

Dissent: a stand against submission



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Former Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren once said, “ Mere unorthodoxy or dissent from the prevailing norms is not to be condemned. The absence of such voices would be a symptom of grave illness in our society.” This message combined with the government position of its speaker reveal the belief that challenging the political system benefits humanity as a whole. While both Plato and John Stuart Mill recognize the nature and importance of dissent in a philosophical discussion, they disagree on its implementation within a political system. Through Plato’s Crito, dissent is perceived as a detriment to society because a citizen has an obligation to maintain political order, rather than destroy it by disobeying the laws. To purposefully act contrary to that system is to weaken its power and organization, thus deteriorating the cohesion of society. Mill, however, believes that the ideal forum for dissent is the political system because politics is the collaboration of individual ideas. To ignore one opinion entirely is to weaken the system, in his eyes. With these fundamentally similar definitions of dissent applied in entirely different fashions, the dilemma between political and personal obligation is uncovered in the writings of Plato and Mill. Throughout the dialogue between Socrates and Crito, Plato reveals his stance concerning the importance of dissent within a healthy society. Plato’s perception of dissent, as revealed by this work, is an expression of individuality within a society that preaches conformity. While dissension is a healthy form of personal expression, there are limitations to the extent with which it can be beneficially pursued. Plato sees opposition as the crux of philosophical debate because it forces people to look beyond their perceptions and welcome foreign concepts. Through the expansion of linear thought, people are able to see life and society in different ways. Politically,

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however, there must be established laws by which all citizens are expected to abide. Without the compliance found within this doctrine, a state “ in which the decisions of the law have no power but are set aside and trampled on by individuals” cannot possibly subsist and “ not be overthrown.” (Plato 54) Because humanity is social by nature, there is no hope for man’s survival in an apolitical world. Socrates understands that the Athenian civilization relies on the basis of obedience among all of the citizens. In an attempt to maintain that structure, Socrates sacrifices his opportunity to escape from execution because he is unable to justify “ trying to escape without the consent of the Athenians” (Plato 53). Without that consent, Socrates is obligated by his duty to his country to follow through with the sentence. Socrates finds value in laws of social order and therefore refrains from utter dissension. Summarily, while Socrates believes strongly in the importance of philosophical dissent, he recognizes the political limit and decides to act with social propriety. Throughout Mill’s discussion concerning the freedom of speech in his *On Liberty*, he reveals his opinion concerning the topic. He perceives dissension as the expression of original ideas in a society diluted with blind acceptance. He depicts his value of opposition both philosophically and politically through examining the principles in a life of silenced opposition. To silence dissent is to assume that the laws in place have a sense of infallibility. No individual can ever claim to have attained complete understanding of the world and cannot, therefore, determine what is true and what is false. People are fallible by nature and must therefore allow for change within their political systems. Furthermore, stifling dissent stunts the intellectual process because people believe some value without analyzing its nature. Moreover, to silence dissent reduces the truth to prejudice.

Opposition forces people to deeply analyze their beliefs, therefore reinforcing or abolishing those principles. Dissension, in essence, challenges the perceptions of normalcy by presenting a “ clearer perception and livelier impression of truth.” (Mill 210) These challenges, in turn, force people to reconsider their stances on an array of topics because any belief “ unless suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested” is “ deprived of its vital effect” (Mill 210) Along these lines, dissent is closely linked to the government in Mill’s eyes because even the “ best government has no more title to it than the worst.” (Mill 209) To silence the minority in favor of upholding public opinion is equally as (if not more) offensive as government acting against the public’s will. Politics are the ideal forum for disagreement because it offers an opportunity to refine the old laws and generate new ones. To challenge a political system is to question the modes of society and attempt to better its policies. Government is capable of great good and great evil. The result depends on its citizens’ ability to change the policies that act against man’s nature. Therefore, in Mill’s perception, dissent is critical to both philosophical and political institutions. From my Americanized perspective, I find much truth in both arguments but I am more inclined to side with Mill’s advocacy of dissension within everyday political life. Within the democracy of the United States of America, citizens have both the right and obligation to challenge the sometimes narrow and antiquated laws governing such a diverse population. Without dissension, I believe that we as citizens are in danger of becoming complacent in our current society. Complacency is a state to be avoided because it evokes a concept of blind acceptance of the will of the majority. I personally fear and abhor the will of the majority in many situations and am not afraid to state <https://assignbuster.com/dissent-a-stand-against-submission/>

my opinion. The majority is often ill informed and unwilling to admit to it. To sacrifice one's opinion and beliefs to perpetuate the structure of society seems a weak attempt to avoid conflict. I believe that some situations call for the change of society's policies rather than the change of the individual's convictions. Granted that there will be times wherein the individual will be wrong, there still must be that opportunity to evaluate that opinion fairly rather than have it automatically silenced. As author Tryon Edwards once said, " he that never changes, never corrects his mistakes, and will never be wiser one the morrow than he is today." If society never reevaluates its policies, the standard of living will become static and eventually antiquated. Therefore, I am inclined to agree with Mill's belief that dissension should be an integral aspect of both philosophical and political debate. While Mill and Plato disagree on the specific applications of dissension, they both agree that it is critical to the development of human beings in some form. Although Plato believes firmly in the sustenance of the political institution, he realizes that dissent is critical to its foundation. However, he feels obliged to perpetuate society rather than destroy the institution with political defiance. He was created by this system and must therefore support it. Mill, on the other hand, believes that dissent is the basis of healthy human growth. Without challenging and being challenged, people become blind followers of their beliefs and political systems. In a sense, they become apathetic drones, following orders. Dissent allows man to explore not only the nature of society, but also his own foundations. To question is to seek knowledge. Knowledge and reason are the basis of human nature. Therefore, to question is to be true to one's instincts and avoid blind submission to the tyranny of the prevailing opinion. In essence, dissent is the antidote to the delusions of

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the majority. Works Cited
Mill, John Stuart. On Liberty, as reprinted in
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