

## **JOHN STUART MILL (1806- 1873)**

John Stuart Mill was born in London on May 20, 1806. John Stuart Mill was the most influential political thinker of the nineteenth century. J.S Mill was the son of James Mill who was a disciple and close friend of Jeremy Bentham. In his political theory, liberalism made a transition from laissez-faire to an active role for the state, from a negative to a positive conception of liberty and from an atomistic to a more social conception of individuality. While Mill was a liberal, he could also be regarded at the same time as a democrat, a pluralist, cooperative socialist and a feminist.

In his thinking John Stuart Mill was greatly influenced by the dialogues and dialectics of Plato and the cross questions of Socrates. His studies of Roman Law by John Austin, Wealth of Nations by Adam Smith and Principles of Ricardo had, in large measure, affected his reasoning. He had inherited Bentham's principles from his father and Bentham himself and found the principles of utility the keystone of his beliefs. Among other influences, a special mention is to be made of the impact exercised on J.S Mill by his own wife Mrs. Taylor whom he used to call a perfect embodiment of wisdom, intellect and character. She touched the emotional depths of Mill's nature and provided the sympathy he needed.

J.S. Mill was a prolific writer and he wrote on different branches of knowledge with equal mastery. By the age of 20 Mill started to write for newspapers and periodicals. His System of Logic (1843) tried to elucidate a coherent philosophy of politics. The logic combined the British empiricist tradition of Locke and Hume of associational psychology with a conception of social science based on the paradigm of Newtonian physics. His Essay On Liberty (1859) and the Subjection of Women (1869) were classic elaborations of liberal thought on important issues like law, rights and liberty. His The Considerations of Representative Government (1861) provided an outline of his ideal government based on proportional representation, protection of minorities and institutions of self-government. His famous work Utilitarianism (1863) endorsed the Benthamite principle of the greater happiness of the greatest number yet made a significant departure from the Benthamite assumptions. It was written an exposition and defence of the pleasure pain philosophy applied to ethics, but he makes so many changes that there is little left of the original creed. He sees that human nature is not entirely moved by self-interest, as Bentham and his father had taught, but is capable of self-sacrifice.

### **MODIFICATIONS OF BENTHAM'S THEORY**

J.S. Mill was a close follower of his teacher, Bentham and his services to Bentham are exactly the same as the service of Lenin to his master, Marx. He saved Benthamism for death and decay by removing its defects as Lenin made Marxism up to date. Mill criticised and modified Bentham's utilitarianism by taking into account factors like moral motives, sociability, feeling of universal altruism, sympathy and a new concept of justice with the key idea of impartiality. He asserted that the chief deficiency of Benthamite ethics was the neglect of individual character, and hence stressed on the cultivation of feelings and imagination as part of good life poetry, drama, music, paintings were essential ingredients both for human happiness and formation of character. They were instruments of human culture. He made happiness and the dignity of man, and not the principle of pleasure, the chief end of life. He defined happiness to mean perfection of human nature, cultivation of moral virtues and lofty aspirations, total control over one's appetites and desires, and recognition of individual and collective interests.

Mill retained the basic premises of utilitarianism, but distinguished between higher and lower pleasures, and that greater human pleasure meant an increase not merely in the quantity but also in the quality of goods enjoyed. He insisted that human beings were capable of intellectual

and moral pleasures, which were superior to the physical ones that they shared with the animal. He summarised the differences as follows. ***“It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”*** And if the fool or the pig is of a different opinion it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party is in comparison knows both the sides. Mill pointed out that every human action had three aspects:

- a) The moral aspect of right or wrong
- b) The aesthetic aspect (or its beauty)
- c) The sympathetic aspect.

The first principle instructed one to approve or disapprove, the second taught one to admire or despise, and the third enabled one to love, pity or dislike. He regarded individual self-development and diversity as the ultimate ends, important components of human happiness and the principal ingredients of individual and social progress.

Mill used the principle of utility which he regarded as the ‘ultimate appeal on all ethical questions to support his principle of liberty, but then it was utilitarianism based on the permanent interests of the individual as a progressive being. He made a distinction between toleration and suppression of offensive practices. In case of offences against public decency, majority sentiment would prevail. Beyond these, the minorities must be granted the freedom of thought and expression, and the right to live as they pleased.

In one another respect J.S. Mill definitely makes an improvement over the utilitarian theory of Bentham. Bentham had not spoken about the social nature of morality that society itself has a moral end - the moral good of its members. From the contention that every individual desires his own happiness Mill held that the individual should desire and promote the general happiness. It is thus obvious that Mill stood not for an individual’s happiness but for the happiness of all. He regarded utility as a noble sentiment associated with Christian religion.

In addition to the above differences Mill also tried to reconcile the interests of the individual and society. He spoke of nobility of character a trait that was closely associated with altruism meaning that people did what was good for society rather than for themselves. Mill saw social feelings and consciences as part of the psychological attributes of a person. He characterised society as being natural and habitual for the individual was a social person. Mill also stated that pleasures and pains could not be measured objectively. The felicific calculus was absurd; one had to rely upon the judgement of the competent and wise. He described the state as an instrument that would bring about transformation of the human being. In the opinion of Prof. Sabine, “Mill’s ethics was important for liberalism because in effect it abandoned egoism, assumed that social welfare is a matter of concern to all men of good will, and regarded freedom, integrity, self respect and personal distinction as intrinsic goods apart from their contribution to happiness”.

## **LIBERTY**

Mill’s ideas on liberty had a direct relationship with his theory of utility or happiness. Mill regarded liberty as a necessary means for the development of individuality which was to become the ultimate source of happiness. There was only one road for him to take and that was the road of the higher utility. In his well known work, *On Liberty*, Mill thoroughly examines the problem of the relationship between the individual on the one side and the society and state on the other. According to J.S. Mill, Liberty means absence of restraints. J.S. Mill believes that an individual has two aspects to his life; an individual aspect and social aspects. The actions of the individual may be divided into two categories:

- (1) Self regarding actions.
- (2) Other regarding actions.

His liberty of self-regarding action is complete and should not be regulated by the state. However, in action of the individual which effects the society, his action can be justifiably regulated by the state or society. In his *On Liberty*, J.S. Mill wrote thus: the sole end for which mankind are warranted individually or collectively in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their members is self-preservation. That is the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any members of a civilised community against his will is to prevent harm to other.

Mill defended the right of the individual to freedom. In its negative sense, freedom meant that the society had no right to coerce an unwilling individual except for self-defence. In its positive sense, it meant the grant of the largest and the greatest amount of freedom for the pursuit of the individual's creative impulses and energies and for self-development. If there was a clash between the opinion of the individual and that of the community, it was the individual who was an ultimate judge, unless the community could convince him without resorting to threat and coercion. Mill has laid down the grounds for justifying interference. An activity that pertained to the individual alone represented the space over which no coercive interference either from the government or from other people was permissible. The realm which pertained to the society or the public was the space in which coercion could be used to make the individual conform to some standard of conduct. ***Mill in his On Liberty wrote thus: "the only part of the conduct of any one, for which 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 and mind the individual is sovereign."***

Mill defended the right of individuality, which meant the right of choice of the individuals. As for as self regarding actions are concerned, he explained why coercion or state action would be detrimental to the self development of the individual. First, the evils of coercion outweighed the good achieved. Second, individuals were so diverse in their needs and capacities for happiness that coercion would be futile. Since the person was the best judge of his own interests, therefore he had the information and the incentives to achieve them. Third, some diversity was in itself good, it should be encouraged. Last freedom was the most important requirement in the life of a rational person. Mill contended that positive liberty was inherently desirable and it was possible if individuals were allowed to develop their own talents and invent their own life styles. Hence he made strong case for negative liberty and liberal state and society were essential requirements.

Mill asserted that society could limit individual liberty to prevent harm to other people. He regarded liberty of conscience, liberty to express and publish one's opinions, liberty to live as one pleased and freedom of association as essential for a meaningful life and for the pursuit of one's own good. His defence of freedom of thought and expression was one of the most powerful and eloquent exposition in the western intellectual tradition. The early liberals defended liberty for the sake of efficient government whereas for Mill liberty was good in itself for it helped in the development of a humane, civilized, moral person. In the opinion of Prof. Sabine, liberty was "beneficial both to society that permits them and to the individual that enjoys them". According to Mill, individuality means power or capacity for critical enquiry and responsible thought. It means self-development and the expression free will. He stressed absolute liberty of conscience, belief and expression for they were crucial to human progress. Mill offered some arguments for liberty of expression in the service of truth:

- a) the dissenting opinion could be true and its expression would promote humankind of useful knowledge.
- b) even if the opinion was false, it would strengthen the correct view by challenging it.

Mill defended freedom of association on some grounds. First 'When the thing to be done is likely to be done better by individuals than by government. Speaking generally, there is no one first to conduct any business or to determine how or why whom it shall be conducted all those who are personally interested in it'. Second, allowing individuals to get together to do something, even if they do not do it as well as the government might have done it, is better for the mental education of these individuals. The right of education becomes a 'practical part of the political education of a free people taking them out of the narrow circle of personal and family selfishness'. Third, if we let government do everything there is the evil of adding unnecessarily to its power.

It is evident from above observation that On Liberty constituted the most persuasive and convincing defence of the principle of individual liberty ever written. He regarded individual character as a result of civilization, instruction, education and culture. For Mill happiness means liberty and individuality. Liberty was regarded as a fundamental prerequisites for leading good, worthy and dignified life. He considered liberty as belonging to higher and advanced civilizations and prescribed despotism with serve restrictions in case of lower ones. It is generally believed that Mill's essay on liberty was essentially written with the purpose of defending the idea of negative liberty. The theme in on liberty was not the absence of restraints but the denial of individual autonomy by the coercion exercised by a moral majority and public opinion. Mill's doctrine of liberty has been subjected to serve criticisms.

Prof. Ernest Barker criticised Mill's conception of liberty when he wrote that "Mill is a prophet of empty liberty and abstract individual." Mill had no clear cut Philosophy and theory of rights through which alone the concept of liberty attains a concrete meaning. Earnest Barker's observation followed from the interpretation that the absolute statements on liberty like the rights of one individual against the rest was not substantiated when one assessed Mill's writings in their totality. For instance, his compartmentalisation between self-regarding and other regarding actions, conflicted with individualism are indications of this incompleteness. But the point Prof. Barker ignored was the fact that the tension that emerged in Mill was an inevitable consequence of attempting to create a realistic political theory which attempted to extend the frontiers of liberty as much as possible. In fact, no political theorist including the contemporary thinkers like John Rowls, Nozick etc are free from this inevitable tension.

## **REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT**

Mill began his views on Representative government by stating that we can only decide which is the best form of government by examining which form of government fulfils most adequately the purposes of government. For Mill, a good government performs two functions: it must use the existing qualities and skills of the citizens to best serve their interests and it must improve the moral, intellectual and active qualities of these citizens. A despotic government may be able to fulfil the first purpose, but will fail in the second. Only a representative government is able to fulfil these two functions. It is a representative government that combines judiciously the two principles of participation and competence which is able to fulfil the two functions of protecting and educating the citizens.

Mill regarded Representative democracy as necessary for progress as it permitted citizens to use and develop their faculties fully. It promoted virtual intelligence and excellence. It also allowed the education of the citizens providing an efficient forum for conducting the collective affairs of the community. Interaction between individuals in a democracy ensured the possibility of the emergence of the wisest and recognition of the best leaders. It encouraged free discussion which was necessary for the emergence of the truth. He judged representative democracy on the basis of how far it promotes the good management of the affairs of the society by means of the existing

faculties, moral, intellectual and active, of its various members and by improving those faculties. Mill tried to reconcile the principle of political equality with individual freedom. He accepted that all citizens regardless of their status were equal and that only popular sovereignty could give legitimacy to the government.

J.S. Mill hopes that democracy was good because it made people happier and better. Mill laid down several conditions for representative government. First such a government could only function with citizens who were of an active self-helping character. Backward civilizations, according to Mill, would hardly be able to run a representative democracy. Second, citizens had to show their ability and willingness to preserve institutions of representative democracy. Influenced by De Tocqueville's thesis on majority tyranny, Mill advocated a liberal democracy which specified and limited the powers of legally elected majorities by cataloguing and protecting individual rights against the majority. He pleaded for balancing the numerical majority in a democracy by adjusting franchise.

**Mill recommended open rather than secret ballot, for voting** was a public trust which should be performed under the eye and criticism of the public. Open voting would be less dangerous for the individual voter would be less influenced by the sinister interests and discreditable feelings which belong to himself either individually or as a member of a class. He emphasised that representative democracy was only possible in a state that was small and homogeneous. Although a great champion of equal voting rights, universal suffrage are guaranteed in democracy, Mill was fully aware of the weaknesses and danger of democracy. His mind was particularly upset by the inadequate representation of minorities in parliament and the tyranny of the majority over the minority. In order to ensure adequate representation of minorities, **Mill supported the system of proportional representative first proposed for parliamentary elections by Sir Thomas Hare in England and propounded its theory in his work : "Machinery of Representation"** In addition to proportional representation he has advocated plurality of votes to the higher educated citizens.