how much deliberation would a truth be validated? Furthermore, if it is the case that one can never be certain of the truth, then what sort of chaos might the resulting uncertainty cause? Mill's ideas on human fallibility and public opinion are also tempered with his views on religion and its importance in the search for truth. Mill points to the fact that a belief in God should not determine someone's trustworthiness. While he does not discount the importance of Christian faith, he seems to place it in perspective. For instance, Mill does not believe that one should solely adhere to the doctrine of religion and ignore the importance of personal integrity standing on its own merit.

For example, if an Atheist tells the truth and admits that he or she does not believe in God, he or she may not be trusted because of his or her lack of faith; however, if he or she lies and says he or she has faith, then he or she may be trusted. Such trust would obviously be based then on the wrong criteria. Such an example supports Mill's view there is no absolute correlation between religious belief and honesty, rather honesty is an intrinsic factor of personal quality, not religion. Such example also supports Mill's view that those who adhere to the Bible as the complete truth are

misinterpreting its intent to supplement the strong personal ethics and character already assumed to be present.

To make his point that morality and religion do not necessarily go hand in hand, Mill asserts that some of the most known moral individuals in history were not Christians. Mill also points out that a person does not have to be evil to argue against the basic beliefs upheld by society, invoking Socrates as proof that people can misjudge even the most competent and well-intentioned minds. Mill further uses historical examples in his ongoing argument regarding the possible fallibility of majority opinions. Such fallible opinions are exemplified by looking at past history. For example, past popular opinion has often been rejected by present-day society, and there is no guarantee that present popular opinion will not also be rejected by future generations. Was it not once the majority opinion that the world was flat? Thus, Mill advocates for freedom of thought and speech in order to keep alive possible truths, spur debates, understand the meaning of an opinion, and increase reasonability.

Throughout Mill's writing, he continues to emphasize the importance in people realizing that their opinions may be wrong and keeping an opposing viewpoint alive lends itself to that possibility in the search for truth.

Individuals can only form the most intelligent, educated opinions that they are capable of based on information presently known and made available. However, if the information presented is invalid then it follows that the opinions formulated based on such information is also invalid. Thus, such reasoning supports Mill's argument that liberty in thought and discussion must never be suppressed and, therefore, opinions should not be forced

upon others unless their truth is certain, which will never be. However, it is at this point that questions arise once again with regards to certainty and resolution.

Where does indecision finally end? When and how much deliberation is required for a truth be validated? How would one ever be certain of the truth and find true resolution? According to Mill's argument on human fallibility, it may well be that absolute certainty can never be had. However, Mill expresses the need to make wise decisions, which can only come from open discussion and personal experience. However, Mill further expresses the view that, when making a determination and even after determination is made, those who are fair and seek truth will keep their mind always open to all ideas and search for opposing arguments—realizing the necessity of a devil's advocate. According to Mill (1869), a so-called fact must be held up to debate or “ it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth. ” Thus, the basis of Mill's idea is the argument that has been present in many liberation movements throughout history before and after Mill's time: the argument that issues should not be forever closed for debate once a consensus has been reached. The Women's Suffrage Movement, Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War are all examples of where the minority opinion, which needed to be heard, was suppressed in error.

Nevertheless, contrary to popular opinion, Mill states that the truth does not always emerge in the end, as people do not necessarily support the truth with more passion than they support falsehoods. Such is the nature of humankind. People are not only fallible in their development of opinion but often too in their ability to admit truth. Thus, while Mill's argument is indeed

substantiated, it is of little relevance unless the goal sought is indeed truth.

References Mill, John Stuart.

1869. On Liberty of Thought and Discussion. In On Liberty (chapter II).

Retrieved from [www. bartleby. com/130/](http://www.bartleby.com/130/).